

# More than Just an Anecdote

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## Selling Qualitative Assessments to the Data Gurus

Becki Elkins Nesheim  
Amanda Knerr  
ACPA Student Affairs Assessment Conference  
Indianapolis, IN  
June 20, 2008

## Plan for the session...

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- Paradigms of Inquiry
- What is Qualitative Research
- Assumptions and Principles
- Standards of Rigor
- Ethical considerations
- Data Collection and Analysis
- Questions for Consideration
- Addressing Audience Concerns
- Showing the Value

## Intended Outcomes

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- Participants will be able to...
  1. Differentiate paradigms of inquiry
  2. Define what qualitative research is
  3. Articulate the assumptions and principles of qualitative research
  4. Outline acceptable standards of rigor
  5. Identify strategies for successfully applying qualitative research to assessment efforts (and selling the results!)

## Paradigm(s) of Inquiry

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- A way of looking at the world.
- Provides the assumptions, the rules, the direction, and the criteria by which "normal science" is conducted.

(Thomas Kuhn [1970] as cited in Erlandson et al. [1993])

## Paradigm(s) of Inquiry

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- **Ontology**
  - “the nature of the knowable” (Egon Guba)
  - what is “reality”
- **Epistemology**
  - the relationship between the knower and the known
  - how we know
- **Methodology**
  - the means for making discoveries
  - how we come to know

## Paradigms of Inquiry

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### Positivist

#### Realist Ontology

- There is Truth
- It is discoverable

#### Objectivist Epistemology

- Distance / detachment between the knower and the known
- Objectivity is possible

#### Interventionist Methodology

- *A priori* hypotheses
- Controlled conditions

### Constructivist

#### Relativist Ontology

- Realities are multiple
- Realities are socially-constructed

#### Subjectivist Epistemology

- Impossible and undesirable to separate the knower from the known
- Outcomes = result of the relationship between researcher and participants

#### Hermeneutic Methodology

- Continuous interaction between knower and known
- Dialogue between researcher and data

## What is qualitative research?

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- Research in which the data are words / pictures / ideas...mostly anything but numbers.
- Research in which the data are collected and analyzed by the researcher, not by any mechanical means.

(Jacobs, 1985; and others)

## What is qualitative research?

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Qualitative researchers seek answers to their questions in the real world. They gather what they see, hear, and read from people and places and from events and activities...Their purpose is to learn about some aspect of the social world and to generate new understandings that can be used.

(Rossman and Rallis, 1998)

## What is qualitative research?

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- How have you seen qualitative research methods used in assessment?
- How *might* they be used in assessment?
- What are the challenges to doing so?

## Assumptions...

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...of constructivist qualitative research

- Realities are multiple and socially-constructed
- There is a mutually-shaping relationship between the knower and the known
- Inquiry is value-laden
- The purpose of research is understanding

## Principles...

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...of qualitative research methods

1. The primary objective is understanding.
2. An emic perspective is necessary to achieve understanding.
3. To achieve understanding, phenomena must be studied in their natural settings.
4. Phenomena must be studied from a holistic perspective, and with attention to their unique contexts.

## Principles (cont.)

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5. Qualitative data are collected and analyzed by means of a "human instrument".
6. Analysis of qualitative data builds understanding inductively, from the data themselves.
7. Standards of rigor are different, but no less mandatory, than those used to judge quantitative research.
8. Qualitative methods demand special attention to conducting research with ethical obligations in mind.

