Twelve Components: Evaluating Ethnographic Design

[Exploratory: A Developing Outline]

by Donald Ratcliff

Adapted from the first edition of Goetz and LeCompte (1984) and prepublication drafts of that chapter with additional comments by Donald Ratcliff.

In a general way it follows LeCompte and Preissle's (1993, pp. 325-330*)* eight tasks related to validity.

Basic question is that of whole chapter – how to assess quality of qualitative research. Quantity of time or number of pages isn't enough. Merely fulfilling basic essentials does not ensure high quality.

Difficult to define which are the most important dimensions.

Five attributes often sought by journals and paper reviewers – can evaluate as contrasts:

1. Appropriate (vs. inappropriate)
2. Clear (vs. opaque and vague)
3. Comprehensive (vs. holistic and narrow)
4. Credible (vs. not believable)
5. Significant (vs. trivial)

These are the minimum – creativity, being a distinctive contribution to literature and other possible qualities could be added. But if a study has all five attributes for every aspect of the research, it is obviously better.

The referent for the five is <u>not</u> what some evaluators think should have been done, but rather the research <u>questions</u> and intentions of researcher at the beginning.

Each of these five attributes can be applied to each of twelve dimensions – five areas to assess for each component. Assessment of each cell in the matrix can be conducted dichotomously (yes/no) or with levels (good/uncertain/poor, or even a Likert scale).

A written summary of each of the 12 dimensions follows, which summarizes and may include a rationale for the assessments in the cell structure.

In a dissertation committee, specific components may be a stronger area of expertise for a given committee member, and thus that area may receive concentrated attention from that individual. However, it is important that all committee members consider all 12 dimensions, at least to some extent, while reading and meeting about the research. It would also be very productive for the candidate to address each cell and make a written

summary of each component in a self-evaluation of their own research. This self-evaluation could also be considered prior to and during the defense. One or more evaluations during data collection and analysis can provide feedback to the researcher/s; a single summative evaluation is not as good as multiple formative evaluations during the research process.

Twelve Components of Research:

1. Purpose/Goals/Questions

A. Appropriate - Does topic apply to the discipline selected? Need to judge by "intrinsic merit", not evaluator's bias or disciplinary biases.

B. Clear - If sufficient focus can summarize purpose in short paragraphs. Succinct, terms clearly defined. Parsimonious.

C. Comprehensive - Do question/s and purpose really describe all it could for a complete study? Are all of the relevant areas related to the topic included?

D. Credible - Questionable if topic is already studied thoroughly. Need to be familiar with related literature. What group's special interests are served or ignored? Whose values are emphasized in the goals and purposes?

E. Significant - Will it significantly contribute to literature? Will it provide a unique or distinctive perspective on existing issues? Can it refine concepts, perspectives, or verify current understandings? Will it be likely to be accepted and used for significant insight and/or change of policies and practices?

2. Research Philosophy

A. Appropriate - What philosophical view is reflected in the study itself, not just the philosophy of researcher.

B. Clear - Specify philosophical tradition: e.g. 1) realism 2) idealism 3) existentialism 4) pragmatism 5) phenomenology 6) positivist 7) a combination of these.

C. Comprehensive - Not just selecting a philosophy and using associated guidelines in a study "replacing one positivist orthodoxy with a group of

neopositivist orthodoxies." (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993, p.326). Is there consistency in philosophical views?

D. Credible - Describe in detail, relate to existing research philosophies in literature.

E. Significant - Show how philosophy affected choices of theories, data collection, interpretation.

3. Conceptual/Theoretical Frame - Heart of study

To some degree specified at the beginning of the study, can be multiple theories, very broad theories (e.g. Lewin, Gaffman).

A. Appropriate – Concepts apply to setting; fits what was experienced. How do concepts and constructs interrelate with each other/interactions. Concepts related to questions asked – "securely integrated"

B. Clear - Well defined. Data level of questions clearly related to theory. Empirical descriptions of possible relationships and presuppositions articulated.

C. Comprehensive - Scope of theory fits research questions – novices often restrict scope to current status of discipline – need to broaden to include cross-disciplinary concerns – multiple theories and views.

D. Credible - Not an afterthought – emergent (not imposed—need to suspend preconceptions at least for awhile during data collection) and found in data. Address rival explanations of data; not just trying to support one perspective. Results of data, not results of researcher's norm – based or value-based judgements that are presumed to be factual.

E. Significant - Thoroughly addresses relevant theories or adds to them. Most significant when pit one theory against another (like a critical experiment).

4. Research Design/Model

A. Appropriate – Ethical, do-able. Must assess clarity before can tell if it is appropriate design. Does design fit questions/goals? Ethnography good for 4 situations:

1. Sociocultural system analysis
2. Using culture to analyze social events

3. Participant–centered analysis and reconstruction of events or actions
4. Obtaining process and values data

B. Clear – Often not clear what was intended to be done in contrast with what actually was done "Ethnography" defined in different ways – sometimes synonymous with qualitative research. Use terminology consistently within study and accurate terms (good to reference using an accepted methods text).

