

# How Getting Close to Your Subjects Makes Qualitative Data Better

**O**NE WAY CERTAIN QUALITATIVE RESEARCHERS ensure that the data they get is “good” is often overlooked—that they inevitably come to care deeply about what and whom they are studying. Qualitative researchers can approach their subjects in two ways. The first is to attempt to be objective—to consciously avoid the personal involvement that might bias a study. Although most such qualitative researchers appreciate that it is impossible for researchers to be truly objective, many believe objectivity should nonetheless be the standard to which researchers hold themselves. Just as in most quantitative work, the ideal is that it is inappropriate for the values of the researcher to enter into the research itself.

A second approach is for researchers to accept involvement and bias as inevitable and to work toward finding meaning through building close relationships with subjects. Subjective researchers view the relationship between the research and subject as subjective and transactional. The researcher and subject are linked, with the values of the researcher “inevitably influencing the inquiry” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110).

In a subjective relationship, researchers and subjects collaborate to determine meaning, generate findings, and reach conclusions. The research

relationship is a partnership. It is not a series of detached observations about subjects by intentionally uninvolved researchers. Instead, subjective qualitative researchers consciously avoid such barriers between themselves and their subjects.

In fact, good data for subjective researchers is the product of just these strong connections between researchers and subjects. These connections allow for the rich description of contexts and experiences that are the essence of good qualitative data. In short, what makes subjective data good is close involvement between researchers and subjects. Thus, in discussing the link between personal involvement by researchers and good data, it is on subjective qualitative researchers and research that I focus.

## Why Become Involved

What justifies doing subjective work? Whether their work is objective or subjective, qualitative researchers make decisions about what they believe is the appropriate or inevitable relationship between themselves and the phenomena and people they study. Subjective researchers, however, are more likely to have made a more active choice, departing from the norm in social science research as they do (Toma, 1999). For instance, I know going into a study that I believe researchers and subjects should interact in the research process. When I approach my subjects—both the topics I

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am exploring and the people who will provide data—I thus do so with an eye to getting close. This is what will yield the best data and thus the best study, given the subjective approach on which I have decided to hang my hat.

There is no right or wrong answer here—just the one that feels right to the individual researcher. What is important is to know there is a decision to be made—that there is an alternative to the objective approach associated with the scientific method we all learn in school. The decision is so basic that one cannot be subjective one day and objective the next. The choice reflects a core understanding about how the world works; it is either impossible to be objective or it is not. Someone cannot simply “pretend” to believe the other way for the sake of a particular project, like a lawyer arguing a certain side of a case.

How researchers decide to relate to their subjects is important not only in terms of how they go about doing their work of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data; it is also important in framing how others evaluate that work—and in shaping the contexts and environments within which they work. The decision to work subjectively is often also a decision to work outside of the mainstream. In doing so, subjective qualitative researchers have unique responsibilities and challenges associated with their work.

Researchers working in these two traditions really work in two different worlds. In one world, researchers can be objective in their relationship with the phenomena and people they study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Phillips, 1990). The tradition that remains dominant in social science research is founded on the assumption that objective researchers can discover (or should try to discover) what is real about the world. The approach necessarily forecloses personal involvement by researchers with research subjects. Researchers must remain distant and uninvolved in order to generalize about the subjects they explore. Personal involvement with subjects is a mark of biased—thus bad—data.

The opposite is true of the subjective approach, which invites involvement between researchers and subjects. The assumption is that personal values necessarily influence any investigation. Thus, the relationship between researchers and subjects is inherently subjective. Scholars cannot divorce their

own values and biases from the inquiry in which they engage (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994; Schwandt, 1994).

Accordingly, subjective researchers cannot separate themselves from the phenomena and people they study. The process of research is a transaction between two people. It is two-sided arrows signifying two-way exchanges, rather than one-sided arrows signifying one thing acting upon another. The accommodation to the introduction of subjectivity into inquiry is that researchers announce and explain its potential influence on their work. Qualitative methods are almost a given for those working subjectively, given the transactional nature of the data-gathering process. Quantitative approaches simply do not lend themselves to two-way interaction between researchers and subjects.

