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| Dr Gan Joo Kong |
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**Qualitative Research**

What is qualitative research?

It is interpretivism, the opposite of positivism. It means that the activities of a selected group of people or a selected few persons in a natural environment are studied and meanings are drawn from them without any biasness. The idea is to make sense of and understand their motives, actions and intentions in a way that is meaningful for the research participants. This is said to be an inductive research approach. It means that we can explore, catch glimpses, illuminate and then try to interpret bits of reality. Interpretation is as far as we can go. This places less of a burden of proof on qualitative research but it builds gradual pictures. These pictures are themselves only interpretations - approximations - basic attempts to represent what is in fact a much more complex reality - paintings that represent our own impressions, rather than photographs of what is ‘really’ there. They are created by collecting a number of instances of social life.

There is no theory or hypothesis to start with or to prove at the beginning. There is a phenomenon to examine and to find the meaning of it in the process of the research being done. The researcher is involved as the development of the research design and the collection of the data from the participants and in the search for meanings of the data obtained. The researcher interprets the meanings of the data collected and attempts to find the relationships among the meanings of the phenomenon to reach a conclusion for the development of a theory. Finding relationships of the data or variables is in a way creating hypotheses but it is done from the data collected but not to prove a theory as seen in deductive research approach.

Furthermore, a qualitative research concludes with a theory but not to prove a theory as seen in deductive research.

The Social Aspect of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research invokes the need to discover as much about how research subjects feel about the information they provide besides the information itself. It is these qualitative areas in social life that qualitative research addresses. The qualitative researcher examines them to discover the lives of the participants in their natural environment. It involves a specific sample at a specific social setting but not at a broad population. This implies that what information that has been gathered from this small sample is only good for this sample it cannot be applied to another place for two reasons: the participants are not the same with different social backgrounds and in a different natural environment.

The participants are subjected to the conditions, situations and circumstances in the natural environment. They are influenced by the ***cultural factors*** such as the beliefs, values and attitudes in the particulate environment. Fundamentally, qualitative research is the study of social actions of the participants in an environmental setting and this implies the study of the culture of the group of people in a particular natural setting.

Quality research develops from aspects of anthropology and sociology and represents a broad view that to understand human affairs it is insufficient to rely on quantitative survey and statistics, and necessary instead to delve deep into the subjective qualities that govern behaviour. Qualitative research has to come out and tell really what happened in the phenomenon studied. From here it is apparent that qualitative research compensates for the difficulties confronted by quantitative research in terms of its problem with objectivity and to respond to uncontrolled variables. Consequence to this development, qualitative research is increasing in use in a wide range of academic and professional areas.

Developing Rigour through Writing in Qualitative Research

Qualitative research cannot follow the prescribed steps of quantitative research in respond to uncontrolled variables. The type of research instruments to be used is done based on the gradual responses to the nature of the social setting being investigated as its nature is revealed. This implies that every qualitative research design will be different. For example in the qualitative research design like case study, the questionnaire and interview may be more appropriate, and in the case of grounded theory observation and interview may be applied. This is not the situation in quantitative research where a research instrument is designed according to the strategy to fit the scenario being studied.

In qualitative research the validity is not there at the beginning because there is no theory or hypothesis to begin with. Its validity is developed from the workings of every step it moves through the process of the research. Each working of a step is a justification of the strategy applied.

Sources of Validity

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| Quantitative research | Qualitative research |
| Need to tell the reader of the research:1. Details of the population (in samples)2. What sort of question (in survey  questionnaires)3. Which statistics The composition of groups (in experiments)4. Which variables are being included and  excluded.5. What groups are exposed to in experiments. | Need to tell the reader of the research the rationale for:1. Choice of social setting: how it represented the  research topic: in its role in society, how feasible  and substantial it was (e.g. access, duration, depth,  breadth).2. Choice of research activities: how they suited the  social setting, how they were appropriate to  researcher-subject relationships, how they formed  coherent strategy.3. Choice of themes and focuses: how they emerged,  why they are significant, how far they are  representatives of the social setting.4. Dedication to and thoroughness of fieldwork: how  and to what extent the field was engaged with (e.g.  strategies for ‘being there’ ), how data was  recorded and catalogued.5. Overall need to articulate a judicious balance  between opportunism and principle. |

Judicious Balance

This touches on how far research strategies are appropriate to the setting and the people in it.