C. Comprehensive –Adaptations and variations of standard methods appropriate to answer questions comprehensively. Need variety of methods (one form of triangulation).

D. Credible – 6-8 months in field more credible than one shot observation in classroom. Need sufficient training and funding. Has the design been used before?

E. Significant – Complete ethnography vs. mixed design will affect interpretation. Takes time and sufficient resources. Results may be inaccessible for longer time due to analysis requirements – may require compromise. (e.g. use samples of video data).

5. Setting/Circumstances (Description of Setting)

A. Appropriate – need to identify the range of circumstances to be sure all that are relevance to questions are included in study.

B. Clear – Description is clear. Ideal is to describe setting so thoroughly it is virtually equal to photograph.

C. Comprehensive - My list compiled from numerous studies:

1. How you chose and entered site

2. Detailed description (Maps and diagrams may be good supplements if they don't compromise confidentiality)

a) Surrounding community

b) School/church/organization catchment area

c) Buildings

d) Politics

e) Church or other organization – social, legal, denominational, district and local church levels

f) Leadership – style/roles, social class ethnicity, areas of responsibility and power

g) History of church, or other organization: local, district, denomination

h) Annual schedule

i) Teachers – roles, backgrounds (e.g. Ethnicity, class)

j) Classroom/s or other areas used

k) Staff – roles, background

l) Students – ethnicity, classes, roles.

Gatekeeper of this crucial to access these details.

D. Credible – Degree to which it could be a guidebook/manual for a newcomer. Show how setting and situation could bias study. Include documents, manuals if available. (e.g. photo books, policy manual).

E. Significant – Not necessarily representative. Describe insufficient detail that reader can determine if research site is significantly like their own site.

6. Sampling Procedure

A. Appropriate – (The procedure itself is appropriate, not just the number or the sample itself.) Did specific people chosen for detailed study bias study? Sufficient number and variety of people in sample/s to represent the group to be described in results and conclusions section of report.

B. Clear – The written summary of the sampling process is described fully – what kind of sampling/selection used (use terms from reputable source).

C. Comprehensive – Also need to describe participants in thorough detail. Who declined to participate and who dropped out? Does this reflect a loss of extremes that might give distinctive input? Or was it a loss of those in midrange that might give more typical responses. (Thus were conclusions skewed toward views of one or several extremes?) Who were the participants? Characteristics in detail (My compilation from studies):

1. race/ethnicity
2. age
3. number of participants
4. gender
5. socioeconomics
6. student/teacher ratio
7. teacher typologies of students
8. home environment (family, residential area, living area/s)
9. common experiences with peers
10. personality characteristics

D. Credible – Most likely biasing factors described in detail. Are comparisons and generalizations warranted from sample/selections? (Highlight areas of possible bias and explicate in detail).

E. Significant – Convincing rationales provided for sampling procedure.

7. Background and Experience of Researcher

A. Appropriate – Researcher characteristics affect rapport: sex, age, ethnicity, values/morals, social and emotional characteristics, other physical aspects. These also affect degree to which researcher can participate, degree of acceptance by participants, and thus the resulting data.

B. Clear – Language, including dialect, will affect entry and later access to people during research (congruence with their world-view).

C. Comprehensive – Extensive reflections of past experiences that might potentially relate to setting, participants reflect before, during and after research. (Personal notes).

D. Credible – If identify personal characteristics, reader can possibly judge likelihood participants were reactive

E. Significant – May find setting or participants repugnant and withdraw – reject values of those studied – or go to other extreme: "go native" and lose perspective.

8. Role/s of Researcher

A. Appropriate – Roles will facilitate acquisition of some data and limit other data – so choose roles that will best provide data related to goals and purpose.

B. Clear – Need to be resocialized on personal level yet retain outside view. Did you specify a role rather than leave it vague (ambiguous roles tend to be seen as threatening)

C. Comprehensive – Relationships vitally affect breadth of data. Were you able to flex with people – shift role if it meant getting more and better quality data?

D. Credible – Need some externality-value of etic perspective. ("Social Science framework") (See Lofland & Lofland text, or even Jim Lee). Did they believe your role or did you try to portray a role you could not genuinely assume? Need authenticity of role (we can assume several possible roles, but some roles fall outside our potential range).

E. Significant – Must assess degree of participation – full to none – to help assess influence of researcher assumptions and biases on results. Were you a significant person to them by virtue of the assumed role/s, or were you peripheral?

9. Data Collections Methods

A. Appropriate – Methods are plausibly related to the research questions. Beware of irrelevant or unneeded data (too many rabbit trails followed). Careful planning needed and regular follow up reviews. What constraints on the kinds of data collected were there? Also characteristics of participants can affect methods chosen.

B. Clear – Parsimony needed. Describe amount of time taken for each phase. Low inference descriptors needed. Audit trail – each decision, change, and other aspects can be traced.

C. Comprehensive – Be exhaustive as possible without exhausting participants or researcher. Can over saturate – redundancy because you are there too long. Sufficient time must be allotted for data collection – at least a few weeks. (3 to 36 months in literature surveyed). Deal with all questions proposed.

