



# *Qualitative Sociology Review*

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Guest Editor: Anne Ryen  
University of Agder, Norway

## Editorial: The Credibility of Qualitative Research

This special issue of *Qualitative Sociology Review* is dedicated to the topic “The credibility of qualitative research”. In June 2007 the European Science Foundation funded the ESF Exploratory Workshop “Improving The Quality of Qualitative Research” arranged at University of Agder, Kristiansand, Norway

[http://www.esf.org/index.php?eID=tx\\_nawsecured1&u=0&file=fileadmin/be\\_user/ew\\_docs/06-193\\_Report.pdf&t=1226941778&hash=17f05fba007263bcf8cfb24ea1fd86af](http://www.esf.org/index.php?eID=tx_nawsecured1&u=0&file=fileadmin/be_user/ew_docs/06-193_Report.pdf&t=1226941778&hash=17f05fba007263bcf8cfb24ea1fd86af)

This was an initiative from the 2005-7 Presidency of the European Sociological Association, Research Network 20 Qualitative Research (ESA RN20)

[http://www.europeansociology.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=38&Itemid=29](http://www.europeansociology.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=38&Itemid=29)

with a brief review and a photo from the workshop including the history and the activities of the RN20 in the ESA Newsletter here:

[http://www.europeansociology.org/images/stories/ESA2007\\_2009/Newsletters/esa\\_newsletter\\_summer2008\\_high\\_quality\\_update.pdf](http://www.europeansociology.org/images/stories/ESA2007_2009/Newsletters/esa_newsletter_summer2008_high_quality_update.pdf)

A more formal report “Is There a “Legitimation Crisis” in Qualitative Methods?” from the workshop was published by the then ESA RN20 President - Shalva Weil in *Forum: Qualitative Social Research FQS*, Volume 9, No. 2, Art. 6 – May 2008

<http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/438/948>

To cite the abstract for the workshop application:

Multiple theories and contrasting methodologies in qualitative research may persuade us that credibility is irrelevant. Denzin and Lincoln, by referring to a ‘legitimation crisis’ which questions traditional criteria for evaluating and interpreting qualitative research (2000:17), may confirm doubts of funding agencies and quantitative researchers.

This workshop will convene internationally recognized scholars to develop substantial arguments to satisfy external critics concerning credibility gaps and inspire a new generation of qualitative researchers. (Silverman, Weil and Ryen 2007)

Qualitative research is increasingly being employed as a suitable methodology across disciplines and professions including evaluation studies and traditional quantitative territory such as business studies, economic geography and development studies across continents. A substantial amount of such studies work as background to decisions on social change to in one way or another improve

people's living conditions. However, successful policy implications are dependent on the credibility of such qualitative research. If not, the consequences may be severe.

Our aim is to make sure the discussion about the quality of our research remains a topic across methods and practice. This QSR issue thereby is a following-up of the ongoing discussion of credibility of qualitative research claiming credibility is a most highly relevant issue. Still, in the wide array of methodological literature we do find a range of criteria to gauge successful standards, and as claimed by Christian Lüders (2007:359) they "are further developed and put into concrete terms in the various schools and methodological approaches". However, the criteria tend to remain at a rather general level, and rather conflicting when made more relevant to practice. No sets are clearly defined for the future directions, and will need to address both internal problems as well as external expectations (Also see von Kardoff 2007, on utilization of social science knowledge). Hubert Knoblauch (207:354) addresses the continental division in qualitative research. He refers to the difference between the Anglo-Saxon and the German-speaking countries where postmodernism never had the same strong impact on qualitative research in the latter compared to the former countries. This difference between continents is addressed in the ongoing ESF Programme EUROQUAL chaired by Paul Atkinson:

Based on the fact that while qualitative research is highly visible in many fields of social-science research, it exists within many sub-specialisms, and reflects national as well as disciplinary boundaries. There is a clear need for scholars throughout Europe to share, develop and promote high-level methodological expertise. There is an equally pressing need for capacity-building within the European social sciences

<http://www.esf.org/activities/research-networking-programmes/social-sciences-scscs/current-esf-research-networking-programmes/qualitative-research-in-the-social-sciences-in-europe-euroqual.html>

In their Introduction to *Qualitative Research Practice* Clive Seale et al (2004: 1-11) address the issue of general norms and research practice where they argue against making qualitative research into a question of historical stages or moments as in Denzin and Lincoln's *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (1996), and see any general framework to guide research practice as provisional representing a "partial truth" only though differentiated from the postmodern argument. They also refer to the unhappy distinction between the external political role of methodology and the internal procedural role. In the former the task of methodology has been to legitimate our work to those asking for our results, and in the latter to guide researchers along the process of doing research. Rather, they place research practice at the centre "...instead of forcibly applying abstract methodological rules to contingent situations, the research situation is placed in a position of dialogue with methodological rules" (2004:7). This connects well with the contributions in this QSR issue.