Inductive research strategies: Cash Study, Grounded Theory or Ethnography, they have their own respective settings and the samples or particular participants, and research phenomena to look into and as a result each has its own research instruments to collect data and conclusion to reach. Therefore the judicious balance in qualitative research is between taking the opportunity to encounter the research setting while maintaining the principles of social science - how you go about maintaining the relationships and getting the data in order to find the answers to the phenomenon.

Research as Social Action

There are several issues involved in the balance between creative opportunity and maintaining scientific principle:

1. creative exploration makes qualitative research akin to the research we all do in everyday life;
2. as in the rest of everyday life, researchers, like other people, are ideologically motivated;
3. approaching the research setting appropriately involves interaction between the culture of the setting and the culture of research;
4. accounting for the research strategy, to demonstrate how the judicious balance is maintained, requires careful articulation which resides in the conventions of research language;
5. all in all, qualitative research is learning culture.

From the above issues, it is rational to infer that qualitative research is about social action. The researcher cannot put himself above other people but as a person interacting with others. Therefore in the writing of the research report, it must account of personal struggle to make sense of the complex human situations within which the research often becomes implicated.

(Source: Adrian Holliday (2009). *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research*, 2nd Edition, SAGE Publications Ltd: London, pp. 1-20.)

**Overview of Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is different from quantitative research in terms of:

* different knowledge claims
* different strategies of enquiry
* different methods of data collection
* different method of analysis that is drawn on diverse strategies of enquiry

Characteristics of qualitative research

* *Takes place in the natural setting*.
* The researcher often goes to the site (home, office) of the participant to conduct the research.
* This enables the researcher to develop a level of detail about the individual or place.
* The researcher becomes highly involved in actual experiences of the participants.
* *Uses multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic*.
* The method of data collection involves active participation by participants and sensitivity to the participants in the study.
* Qualitative researchers look for involvement of their participants in data collection and seek to build rapport and credibility with the individuals in the study.
* They do not disturb the site any more than is necessary.
* In addition, the actual methods of data collection are based on open-ended observation, interviews and documents such as questionnaires, scrapbooks, e-mail.
* The data collected involve text (or word) data and images (or pictures) data.
* *Qualitative research is emergent rather than tightly prefigured*.
* Several aspects emerge during a qualitative study.
* For example - The research questions may change and be refined as the inquirer learns what to ask and to whom it should be asked.
* The data collection process might change as doors open and close for data collection, and the inquirer learns the best sites at which to learn about the central phenomenon of interest.
* The theory or general pattern of understanding will emerge as it begins with initial codes, develops into broad themes, and coalesces into a grounded theory or broad interpretation.
* These aspects of an unfolding research model make it difficult to prefigure qualitative research tightly at the proposal or early research stage.
* *Qualitative research is fundamentally interpretative*.
* This means that the researcher makes an interpretation of the data. (There are no hypotheses to guide you.)
* This includes developing a description of an individual or setting, analysing data for themes or categories, and finally making an interpretation or drawing conclusions about its meanings personally and theoretically, stating the lessons learned and offering further questions to be asked.
* It also means that the researcher filters the data through a personal lens that is situated in a specific socio-political and historical moment. One cannot escape the personal interpretation brought to qualitative data analysis.
* *The qualitative researcher views social phenomena holistically* (as complete a picture as possible).
* This explains why qualitative research studies appear as broad, panoramic views rather than micro-analyses.
* The more complex, interactive and encompassing the narrative, the better the qualitative study.
* *The qualitative researcher systematically reflects on who he or she is in the enquiry and is sensitive to his or her personal biography and how it shapes the study*.
* This introspection and acknowledgement of biases, values and interest (or reflexivity) typifies qualitative research today.
* The personal-self becomes inseparable from the researcher-self.
* It also represents honesty and openness to research, acknowledging that all inquiry is laden with values (Mertens, 2003).
* Procedurally statements of personal reflection emerge in the ‘role of the researcher’ section or an epilogue or are embedded throughout a proposal or a study.
* *The qualitative researcher uses complex reasoning that is multifaceted, iterative, and simultaneous.*
* Although the reasoning is largely inductive and deductive processes are at work.
* The thinking process is also iterative (doing something again and again to improve on it), with a cycling back and forth from data collection and analysis to problem reformation and back
* Added to this are the simultaneous activities of collecting, analysing and writing up data.
* *The qualitative researcher adopts and uses one or more strategies of inquiry as a guide for the procedures in the qualitative study.*