Finally, two types of researchers adopt a subjective approach to their subjects: critical researchers and interpretive researchers. The main difference between them is their core beliefs associated with how they view reality. This is a question of whether or not they believe that there is a single reality or absolute truth the researcher can discover—critical researchers do<sup>1</sup> and interpretive researchers do not.<sup>2</sup> Still, in both approaches, researchers and subjects are closely linked. That is our topic here, not the question, “what is reality?” In other words, our focus is on how researchers relate to whom they study (in other words, their epistemological stance), not how they relate to what they study (their ontological stance). The key to both the critical and interpretive approaches is the abandonment of objectivity in the interest of collecting and interpreting data through close exchange with subjects. The researcher is not a detached observer but is a participant with the subject in the search for meaning.

### Researchers, Subjects, and Good Data

One reason why these issues of what is reality and what can we know about it (the ontology the researcher adopts) and what is the nature of the relationship between the researcher and subject (the epistemology the researcher adopts) are important in subjective research is that, unlike in objective work, they are one and the same. “What can be known is inextricably intertwined with the interaction between a particular investigator and a particular object or group” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110).

The act of assessing what are good data—both in terms of what researchers find and how they find it—therefore becomes an evaluation of the product of the interaction between the researcher, the phenomenon, and people under consideration, and the data being gathered. Thus, it makes sense that more intense interactions strengthen end products in qualitative research. Getting closer to your subjects makes better qualitative data.

A recent study that I completed provides an illustration. In the study, I focused on college football and its significance to both the large universities that sponsor it and the people associated with these institutions (Toma, 1997b). I looked at the roles of football in the building and expression of institutional culture, how football enhances identification by various constituents with their institutions, and how people in external relations and student affairs consciously use the culture and identification associated with football to do what they do.

When I look back on the football study, the most meaningful findings and interpretations resulted from really getting to know the people I interviewed. I could have learned much from these people in a more detached manner, as through a survey or objective qualitative work. Another researcher might have taken an objective approach to conceptualizing and designing the study and collecting and interpreting data—and that would have been acceptable.

Even using qualitative methods, researchers could have generated a set of hypotheses about the subject. They then could have attempted to prove or disprove them through using a strict interview protocol and consistent set of interview topics at each site—asking the same questions in the same ways to the same types of people. They could have interpreted the data focusing on generalizing across contexts—making certain to treat everything like everything else and everyone like everyone else. Getting close to the phenomena and people being studied would have been a problem. It would have indicated that the researchers were biased, and that would have constituted bad data.

### **Enhancing Breadth and Depth**

The opposite of being objective—getting close to the subject—contributed to making the football study a success. In getting to really know these people, I got to really know the subject we

discussed. For instance, going into the study, I knew something about football as an expression of institutional culture at large universities. It embodies the symbols, language, narratives, and rituals of campus life. Discussing the concept with several hundred people—most of whom cared deeply about the topic—yielded two things.

First, their illustrations and stories provided me with mounds of data. When I need an example of football Saturday-as-narrative, for example, I now have numerous stories, legends, sagas, and myths from which to choose. The same is true for football Saturday-as-ritual or football Saturday-as-symbol. Still, I might have collected these from books or other sources. What I gained by getting involved with my research subjects—interacting with people on various campuses—was a sense of the context in which these narratives occur.

At Texas A&M, I heard the story of the Twelfth Man—how a student from the grandstands stood and announced his willingness to don a uniform and enter an important game when the team was short of players. I learned about the ritual aspects of tailgating before night games at Tiger Stadium at Louisiana State—how people gather to watch Mike the Tiger, LSU's live mascot, be paraded into the stadium before the game. I also became acquainted with the small rock mounted on a pedestal on a hill above one goalpost at Clemson, and how the team touches the rock for good luck as they run down the hill onto the field. Now I am able not only to recount the legend of the Twelfth Man, discuss the ritual of the parade, or share the story of the Death Valley rock, but I can reflect on how the story, the practice, and symbol are telling of how people experience their institutions. I can better explore the connections people have toward their institutions through cultural forms such as these.

Similarly, at the University of Nebraska, when Memorial Stadium is full, as it always is on football Saturday, it is said to be “the third largest city in Nebraska.” The stadium was constructed in 1922 as a memorial to Nebraskans who died in military service. In their memory, sayings are inscribed in the four corners of the stadium—for example, “not the victory but the action; not the goal but the game; in the deed the glory.”

In 1988, Nebraska set a single-season home attendance record by averaging 76,342 fans for six

home games, breaking the old record average of 76,341, set in 1974. I could have found these factoids in any Nebraska football game-day program, and they would have said something about the University of Nebraska and the people of the state. However, what came especially clear to me through engaging with people on campus is that most Nebraskans know these factoids; they are the stuff of legend. I learned that Nebraskans take extraordinary pride in the things, like the stadium, that make their place distinctive.