D. Credible – Describe the initial planning and ongoing review of plans – so it can be judged for appropriateness. Must be dense and represent what was researched fairly. Direct quotes needed from participants and researchers notes. Use the language participants use. Higher validity with interactive methods <u>if</u> methods used correctly. Naturalistic setting also adds to validity, as does the use of categories emic to or emergent from participants. Time facilitates likelihood of matching participant categories to researcher categories. Multiple sources of data needed to verify and refine—or eliminate—preliminary findings. Readers will judge if alternative sources were available (i.e. what could have been asked or

examined, but wasn't?) Were techniques of data collection related to results – justified conclusions, not just speculation or superficial data.

E. Significant – Data hard to replicate – lower reliability (as with projective instruments) and concepts of participants are more tied to time, place, and those studied. Reliability of confirmation surveys with standardized items can be controlled to greater extent than can reliability of observations using field note data. (One can make a case for very high reliability in transcriptions of interviews). Validity of interviews and observations depends on researcher's role, specific techniques used, and degree of clarity of constructs.

10. Data Analysis/Interpretation

A. Appropriate – Name the formal method/s of data analysis and changes/adaptation's made. Informal methods should be described in detail (preferably illustrated). Identify the basis for interpretations.

B. Clear – Almost seems mystical how data is transformed because of complexity of data, as well as shifts of data and kinds of analysis throughout study. Needs to document how initial codes pushed researcher to more elaborate codes and linkages and finally to formal data analysis. (Use theoretical notes for this documentation). Describe member check and how the results of the check elaborated or restricted conclusions.

C. Comprehensive – Need to describe: 1) abstraction process 2) units of analysis 3) codes used 4) methods of quantification, if any 5) corroborating evidence 6) how synthesized in the results 7) limitations and advantages to a given formal method 8) usage of additional formal methods with given data and triangulation of formal methods of analysis (and potential future formal methods and triangulation).

D. Credible – Often a weak area in qualitative research – either cavalier or not described sufficiently. Why did the researcher choose one analytic method and not an alternative? Need to trace ongoing shifts in analysis and describe in the report and justify those changes, so reader can judge analysis approach chosen. Distinguish analysis using participant categories from analysis using researcher categories – including those derived from existing theories – so they can be evaluated for appropriateness.

E. Significant – Discuss how key constructs evolved over time of study, so they can be assessed for adequate relationship to initial questions as well as the collected data. While unwarranted conjectures are possible using qualitative analytic procedure, it is also possible that analysis will be too narrow and

simplistic, interfering with the development of theory that adequately explains. Describe derivation of meanings of emergent terms and constructs.

11. Applications/Recommendations

A. Appropriate – What is intended audience? Relates to purpose and goals. What policies need revising? May be parallels discovered between unrelated groups – e.g. comparisons made across cultures.

B Clear – Careful specification of implications. Implications for the research setting, and potential applications for other settings clearly state limitations of conclusions and applications. Application is a shared responsibility with the reader.

C. Comprehensive – If initial framing is more comprehensive, it will apply more broadly. Multiple applications of results possible, not just one situation or level (at least implied, not absolute). (This could be a unique case.)

D. Credible – Degree of tentativeness/confidence is appropriate to purpose, goals, and breadth of study. Convincing arguments for conclusions, implications, and applications.

E. Significant – May not need to specify immediate changes needed if the outcome of study is new or revised theory, or information about a group or context that is rare. The ultimate objective of a study is to document what occurred and preserve information. Tentative conclusions can generate as much research in future as very confident conclusions (perhaps even generate more follow-up research). Move beyond concepts that initially informed research – what does the research suggest about additional areas needing research and potential areas have been uncovered that need new constructs and categories that subsequent research can address? What issues do we confirmatory follow-up?

12. Presentation Format and Sequence

A. Appropriate – Wide variations:

1) chronological

2) topical

3) descriptions of problem-solving.

Many qualitative methodologists prefer the review of the literature that is embedded throughout, rather than a separate chapter (requires a high level of integrative thinking).

B. Clear – Clarity of description is a strong indication of validity. Sometimes difficult to separate data and interpretations; theoretical notes help in this area.

C. Comprehensive – Represent multiple perspectives via dense narrative. Several criteria (McCutcheon): 1) logical 2) orderly 3) feasible 4) alternative possibilities are noted and reasons for discarding them are described in detail 5) sufficient data to merit interpretations made – quotes allow reader to assess this 6) results are consistent with what has been found in similar groups and, if not, there is a plausible explanation for discrepancies 7) results contribute to theory, general understanding, or current controversies and issues. Results apply to multiple theories and perspectives

D. Credible – direct quotations of participants and field notes – convincing, but addresses major questions you began with. Include findings that are discrepant and deviant cases – (exceptions) – helps separate data and interpretations. Time oriented or other consequential influences must be demonstrated and justified. Note results that were not anticipated (surprises) and show how those were integrated into results and why they are significant.

E. Significant – Need to describe different levels of confidence for various data and interpretations. Integrate results broadly, relate significance to original goals and purposes.

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Return to Qualitative Research Resources

Return to Qualitative Research Outline