Differences between qualitative research and quantitative research in two key ways

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|  Qualitative research |  Quantitative research |
| 1. Involves simultaneous collection of a  wealth of narrative and visual data over an extended period of time.  | 1. Research is conducted in researcher-  controlled environment |
| 2. As far as possible data collection is done in a naturalistic setting.  | 2. The activities of data collection, analysis  and writing are separate, discrete activities.  |

These two characteristics of qualitative research have helped to encourage the growing interest for qualitative research in education.

Education problems and questions cannot possibly be solved through quantitative approach which attempts to control variables in very complex environments. Educational problems and questions should be solved through research conducted in real world settings in order to have relevance to real world settings.

**2. The Qualitative Research Paradigm (Model/Mind-Set)**

The qualitative research paradigm has developed from cultural anthropology and American sociology. It has been adopted by educational researchers in the 1980s. *The objective of qualitative research is to understand a particular social situation, event, role, group or interaction.*

It is largely an investigative progress where the researcher gradually makes sense of a social phenomenon (event/happening/occurrence) by contrasting, comparing, replicating, cataloguing and classifying the object of the study. This then entails immersion in the everyday life of the setting chosen for the study; the researcher enters the informer’s world and through on-going interaction, seeks the informer’s perspectives and meanings.

Scholars have distinguished qualitative research from quantitative research in the following ways:

1. Qualitative research occurs in natural settings, where human behaviour and events occur.
2. Qualitative research is based on assumptions that are very different from quantitative designs. Theory or hypotheses are not established a priori.
3. The researcher is the primary instrument in data collection rather than some inanimate mechanism.
4. The data that emerge from a qualitative study are descriptive. That is, data are reported in words (primarily the participant’s words) or pictures, rather than in numbers.
5. The focus of qualitative research is on participants’ perceptions and experiences and the way that they make sense of their lives. The attempt is therefore to understand not one but multiple realities.
6. Objectivity and truthfulness are critical to both research traditions. However, the criteria for judging a qualitative study differ from quantitative research. First and foremost the researcher seeks believability, based on coherence, insight and instrumental utility and trustworthiness through a process of verification rather than through traditional validity and reliability measures.
7. Qualitative research focuses on the process that is occurring as well as the product or outcome. Researchers are particularly interested in understanding how things occur.
8. Idiographic interpretation is utilised. In other words, attention is paid to particulars; and data is interpreted in regard to the particulars of a case rather than generalisation.
9. Qualitative research is an emergent design (picture) in its negotiated outcomes. Meanings and interpretations are negotiated with human data sources because it is the subjects’ realities that the researcher attempts to reconstruct.
10. This research tradition (approach) relies on the utilization of tacit knowledge (intuitive and felt knowledge) because often the nuances (small differences) of the multiple realities can be appreciated most in this way. Therefore data are not quantifiable in the traditional sense of the word.

 (Source: Creswell, 2003, pp. 198-199.)

**3. The Qualitative Research Process**

The figure below compares the steps of qualitative and quantitative research and lists traits that characterize each approach at every step.