(adapted from Whitt, E.J., 2005)

## Standards of rigor

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- Trustworthiness: (1) standards for acceptable and competent practice; (2) standards for ethical conduct. (Rossman & Rallis, 1998)
  - Credibility
  - Transferability
  - Dependability
  - Confirmability

## Trustworthiness: Credibility

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- Are the researcher's interpretations credible to the study participants (a.k.a., respondents)?
- Established through:
  - Triangulation
  - Peer debriefing
  - Member checks
  - Search for alternative evidence / explanations
  - Humility throughout the process

## Trustworthiness: Transferability

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- To what extent are the findings applicable to other settings?
- Established through:
  - Thick, rich description of the study context, design, and participants
  - Is a decision made by the reader, not an assertion made by the researcher

## Trustworthiness: Dependability

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- To what extent were the research methods decisions made consistently and appropriately throughout the course of the study?
- Established through:
  - Audit trail

## Trustworthiness: Confirmability

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- Do the results of the study make sense?  
And, can they be confirmed by others?
- Established through:
  - Audit trail

## Ethical Considerations

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- Confidentiality
- Honesty
- Responsibility
- Reciprocity (fair return)



## Data Collection

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"A discovery process"

"Interviewing, observing, and studying material culture are the primary ways to discover and learn in the field..."

~ Rossman & Rallis, (1999)

Methods = interviews, observations, document analysis, and???



## Data Collection

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"If you claim to know something as a result of your research, data must exist to support those claims."

~ Rossman & Rallis, (1999)



## Data Analysis

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"...the process of making sense of one's data...organizing what you have seen, heard, and read so that you can make sense of what you have learned, create explanations, pose hypotheses, develop theories, link your story to other stories."

~ Glesne & Pushkin



## Data Analysis

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"Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data. It is a messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating process. It does not proceed in linear fashion; it is not neat. Qualitative data analysis is a search for general statements about relationships among categories of data; it builds grounded theory."

~ Marshall & Rossman

## Remember...

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"...every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing..."

~ Silverman

## Questions for Consideration

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- What was the purpose of my study?
- What were the results of the study?
- What conclusions / interpretations did I draw? How closely linked are the conclusions / interpretations to the results?



## Questions for Consideration

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- What, if any, methodological assumptions did I make?
- What are the limitations of my study? Have I adequately outlined them for my readers?
- What steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the research? To what extent were appropriate standards of rigor met?
- Did I conduct the research ethically?



## Addressing Audience Concerns

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- Generalizability
- Objectivity
- Lack of Control on Study
- Emergent Methodology

## Concern 1: Qualitative Research Isn't Generalizable

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- ❑ Not always about generalization. It is about the process of obtaining information and the experiences of the participant and researcher
- ❑ Qualitative research is about making meaning of experiences and highlighting or understanding what made those experiences what they are or were

## Concern 2: Qualitative Research is Not Objective

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- ❑ There are certain phenomena that objective methods cannot address
- ❑ Objective methods ignore the researcher's and participants' insights and therefore lose too much information
- ❑ No research is truly objective and without bias
- ❑ The Objective approach does not allow researchers to tell the story. Objective research inhibits the voices of both the participant and the researcher
- ❑ Focus is NOT on objectivity, it is on interpreting events and finding themes in experiences

Mitchell, M.L. & Jolley, J.M. (2000).  
[http://www.markwebtest.net/firms.com/Appendix/App\\_Quant\\_Vs\\_qual.html](http://www.markwebtest.net/firms.com/Appendix/App_Quant_Vs_qual.html)

### Concern 3: Researchers Have No Control Over Study's Direction

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- ❑ Not as structured. It allows researchers and participants to "veer off course" and to explore issues in depth
- ❑ Concentrates on making meaning of experiences rather than sticking to one point of view
- ❑ It allows the focus and the understanding of topics to change as participants and researchers interact

### Concern 4: The Methodology Is Not Determined at the Onset of the Study

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- ❑ While a general structure is sometimes outlined, the act of observation, interviewing, etc., can change direction based on the rapport with the participant, the interests of the researcher, and the discussion and experiences that ensue. The Methodology is built around the experiences rather than the understanding of experiences dictated by a structured set of questions or data



## What's the Value?

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- Provides meaning to job and career
- Can point out areas of strengths and opportunities for growth
- Can validate policies and procedures to students, parents, and other units
- Student affairs professionals connect with the "stories" inherent in qualitative research
- Variety of mediums information can be shared and utilized