We are very happy that some of the presentations from the referred ESF workshop are published in this *Qualitative Sociology Review* issue, and that other qualitative researchers as well have contributed to explore this highly relevant and important topic.

In the opening article "Triangulation and Dealing with the Realness of Qualitative Research" Krzysztof Konecki presents his reflections on working in the qualitative field with a focus on the accountability of research conclusions. He poses a most relevant question: How is the description of reality constructed in ethnographic reports? In his discussion of the meanings and interpretations of observed events, he argues they are part of a symbolic interaction between the

author and his or her audience, “the generalised other”, thus creating a particular context in which the text is received. According to Konecki this has a big impact both on what we as researchers write about and how they write. This way the audience influences the text. In his discussion of the representation of field events, he draws upon two of his previous empirical projects.

Also Marie Buscatto draws on organisational ethnography in her article “Who Allowed You to Observe? A Reflexive Overt Organizational Ethnography” where she uses a reflexive perspective to discuss how ethnographers ensure that their final results are “scientific”. More precisely, she discusses how ethnographers may employ techniques and procedures offered as guidance throughout the different research stages. In her article she draws on her own experience from doing overt research in private companies and illustrates how analysing empirical data becomes a central part of knowledge and enrich the quality of qualitative methods.

Lars-Christer Hydèn on “Narratives in Illness: A Methodological Note” invites us into the debate about narratives as text or performance with himself well positioned in the latter approach with a focus on how stories are told along with using also other communicative modalities. As opposed to many other studies on patients with Alzheimers, Hydèn analyses a narrative told by an Alzheimers patient herself. In his detailed transcriptions he shows how the telling of the story or more exact the performance between the patient and her listeners, becomes a joint and mutual performance. Telling stories then, he argues, becomes a multimodal event where the patient manages to construct her identity not only as a linguistic construct, but also embodied where the old self emerges into the teller-self, of special importance in the field of health and illness.

In “Vision and Performance. The Sociolinguistic Analysis of Genres and Its Application to Focussed Ethnographic Data” Bernt Schnettler discusses the use of audiovisual recording devices in qualitative research. Differentiating between the old focus on data collection, his concern is with the quality and transparency of data analysis. Video-data are mediated representations of reality transformed into data which makes analysing video data a most current challenge. He demonstrates the benefits as well as the limitations of sociolinguistic genre analysis. In his discussion he draws on video-taped data of a New Religious Movement’s spiritual leader and stepwise introduces data not in the video to contextualise the video fragment previously explored in detail. To decipher the meaning of certain aspects of the leader’s visionary performance, he argues a need for focussed ethnographic fieldwork supplied also by data from other methods which he makes into a general statement when using video data.

In “Wading the Field with My Key Informant: Exploring Field Relations”, Anne Ryen explores the ethnographic puzzle of prolonged field relations in qualitative research. She claims a need for bringing in the “[inter]” and the social into the analysis. She claims the problem with the classic commonsense explanations is making us into integral components of the very world we seek to describe. Rather, she argues a need for exploring (all field-) members` interpretive work and thus recognises the classic ethnomethodological differentiation between topic and resource. However, in cross-cultural research we can not take for granted that members share vocabularies, descriptions and images. This often introduces misunderstandings and even communicative breakdowns in the field. She therefore argues a need for Membership Categorisation Device analysis while also bringing the wider culture into the analysis. She illustrates with data extracts from her fieldwork in East-Africa.

This way, all articles in this edition make use of a researcher-centred view and adapt methodology to the research situation. Therefore, we hope this QSR issue will be a most relevant contribution to the ongoing debate of the credibility of qualitative research practice and how to make our research count.

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