 **Quantitative Steps in the process Qualitative**

 **characteristics of research characteristics**

 - Description and 1. Identifying a - Exploratory and

 explanation-oriented Research Problem understanding oriented

 - Major role 2. Review the - Minor role

 - Justification for the literature - Justification for the

 research problem and research problem

 specification for the need

 - Specific and narrow 3. Selecting - General and broad

 - Measurable, participants/sample - Participants’ experience

 observable data

 - Predetermined instruments 4. Collecting - Emerging protocols

 - Numeric (numbered) data data - Text or image data

 - Large number of individuals - Small number of

 individuals or sites

 - Statistical analysis 5. Analysing and - Text analysis

 - Description of trends, interpreting data - Description, analysis,

 comparison of groups, or and thematic development

 relationships among variables - The larger meaning of

 - A comparison of results with findings

 prediction and past studies

 - Standard and fixed 6. Reporting and - Flexible and emerging

 - Objective and unbiased evaluating research - Reflexive and biased

For most part, the methods used to conduct qualitative research are the varied types for example ethnographic research, narrative research and case study. Because of these commonalities, it becomes possible to focus on general methods used to identify research topics, review related literature, select participants, collect data, analyse and interpret data, and report and evaluate the research results:

1. *Identifying a research topic*. The researcher identifies a topic or study of interest to

 research. Often the initial topic is narrowed to be more manageable.

2. *Reviewing the literature*. The researcher examines the existing research to identify useful

 information and strategies for carrying out the study.

3. *Selecting participants*. The researcher must select participants to provide data collection.

 Participants are purposefully selected i.e. not randomly selected, are usually fewer in

 number than in quantitative samples.

4. *Collecting data*. The researcher collects data from participants. Qualitative data tend to be

 gathered from interviews, observations, questionnaires and artefacts.

5. *Analysing and interpreting data*. The researcher analyses the themes (main subjects) and

 results of the collected data and provides interpretation of the data.

6. *Reporting and evaluating the research*. The researcher summarizes and integrates the

 qualitative data in narrative and visual form.

**4. Qualitative Research Approaches**

The table below provides a brief description of some of the most commonly utilized qualitative research approaches.

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|  Common qualitative research approaches |
| Approach | Key Question |
| Case study | What are the characteristics of this particular entity, phenomenon, or person? |
| Ethnography | What are the cultural patterns and perspectives of this group in its natural setting? |
| Ethology | How do the origins, characteristics, and culture of different societies compare with one another? |
| Ethnomethodology | How do people make sense of their everyday activities in order to behave in socially accepted ways? |
| Grounded theory | How an inductively derived theory about a phenomenon is grounded (based) in the data in a particular setting? |
| Symbolic interaction | How do people construct meanings and share perspectives by interacting with others? |
| Historical research | How does one systematically collect and evaluate data to understand and interpret past events? |
| Phenomenology | What is the experience of an activity or concept from these particular participants’ perspective? |

Examining the table shows that the primary difference among the approaches is in the particulars of the social context examined and the participants selected. For example, some qualitative researchers focus on the exploration of phenomenon that occur within a bounded system (e.g. a person, event, programme, life cycle) (case study); some focus in depth on a group’s cultural pattern and perspectives to understand participants’ behaviour and their context (ethnography); some examine how multiple cultures compare to one another (ethology); some examine people’s understanding of their daily activities (ethnomethodology); some derive theory using multiple steps of data collection and interpretation that link actions of participants to general science theories or work, inductively to arrive at a theory that explains a particular phenomenon (grounded theory); some ask what is the meaning of this experience for this participant (phenomenology); some look for common understandings that have emerged to give meaning to participants’ interactions (symbolic interactions); some seek to understand the past by studying documents, relics, and interviews (historical research); and some describe the lives of individuals (narrative).

Overall, a collective, generic name for these qualitative approaches is ***interpretive research***.

