

Doing High Quality Field Research



Kim Elsbach

University of California, Davis

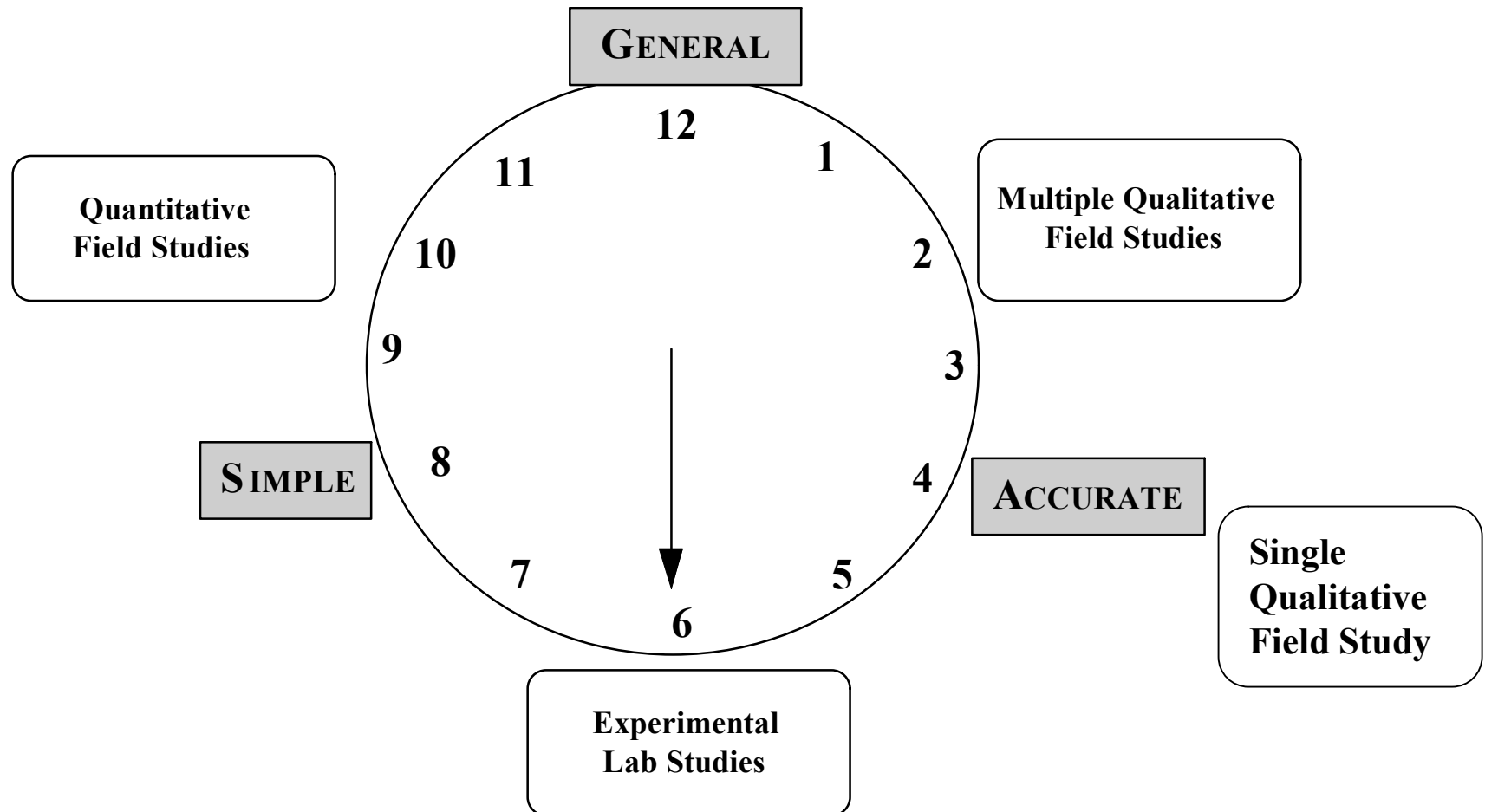
1. What Does it Mean to do High Quality (Qualitative) Field Research?




- a) It plays to the strengths of the method for theory-building
 - Accuracy
 - Richness
 - Dynamics

- b) It recognizes the weaknesses of the method for theory-building
 - Complex
 - Specific

Understand the Methodological Trade-offs in Theory-Building



Strengths of Field Research



Accuracy A grounded theory that is faithful to the everyday realities of a substantive area is one that has been carefully induced from diverse data. . . . Only in this way will the theory be closely related to the daily realities (what is actually going on) of substantive areas, and so be highly applicable to dealing with them. (Glaser & Strauss, 1967: 238)

Richness Theory building seems to require rich description, the richness that comes from anecdote. We uncover all kinds of relationships in our “hard” data, but it is only through the use of this “soft” data that we are able to “explain” them, and explanation is, of course, the purpose of research....(Mintzberg (1979: 113).

Dynamics It is through rebuilding the world in dynamic, sequential (and, implicitly, causal) fashion and then presenting that world to others that meaning is generated. Such sequential organization is best understood by examining it naturalistically, without reference to artificially constructed categories. Through qualitative data, the process as a whole is preserved. We lose something critical by ignoring the totality in examining the parts. (Fine & Elsbach, 2000 : 57)

Weaknesses of Qualitative Research



Complexity and Specificity

Grounded theories are very “fluid”. . . Because they embrace the interaction of multiple actors, and because they emphasize temporality and process, they indeed have a striking fluidity. They call for exploration of each new situation to see *if* they fit, *how* they might fit, and how they *might not* fit. They demand an openness of the researcher, based on the “forever” provisional character of every theory. (Strauss and Corbin, 1994: 279)

What is My Best Ethnographic Research and Why?