Second, working subjectively gave me a sense of depth. Now that I have spent time getting to know the institution and its people, the familiar Knute Rockne-George Gipp myth ("win one for the Gipper") has deeper meaning for me when I attempt to understand the image that Notre Dame holds of itself. I know something about how deeply people at Notre Dame have internalized the Gipper myth and how it is important in their daily lives. While the myth always seemed a bit corny to me (particularly as expressed in the movies by Ronald Reagan), getting to know what the myth represents to real people at a real place makes it seem more significant. It also prompted me to think differently and more deeply about the core questions in which I was interested.

Responses to an objective question might have told me something about the Gipper myth, but they would have yielded little, if anything, about the passion that it evokes in people. Had I simply set out to prove hypotheses—and not engaged the interview subjects on their own terms—I would have missed much of this. Instead, I came away with both new information and new ways to conceptualize these phenomena. Getting to know my research subjects caused me in interpreting my data to focus much more on the importance of football in helping people to "buy into" the campus culture at places like Notre Dame.

### Providing Context

The give and take of the interviews—sharing ideas and thoughts about the subject—frequently helped the people being interviewed make new and deeper connections between aspects of their experiences. Some idea with which I had been working—commonly one contributed by someone I interviewed earlier—was often the ticket to an in-

terviewee thinking about something in a different and useful way. The people I interviewed were almost always interested in whether their experiences were representative. Naturally, they knew much more than I did about their specific responsibilities on campus—and how football intersects with them. What I contributed was broad context.

For instance, in talking with admissions directors, I shared my emerging finding that exposure to the institution's college football team has little to do with the actual admission decision of students. Geography and cost are more important. However, football does have a significant role in bringing the institution to the attention of prospective students in the first place. "High school students choose colleges based on name recognition [and] anything related to increasing name recognition is important," an administrator at Michigan noted. "That is the value of having a prominent football program."

It is no accident that one-third of the photographs in the poster-sized viewbook produced by Michigan for prospective students in each of the past 3 years involve people watching football or basketball. Given this type of baseline, people could then focus more readily on how their campus is different or exceptional. Here I made the strange familiar (Whitt, 1993) for my interview subjects through providing context—and the result was better data.

Similarly, I could share an overall conceptualization of the topic in the hope of generating new ideas from the interviewee. For instance, in order to get persons involved in fundraising to think of their duties and place in new ways, I framed the role of football in fundraising (it is an excuse to get people to campus) as institutional identification (people want to be more closely involved with places they believe are significant and they believe others believe are significant). I shared my thoughts about how supporting winning football teams allows people on a campus or in a state to associate themselves with success. They can bask in the reflected glory of "their" team.

An exchange I had with an interviewee at Connecticut provides an illustration. The person picked up on the identification notion, helping him to understand and explain the impact of the new national prominence in sports at UConn in a new and useful way:

Unlike [at the flagship universities] in the Midwest, students start at UConn as disappointed that they did not go anyplace else. People were desperate for a point of pride. Due to our athletics success, we can now run with the best. . . . [UConn has] always had an identity problem relative to private schools in the Northeast. We have never had the identity or status of the big Midwestern institutions. New England is provincial and has not supported public education like in the Midwest, so public education is not held in the same esteem. What has really helped us is our success in basketball. (Toma, 1997b)

Drawing on the institutional identification idea, he suggested that basketball success has provided an identity not only for UConn but for the entire state of Connecticut—"which has always been that little state between Boston and New York." Here, I made the familiar strange through reconceptualizing ideas—and again the result was better data.

Both providing context and reconceptualizing ideas helped people to think through their responses in new and interesting ways. The transactional nature of the interviews thus strengthened the resulting data; getting involved led to good data. In dealing with complex notions, such as why certain things are important to organizations and people, it seems natural that several minds are better than one. Personal involvement between researchers and subjects is what allows that to happen. This all leads to a simple rule: As interactions between researchers and subjects deepen (epistemology), data about phenomena and people—and the interpretations that result from data—become better (ontology).

### **Merging People and Phenomena**

What helped in all of this was that the people I interviewed were generally interested in the phenomena I was studying—the meaning of football to institutions and those associated with them. Their interest only heightened my own interest. The process of gathering data reinforced for me that I might be on to something of some importance, making me want to dig deeper in understanding the questions on the table. In fact, the process of working with informants spawned several new and interesting questions. Interacting with people who cared about the topic made me care even more about a topic with which I was already engaged. It also made me do a better job in ad-

ressing the topic. In essence, the process of working directly and closely with people raised the stakes associated with the study.