**5. Characteristics of Qualitative Research (QR)**

* The central focus of QR is to provide an understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants. Therefore, it involves the collection of narrative and visual data over a period of time in a natural, nonmanipulated setting.
* The researcher has to spend a great deal of time with the participants and is immersed in the research setting. The recordings in the natural setting provide the basis for understanding the setting, the participants and their interactions. This immersion is imperative in order to get an in-depth understanding of the true meaning of the phenomenon the researcher is studying.
* The focus of QR is on individual, person-to-person interactions in order to describe the meaning of the findings from the perspective of the research participants. This can only be possible, if the data is gathered directly from them.
* The researcher must avoid making premature decisions or assumptions about the study to interfere with her or his findings. She or he must always be open-minded to other explanations or suggestions.
* The researcher only starts to make decisions after the initial data analysis with regard to the direction his research should take or the specific areas to gather more data.
* It is imperative that the collected data are analysed inductively. The researcher must not impose an organising structure (e.g. a theory or concept) or make assumptions about the relationships among the data before collecting evidence. The key thing is to focus strictly to discovering and understanding of the data collected. As the data are analysed, the researcher seeks to find patterns, relationships or common themes among the data. The more data are collected, the stronger the foundation for the inductive analysis.
* The qualitative reports must provide clear and detailed descriptions of the study being done. It must include the “voices” of the participants (i.e. verbatim). It also includes a description of the role of the researcher and her or his biases or preferences concerning the research topic or research processes.
* The qualitative researcher must remain vigilant to her or his responsibility to obtain on going consent from participants and to ensure their ethical treatment.

**6. Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research (Credibility of Research Findings)**

The information gathered from the qualitative study has to be credible and reliable. This is to ensure that the information obtained remains valid for the purpose of usage. This then shows that the instrument that has been used in the research measures the variables accurately and that there is *trustworthiness* in the research that has been done. Therefore to ensure that the measures developed are reasonably good, we use the reliability and validity tests.

**Reliability**

According to Gay et al, (2006), reliability in qualitative study is referred to as the degree to which the research data consistently measured whatever they measured. Normally this refers to the instruments used in qualitative research. For example the same questionnaire is provided to all the participants even when the data collection is done at different times. For example, all the 30 teacher participants received the same questionnaire. The same thing happened to the 100 students; they all received the same questionnaire. This is to ensure that the answers gathered from teachers and students are consistent with the items in the instruments.

However data obtained from the particular teachers and students at the particular time or situation could not be applied to another group or to a larger population (Gay et al, 2006, p. 407). If the same events were to occur again but then the time and environment could have changed, the reliability of the collected data still could not be applied to the new situation. This is because the purpose of the qualitative study is fundamentally to *understand* the happening but not what would happen after that. It is not to look for the ultimate truths or solutions to problems that could be transferred from one setting to another setting (population). As a consequence the strength of qualitative research in this case is not based on ***generalizability*** which referred to the application of findings in one setting to another setting such as the population. (However generalizability is applicable in a quantitative research i.e. the findings can be applied to the population.)

If there are interviews with the participants the same research questions should be applied to each of the participants. This is to ensure that reliability is maintained.

**Validity**

It is the degree to which a test measures what it is intended to measure; a test is valid for a particular purpose for a particular group. In qualitative research, it is the degree to which qualitative data accurately gauge what the researcher is trying to measure. The data from the participants are valid at the particular circumstances and situations. But when the circumstances and situations start to change, then the data cannot be applied to the new situation or circumstance. *In qualitative research it is said to have internal validity but not external validity i.e. it cannot be applied to the population.*

In qualitative research **validity** refers to two aspects: ***trustworthiness and understanding***. According to Guba (1981) trustworthiness of a qualitative research relates to four criteria: “credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability” (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006, p. 405).

In qualitative research, transferability is an issue because the findings are good only at the particular situation, to the particular group of people and location. Therefore credibility, dependability and confirmability are more relevant. Therefore *validity* here implied *credibility, dependability and confirmability*.

*Validity refers to the extent to which the data collected could ‘fit’ what has been looked for.* Therefore what is gathered and what is intended are supposed to fit. In qualitative research the concern is about the reality of the situation for example how the policy is being implemented but is not concerned with what is intended (i.e. an implicit knowledge). *Therefore in qualitative research, the external validity is more important than the internal validity*. The external factors in the environment are more valuable than the implicit factors. For example the facilities for teaching are more important than what the teachers thought (for example, the teaching of science should be related to the characteristics of the students to bring about learning of the subject by the students but not what the teacher wanted to teach).

