

Challenges in Qualitative Inquiry Tradition

Denzin and Lincoln note that the qualitative inquiry traditions have gone through several phases in history (they identify eight historical moments), from the traditional period of Malinowski to the current moment of “future” (the year of 2005 and later) that fights back the methodological backlash associated with “Bush science”. While the later moments, in my view, are arguably questionable due to their still relatively new characteristics, I believe that “blurred genres”, “crisis of representation”, and “triple crisis”, represented by publications such as Clifford Geertz’s “The Interpretation of Cultures”, James Clifford and George Marcus’ “Writing Culture”, and other writings (e.g., feminist or Marxist writings) that challenge ethnographers’ claims of legitimate representations of culture and authentic knowledge, clearly marked the history of the qualitative inquiry traditions.

Yet, these challenges are further apparent in both epistemological and methodological debates of qualitative research in environments of internet communication technologies (ICT), and as we re-examine the fundamentals in assumptions, theories, and practices of qualitative research, we are provided with fresh and sounder insights. In the remaining essay, I will put theories in “traditional” qualitative research and new discussions in qualitative research in ICT environments in dialogues to illustrate how the two speak to each other and how the later amends the first.

Validity and Authenticity

Denzin and Lincoln argue that the practice of ethnography has faced challenges concerning objectivity and validity from harder sciences, for its lack of transparency, by the criteria of harder sciences, in terms of judging the accuracy of its results and communicating it to

wider audiences across disciplines in universal language (e.g., numbers, statistics), when compared to surveys, experiments, and questionnaires.

In response, ethnography (here, I unwillingly discuss qualitative research in terms of ethnography because discussions of ICT qualitative research have been done dominantly in terms of ethnography by scholars and because that's my sources for this discussion, although in the end I agree with Annette Markham that equating the two may uncritically reduce all ICT qualitative research methods to ethnography and that doing so may not be the best practice while they may benefit more from other methods such as case study, grounded theory, and biography) has changed a lot since its origins as the traditional method by anthropologists to study cultures in distance, often indigenous, places. For instance, Glaser and Strauss “discovered” (as evident in the title of their first grounded theory book) and developed grounded theory within positive paradigm, instead of interpretive paradigm (here, I note that the matrix of qualitative vs. quantitative research is different from the one of positivism, post-positivism, and interpretivism) that later qualitative research has generally moved to, with systematic, detailed, step-by-step guidance—or the formula that hard scientists critiqued qualitative research for lacking—for each phase of collecting and analyzing data. Other scholars have contributed to rigorous discussions in qualitative inquiries and legitimized the inquires.

One response to positivity-based, quantitative critiques of ethnography that is in particular relevant to ICT qualitative research is the claim that ethnography produces an authentic understanding of a culture based upon concepts that organically emerge from the actual study, instead of being imposed in advance (e.g., hypo-deductive approach) by the researcher. (Also, Geertz shifted the focus in studies of culture from “facts” to “meanings”.) In this response, cultures are studied in their own natural state, rather than as distributed by survey techniques or

brought to external labs in experimental settings. Christine Hine notes that in this setting, travel has become and played an important part in construction of an ethnographic authority. Unlike arm-chair anthropologists in the early phase who gained their second-hand data through missionaries or travelers, ethnographers in this scenario do the actual fieldwork and engage with the subjects (participants) in more direct interactions, doing participant observations and developing “emic” perspectives (or “thick description” in Geertz’s term). From this, a sense of ethnographic presence begins to emerge in which “being there” is unique to the ethnographer, Hine argues in her assessment of the arguments that are in favor of travel and face-to-face interaction in “traditional” qualitative research.

However, in ICT qualitative research, travel is not a clear-cut issue, or face-to-face interaction for that matter. Some questions may arise: How do we define the research site? Where do we travel to? Markham notes that we need to pay kin attention to the discursive construction of research site (and the researcher/researched and ultimately the “culture”) in ICT qualitative research. (I will discuss this issue later in another section where it is more appropriate.) If we frame the research site strictly in terms of physical location, then it refers to the computer server hardware where the participants’ electronic messages in binary bits are being exchanged. This is hardly the focus of ICT qualitative researchers.

In more empirical examples, Markham, in her study of heavy internet users and their perceptions of the internet, “Life Online”, conducted only online interviews. To her, this was a conscious choice based upon the goal of her study, which was to understand people’s life through online interaction in its own right. She argues, thus the inclusion of embodied ways of knowing might have been unwarranted or even counterproductive. In contrast, Sherry Turkle in her study “Life on the Screen” included her findings of only those online participants who were

matched with their offline identities because the goal of her study was to examine the influences of online experience on people's understanding of their self in the physical world.

This draws our attention to the question of what a person “really is” (and what authenticity is). Privileging embodied ways of knowing, for instance, forcing face-to-face interviews to all participants in online environments or even more problematically requiring researchers to obtain hand-signed, informed consents from their participants in online environments regardless of the goals or contexts (e.g., public/private nature, anonymity and sensitivity of the research site) of the ICT study, assumes that authenticity means one-to-one correspondence between the participants' identity performed in their interactions with the ethnographer and that performed elsewhere both online and offline. This singular notion of authenticity has been already critiqued in discussions of “traditional” ethnography, in particular in terms of representation, exemplified by the representational crisis after Clifford and Marcus' publication of “Writing Culture”, which contributed to the growing recognition that ethnographic writing is always partial and selective, and is less about the “truth” of existing real culture than the creation of “textual constructions of reality,” hence the title of the book “Writing Culture”. ICT qualitative research amends this discussion and helps us understand the importance and fundamental arguments of “travel” in ethnography in context.