The project was no longer about a set of ideas but about ideas within a context. I began to relate my thoughts about the significance of football with real people and real places, each associated with a unique context. The study became as much about the people providing data about the concepts in which I was interested as the concepts themselves. The entire exercise became about integrating data from multiple sources into some sort of coherent whole, not just a set of ideas and opinions. It became about integrating a set of ideas and opinions associated with groups of interesting people who worked in interesting places—and who cared deeply about an interesting topic. The topic I was studying—the significance of football—became an amalgam of the contexts of the people I interviewed. I found that I wanted to do right by these people as well as doing right by the subject in which we shared an interest.

Similarly, spending time on the 11 campuses in the study drew me to them in the same way. I came to care about the places and wanted the people who would read my work to understand them. I was impressed by what I saw—the power of the rituals surrounding football at Louisiana State, the passion people in Nebraska had for their team, the uses of football in relating to external constituents at Clemson—and wanted to tell the stories of these places. In fact, my favorite part of the book that came from the study is the vignettes that start each chapter. These include the "collegiate" aspects of the Texas A&M campus, the culture of the Nebraska marching band, tailgating as community at LSU, wearing Notre Dame logo clothing, and the television broadcast of a Brigham Young University game. It should be clear to readers of these stories that I have a good deal of respect and affection toward these places, as in the following snippet:

The part of football Saturday that occurs in Memorial Stadium begins with the performances by the Nebraska Marching Band and often the band from the visiting team. Even before they arrive in their seats, people look toward the game clocks on both ends of the stadium that are counting down the minutes and seconds until kickoff. They know that the Nebraska Marching Band will enter the field at around 15 minutes before

the game begins. . . . Several of the people in the stadium have already heard and watched the Nebraska band perform that day. Before each game, the band warms up in front of the band building, then marches to Memorial Stadium for several blocks along Vine Street, singing their special song—"The Band Song." The warm-up and parade always draw a large crowd. It is part of the overall ritual of football Saturday for many attending the game—a ritual as unique to Nebraska as the songs performed. (Toma, 1997b)

All of this suggests that the process of subjective qualitative research merges phenomena and people—there are no real dividing lines. In contrast, in objective work, these must remain separate for the result to be good. There are hypotheses and questions at the beginning of the research process, and data are supposed to verify or falsify them at the end of the process. Data act upon hypotheses and questions—they do not merge with them. In subjective qualitative research, phenomena and people are part of a whole—an overall context—that the researcher is responsible for describing to the fullest and richest extent possible. The subject in subjective qualitative research is thus a combination of substance and process.

### **Merging Passion and Practice**

Subjective qualitative researchers, I believe, must approach the questions of what to study and how to study it on very personal terms in order to be effective. Because subjective qualitative research is inherently personal, researchers cannot and should not hide their attachment to the topic and persons they study. The attachment is what makes the two-way data collection process work. Good data in subjective qualitative research are the result of researchers drawing the sources of their data into the study. Nothing does that better than the researcher being genuinely interested in the subject—both in terms of the overall phenomenon and the people who can shed light on it.

In the football study, the people I interviewed knew I was passionate about the topic. I made sure they knew that I had biases and opinions—and that I wanted nothing more than to learn about what they thought about the topic. It was exactly this passion that made the football study such a satisfying experience and something I think is a good piece of scholarship.

Involvement is also what allows for the rich description of context that is the hallmark of good qualitative research. Engagement gives the descriptions of various contexts their power and elegance as well as their true usefulness to policy analysts, researchers, and practitioners. When subjective qualitative research works, it is when researchers describe contexts in ways that bring them alive.

When this happens, the researcher becomes an insider—a partner with the subject who is responsible for bringing the subject to life for the reader. Indeed, within a subjective frame, the process of generating data is a negotiation between the researcher and subject. In fact, it is more accurate to call the subject in qualitative research a participant. The subject shapes not only the data shared with the researcher but the analysis, conclusions, and interpretations that result from that data.

The researcher is also a participant, either as the "passionate participant" who acts essentially as a facilitator in the data collection process (in interpretive work) or as the transformative intellectual who is advocate and activist on behalf of the subject (in critical work). Thus, some significant connection between researchers and subjects is inevitable as they are participating together toward a common goal. These strong connections operate to help ensure that qualitative researchers are collecting and reporting good data.