*In order to ensure external validity the selection of the setting or the selection of the participants is done to minimize differences,* for example choosing participants with similar background, age, experience or qualification or selecting sites with similar environment. Similarly, the same data collecting instruments should be used on all the selected participants to ensure validity. For example the same questionnaire must be given to all the participants or the same questions should be used in the interview of the participants.

However for getting information about the disposition of the participant towards his action it may involve more than just the use of questionnaire or the external factors. This is because it involved the implicit knowledge of the participant. It touches on the quality of the participant. In this situation *interview and observation* are used to gather the implicit knowledge of the participant. Interviews however play a more essential role than observation in dealing with implicit knowledge embedded in the human mind. In this aspect the internal validity becomes important. Therefore in this situation, both aspects (external validity and internal validity) are important.

**7. Trustworthiness of the qualitative research study** is dependent on factors such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

*Credibility* requires the researcher to take into account all the complexities in the study being conducted and address problems not easily explained. (The depth and extent of the study being done.)

*Transferability* refers to the detail descriptive, context-relevant statements so the consumer can identify with the setting.

*Dependability* relates to the detail presented of the data gathered, so that others can see the setting for themselves and this includes the stability of the data collected (for example through the process ***triangulation***).

*Confirmability* is related to the neutrality and objectivity of the data.

According to Maxwell (1992), researchers can contribute to the trustworthiness of their research and to the understanding of it, by addressing descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, generalizability and evaluative validity.

*Descriptive validity* - there is factual accuracy of the account. There is no distorting or making up anything seen or heard.

*Interpretive validity* - it refers to accurately interpret the participants’ words or actions.

*Theoretical validity* - it is the ability of the research report to explain the phenomenon being studied in relation to a theory.

*Generalizability* - it refers to the application of findings to settings or contexts different from the one in which they were obtained. It refers to external generalizability and internal generalizability. External generalizability is not applicable in qualitative study.

*Evaluative validity* - it concerns whether the researcher is objective enough to report the data in as unbiased a way as possible. There is no making of judgements an evaluation of the data.

**8. Ensuring Credibility in the Qualitative Research Study**

In a qualitative study credibility is an important issue. This is because the researcher actually plays the central role as the integrator and interpreter of data.

* He has to be very careful to ensure that he does not analyse and interpret data according to his own feelings or preferences.
* It is necessary that opinions are substantiated.
* All data gathered included those that are not expected or difficult to explain and the information provided by the participants is inclusive of their biases.
* He maintained ethical behaviour in the process of gathering the data.
* He remains objective to ensure the quality of his research study and to be trustworthy (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006, pp. 111 & 480). Gay, Mills & Airasian (2006, p.480) have suggested that the six questions provided by I. Dey (1993) be applied to check the quality of the data:

 1. Are the data based on one’s own observation or is it hearsay?

 2. Is there corroboration by others of one’s observation?

 3. In what circumstances was an observation made or reported?

 4. How reliable are those providing the data?

 5. What motivations might have influenced a participant’s report?

 6. What biases might have influenced how an observation was made or reported?

When it involves ethical issues, it is difficult at times to remain ethical but then it is necessary to ensure the creditability of qualitative research. There is so much of contact and interaction with the participants in the research settings that the researcher has to be careful to avoid conflict or harm. This is because a conflict could affect the success of the qualitative research. It could destroy a trusting relationship and the true information could not be obtained. From then on much prejudice would exist and the caring attitude would no longer prevail. It could then become difficult to carry on with the study. Therefore the participants are to be met only when absolutely necessary and for clarification of related matters.

**9. Strategies for Ensuring the Validity of Qualitative Research**

The following strategies can be adopted to facilitate trustworthiness and understanding when conducting qualitative research.

* Do prolong participation at the study site to have the opportunity to test biases and perceptions.
* Do persistent observation.
* Do peer debriefing to test growing insights through interactions with other professionals.
* Collect documents, films, videotapes, audio recordings, artefacts, and other “raw” or “slice-of-life” data items.
* Do member checks to test the overall report with the study’s participants before sharing it in final form.
* Establish structural corroboration or coherence to ensure that there are no internal conflicts or contradiction.
* Establish referential adequacy -that is, check that analyses and interpretations accurately reflect the documents, recordings, films and other primary sources of data collected as part of the study.
* Collect detailed descriptive data that will permit comparison of a given context classroom/school to other possible contexts to which transfer might be contemplated.
* Develop detailed descriptions of the context to make judgements about fittingness with other contexts possible.
* Establish an audit trail - to have someone to examine the processes of data collection, analysis and interpretation.
* Practise triangulation.
* Practise reflexivity - reflecting on underlying assumptions and biases.