1. **Elsbach & Kramer (1996) “Assessing Creativity in Hollywood Pitch Meetings...”**
 - Collected data over a long period of time, and spent time with lots of different people in different roles. Gathered data in “live” contexts as well as interviews. Really felt I understood what happened in a pitch from both sides.
 2. **Current project on Toy Designers**
 - Long term, spent first year in interviews, next 3 years on site. Observed people over time. Interviewed people outside of site who interact with designers. Followed multiple projects from beginning to end. Understood work-life of subjects.
- * The key seems to be having the **feeling of complete understanding** or comprehension, **including emotional awareness** of lives of subjects, and **getting that feeling across to readers. Writing is very important!**

2. How Do You Position Yourself in the Field?



- a) At first, I think of my self as an interested, but naive outsider.
- b) Over time, I think of myself as an interested, but somewhat more educated outsider.
- c) I very much try to empathize with the subjects, regardless of my a priori feelings about what they do. I try to suspend judgment of individuals, and just get to know them one-on-one. My goal is to understand what they are doing and why - not to evaluate or judge their effectiveness or morality.

3. How Do you Decide What to Present/Not Present?



- a) Ultimately, I present what I think is interesting and relevant to the research questions. I always ask, “does this data tell me something relevant to a research question?” The data also has to be convincing to me, as an expert observer. Based on what I’ve come to know, is this relevant and important. Finally, I’ve started going back to the field and verifying my final models with participants to see if they agree with findings.
- b) I may not present things that affect me strongly, but I think are irrelevant to this set of research questions. I do not feel ethnographers must be comprehensive in what they present.

Some Feelings from Other Field Researchers:



Reflection helps you to hone your theoretical contribution.

“ I think qualitative research makes you theoretically sharper as well as being more applied... because not only do you learn what the critical variables are and how they affect each other, but you’ve been there and observed the phenomena”
Kathy Eisenhardt quoted in Elsbach (2000:67)

The process itself should be intrinsically fun/interesting.

“All my work, for the most part, has been driven by my own interest in social issues. It has to do with why I personally choose problems in the first place.”
Steve Barley quoted in Elsbach (2000:61)

The process can lead to self-growth.

“The Amway study has changed me. I talk about the one study that has changed the way I look at the world, that would be it.... it made me realize the power of giving people hope at a basic level.” Mike Pratt quoted in Elsbach (2000:64)

4. What are Key Challenges for Using Fieldwork to Study Organizations?



- a) Time, time, time.
- b) Location, location, location.
- c) Becoming bogged down by the data.
- d) Increasing commitment to failing course of action.
- e) Being intimidated by a project that seems out of reach.

A Common Complaint About Field Research



You knew answer before you started.

"It felt like you were imposing a pre-defined framework on the responses rather than letting the data speak for itself"

"I believe that you had the model in mind before you did the study, and the study was done to determine whether the model would, in fact, prove useful to subsequent research"

" The qualitative data seem to be here only to help make a point that you've already convinced yourself is true."

"The obvious problem with qualitative analysis is that, if a researcher allows his or her pre-conceived notions to guide interpretation, then the study is really not about generating theory or models, but about testing pre-conceived models in a way where there are few checks for validity. I believe that is what is going on here."

Some Proposed Solutions



1. Make the paper a hypotheses testing paper.

Some editors have suggested that, since you already seem to know what you're looking for that you turn the paper into a hypotheses testing paper.

"In the present version of the paper, there are many places where you imply but don't state hypotheses ..This suggests that your current paper is completely turned around. Rather than being a project where you generate propositions, you should present and test hypotheses."

My feelings:

This is often not possible, since the study was truly inductive, and you did not design the study or collect data with the rigor necessary to test hypotheses. If a great amount of data were collected and the findings were partially predicted before hand, this may work. But, it seems a bit insincere.

2. Present a chronologically correct description of the study.

Some editors want a chronologically correct presentation of your inductive process.

" If you wish to keep the inductive focus, you should use the introduction to explore the issue or problem that led to the study, and discuss the inductive process in the order it occurred."

My feelings:

Presenting a true account of the inductive process is difficult. It makes for a much longer paper, and it may confuse the issue.

Some Proposed Solutions - continued



3. Present your framework up front, and then work backwards.

Some editors suggest that you explain your findings first, and then come clean about your inductive methods in the theory building section.

"The model should have been presented right up front in the introduction and in the heart of the abstract"

My feelings:

This is a viable solution. Dutton & Dukerich (1991) used this in their award winning 1991 AMJ paper. Rod Kramer and I have also used this in a current paper. It seems to set the stage quickly and clearly, but also allow you to describe the inductive process.

4. Disclaimers

Some editors and reviewers have simply suggested that we add a disclaimer to our introduction to let readers know that our discussion of relevant literature was based on the framework that we inducted.

"Our inductive study revealed x. To provide a conceptual grounding for our framework, we first discuss extant literature relevant to this finding"

My feelings:

This is also a good solution. But, it may appear defensive and lead readers to question the study in ways they may not have without the disclaimer. Bob Sutton doesn't like this solution for those reasons. He also feels it delegitimizes qualitative research.

Other Random Pieces of Advice



1. In getting access and arranging interviews or site visits:
 - Make a phone call every day before you do anything else.
 - Every time someone turns you down, ask for a reference for another informant.
2. Getting access at your dream site may be just as easy (or hard) as getting access at the most convenient site. Don't be trapped by convenience - go for what you want to do.
3. Have lots of different strategies for doing an interview, in case you get someone who is hard to get talking
 - Provide scenarios for them to put themselves in to.
 - Ask them to describe recent, specific instances.