### **The Practical Side**

Aside from approaching the foundations of research in different ways, qualitative researchers who take a subjective stance—researchers who become involved with phenomena and people—work in different practical environments than do conventional paradigm researchers. All researchers are responsible for assuring the rigor of their work. In quantitative work, objectivity, reliability, and validity (both internal and external) are benchmarks of rigor (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In objective qualitative work, the standards are similar. Subjective qualitative researchers frame their responsibilities differently, however. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that good qualitative research must be credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable. In essence, these are the markers of the depth of the engagement between the researcher and the subject,

and thus the quality of that engagement.<sup>3</sup> What is important is that there are indeed standards and they are different from those appropriate to quantitative and objective qualitative work.

These different standards contribute to the culture in which subjective researchers work—a culture different in several fundamental respects from the culture associated with objective work. Thus, when researchers become involved, they come to work in different conceptual and practical worlds from their more conventional counterparts. All researchers work at the intersection of several different cultures—cultures determined by their inquiry paradigm (the sum of their assumptions about ontology, epistemology, and methodology), their discipline, their institution, the academic profession, and society generally (Austin, 1990; Tierney & Rhoads, 1993; Toma, 1997a).

These cultures combine to shape the philosophies, assumptions, attitudes, and norms that define the careers and the work of individual researchers. With the rise of subjective types of inquiry across academic fields, researchers even at the most local level (research teams, academic departments) can find themselves grounded within different intellectual traditions and distinct academic cultures, not simply those parallel to the positivist tradition. Subjective and objective researchers view the purposes of their work differently, apply different evaluative standards, rely upon different methods and frameworks, and accept different values.

The decision to view subjects subjectively—and the culture that goes along with it—tends to influence several more practical aspects of the professional and personal lives of subjective qualitative researchers. These include the methods and models they employ, the questions they pursue, the audiences to whom they write, the standards others apply to their work, the reward system under which they operate, the access they perceive to have to decision makers, and the pressures or personal rewards attendant to advancing causes (Toma, 1997a).

Furthermore, getting good qualitative data is not alone the product of researchers really knowing about and caring about the phenomena and people with which and with whom they interact. It also requires that they demonstrate the rigor of their approach within the context of the different

standards and unique cultures associated with working from a subjective stance. Although subjective researchers think and work differently from objective researchers, the two have similar responsibilities in terms of sharing their findings.

Addressing the challenges associated with being different is of paramount importance to subjective researchers. They must work to find ways to say what is important to them—and important to their subjects—that do not compromise the integrity of their work but are still accessible to broad audiences. Zaruba, Toma, and Stark (1996) conclude that it is fine to work under different standards and do so under a different culture—researchers just have to do their work well. Work should be thorough in both its execution and presentation. It should be informed, both about its methods and topics. It should be well-written and well-organized, balanced and inclusive, and useful.

Finally, the work should educate the reader, not just about the subject but about the approach taken to explore it. Subjective researchers should be interested in reaching the broadest possible audience with their good data. After all, writing for policy analysts, other researchers, and practitioners is really about access to influence. If subjective qualitative researchers are interested—as they should be—in influencing various agendas, they must reach these people. What good is good qualitative research if it does not reach the audiences who can really use it to influence positive change. The intense engagement between researchers and subjects loses much of its meaning if people do not hear the story that results.

### Notes

1. Reality for critical scholars is grounded in historical realism—a virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values and crystallized over time (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Thus, history is the basis of knowledge and provides a platform from which critical scholars can generalize about the world. Accordingly, critical scholars are interested in critique, transformation, and emancipation. They maintain that scholarship should influence specific social change, and does so through revealing truths about the world based in history.
2. Interpretive researchers assume that reality and truth are contingent upon what individual people necessarily construct. Reality is thus local—it depends for its form and content on what individuals or groups say it is.

Accordingly, the aim of inquiry in interpretive work is the understanding and reconstruction of various contexts, and the nature of knowledge is based in individual's constructions coalescing around some consensus. These various constructions are not more or less true than each other, only differently informed. Accordingly, interpretive scholars base their work on understanding multiple realities and believe that researchers create findings as the investigation proceeds, rather than discover them (as in the positivist tradition) or mediate them (as in the critical tradition).

3. Although these standards are grounded in interpretive work, they apply to critical inquiry as well. Critical scholarship is also assessed on its historical situatedness—that it takes proper account of the influence of social, political, and cultural conditions—and the extent to which it stimulates the transformation of the existing structure (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Still, where critical scholars collect data, the standards associated with subjective qualitative research generally apply.

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