(Source: Guba, 1981.)

**Wolcott** (1994) provides some practical options/strategies for qualitative researchers to make sure that their research is trustworthy, robust, and contribute to an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. They are:

* Talk little, listen a lot
* Record accurately
* Begin writing early
* Let readers see for themselves
* Report fully
* Be careful
* Seek feedback
* Write accurately

**10. Doing the Right Thing: The Role of Ethics in Qualitative Research**

The role of ethics in QR is about the way in which the researcher treats his participants in the research setting. The very nature of QR requires close contact with the participants in the natural environment and this provides potential opportunities for conflict and harm. It is critical that a clear understanding of the role of ethics in QR is imperative to the researchers. The success of the QR is dependent on it.

The qualitative researcher has to have a clear understanding of the intimate and open-ended nature of the research process and that participants are not “wronged” in the name of research. For this reason, it is important to think about ethical dilemmas before the qualitative researcher commences his research study. This is also to prepare the researcher to make the appropriate response in an ethical, caring manner if difficult situations arise.

QR is intimate because there is little distance between researchers and their study participants. QR is open-ended because the direction of the research is only made known during the course of the study (i.e. not from the beginning of the research study). In other words, the information gathered from the research study dictates the direction of the research to pursue. This is where credibility in qualitative research is imperative to lead the researcher to achieve the appropriate understanding of the phenomenon the researcher is interested. However, this attainment is complicated by the fact that the researcher has to have the ability to obtain participants’ “fully informed consent” to participate in the research process. Informed concern is central to research ethics. It is the principle that seeks to ensure that all human subjects retain autonomy and the ability to judge for themselves what risks are worth taking for the purpose of furthering scientific knowledge.

**11. Ethical Guideposts**

Smith, I. M. (1990) provides the ethical guideposts that can help qualitative researchers to respond appropriately when faced with ethical decisions before, during and after a qualitative research inquiry.

* *Researchers should develop an ethical perspective that is very close to their personal ethical position*. While the researchers are clarifying their personal ethical perspective, it is worthwhile to reflect on how they would like to be treated if they were the participants.
* *Informed consent should take the form of a dialogue that mutually shapes the research and results.* Must be clear how permission is to be obtained - from the selected participants, the higher authority or some other persons. Make sure whether written permission is required.
* *Confidentiality impacts informed consent.* Confidentiality is important for protecting research informants from stress, embarrassment, or unwanted publicity as well as for protecting participants from themselves should they reveal something to a researcher that could against them by others interested in the outcome of the research. Confidentiality usually involves the use of codes or pseudonyms to conceal identities.
* *Researchers should be able to identify broader social principles that are an integral part of who they are as researchers and as contributing members of the communities in which the live.* These broader principles are the democratic process, social justice, equality and emancipation and they may be the principles that guide the ethical behaviour in a given situation.
* *Qualitative researchers are morally bound to conduct their research in a manner that minimizes potential harm to those involved in the study.* This message must be conveyed to the participants.
* *Even though an action may bring about good results, it is not ethical unless that action also conforms to ethical standards such as honesty and justice.* This is related to the principle - ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’
* *The qualitative researcher must remain attentive to the relationships between the researcher and the participants - a relationship that is determined by “roles, status, language and cultural norms.”* The researcher must pay attention to the research processes of giving information, reciprocity and collaboration and to be sensitive to how these processes are viewed by other participants in the research.

 A summary of ethical guidelines for qualitative researchers

* Develop an ethical perspective that is close to your personal, ethical position
* Seek research participants informed consent
* Determine the broader social principles that affect your ethical stance
* Consider confidentiality to avoid harm
* There is no room for deception