“Writing Culture” in Ethnography

As noted above, since the phase of “crisis of representation” in the qualitative inquiry tradition, ethnographers began to understand that descriptions of culture are not simply a matter of good fieldwork practices and careful observation but that they are as much as created by the writing itself by the ethnographers. John Van Maanen surveys three styles of ethnographic

writing—realist, confessional, and impressionist—used by fieldworkers to recover their experience of the culture, and calls them “tales”: 1) Realist tale, the most prominent and popular form of ethnographic writing, is a third-person account of culture where the author is detached, often absent, in the final text and it claims the observational certitude as grounds for its authenticity. 2) Confessional tale seeks to demystify the work of ethnography by portraying the actual process of fieldwork. The highly personalized style of writing documents both the fieldworker’s failure as well as success in coming to understand and appreciate the culture in his or her study, and it is often written in first-person point of view. And 3) impressionist tale is a dramatic, first-person narrative recollection of events. It is very novelistic, utilizing and generating suspense, characterization, and drama. These three (possibly more, Van Maanen notes) literary forms do not compete, in Van Maanen’s view, but rather coexist with changing conceptions of culture itself as contested, emergent, and ambiguous.

Going back to the issue of research site, or the field, when studying cyberspace, Markham argues that the question of how we define the field is inseparable from how it influences the way we represent the culture and “the Other” (participants). In cyberspace, the question of the field hardly begins with localities. The shift from geographic to cyberspace constitutes an equally significant shifting of focus from place to interaction. In other words, researchers who study cyberspace participate in constructing the very phenomena they label as the object of analysis. This is even more so in cyberspace than in physical settings of participants in traditional ethnography, because it is text-based, although this is changing with increasing multimedia characteristics (e.g., online games with avatars, 3D spaces such as “Second Life”, posting videos on YouTube) of the internet. In text-based cyberspace, participation is the key to one’s existence because of lack of pre-existing embodiment contexts (e.g., physical body that

signals, for instance, age, gender, and race). Markham revises the dictum by MacKinnon who also revises the Cartesian dictum: “I type, therefore I am” and even further “I’m perceived online, therefore I am.” Each time researcher responds to the participant, the researcher contributes directly and actively to the development of the Other’s identity and by extension, the field in which the study emerges.

Also the researcher has active choices in what he or she regards as data or considers as constituting the Other. Markham’s example is her initial omission of her participant’s active inscription of his embodiment into his interaction with her. For instance, compare the two different representations:

Representation #1 (original text)

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markham: hello? How was your day?  
pepsi_man jumps up and down, while watching television, with  
excitement.  
pepsi_man: it was a very good day. How about yours?  
pepsi_man giggles.
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Representation #2 (revised text)

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markham: hello? How was your day?  
pepsi_man: it was a very good day. How about yours?
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Markham argues that choosing “Representation #2” for better readability over “Representation #1”, where the participant actively inserts his embodiment (e.g., “**pepsi_man jumps up and down**”) in performances, has a serious consequences for representations of the participant. The ethnographer needs to make adequate decisions in the process of writing of the

ethnographic text. This requires context sensitivity, in Markham's view, because the decisions are not universal.

Ethics and ICT

ICT research introduces new circumstances that researchers did not necessarily have to consider in traditional research settings. For instance:

- Some users perceive publicly accessible data online as private.
- It may be hard to identify participants' age, when we have different IRB procedures for under-aged participants and others.
- Search engines allow people to easily search for statements used in the final research report.
- Informed consent of the actual participant (the persona corresponding to the driver's license) is difficult to attain in writing if the participant desires anonymity from the researcher.

Let us focus on the issue of private vs. public. Many ICT scholars contend, also this is the common belief by general public, that publicly accessible online discourse does not require Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval because the domains in which these texts are produced are public. Markham, citing Walther, notes that while participants may perceive that the space they participate is private because of, for instance, interpersonal characteristics of their interaction (e.g., numerous news reports on MySpace and Facebook and cautionary assertion that the users should be mindful of what they post on those sites because employers can look and deny job applications), this perception is ultimately false and it is the users' responsibilities rather than the researcher's.

The answer to this issue lies more fundamentally on what kind of ethical stance we stand on. Association of Internet Researchers ethics guidelines note that in the U.S., a utilitarian stance is more dominant, which suggests that benefits weigh more than the research risks and individual rights. In this stance, Walther's position is justified. Steve Jones notes that the structure and practices of review agencies (e.g., IRBs) in the U.S. encourage the researchers to be less concerned with ethical dilemmas as they arise during the research process and more concerned with getting approval for research design and procedures before the research begins. And this approval for qualitative research is often difficult to obtain because IRB guidelines were not originally designed for social research and even less for Internet contexts or methods. (They are much suitable for medical research or hard sciences.) Further, alterations to research design after the project has begun often require resubmission and review, thereby discouraging researchers from making modifications once the project has begun.

On the other hand, in European countries, in particular Scandinavia, one might take a deontological or communitarian stance, whereby the individual's rights are paramount and participants' privacy would be still protected. From the deontological stance, the question "Should the researcher regard the data as still public while the participants perceive them as private?" focuses on the researcher's legalistic dilemma rather than the actual participants in the study. To Bromseth in Markham's article, a Scandinavian researcher, this is a false dichotomy (i.e., "Should or should not?") that tries to solve its dilemma through legalistic clarification, rather than through the input from the actual participants whose interests are directly related to the research. Instead, she suggests that the researchers rethink basic issues and develop approaches that are ethically aligned with the researchers, research projects, and the participants.