

Engaging in Reflective / Reflexive practice in Research:

The Research Diary: A Place for Recording Reflections

Keeping a research diary is an essential part of undertaking qualitative research. It is useful to separate this into four sections in order that you are prompted to reflect on different aspects of doing research and your role within the construction of research knowledge (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2001):

1. Observational Note

This is a descriptive note of an event such as an interview, chance encounter, and observation. They contain as little interpretation as possible and are as reliable as you can construct them.

2. Methodological Note

This is the place where you reflect on the methodological aspects of research and your actions in undertaking an interview, observation and so forth. How did the interview go? What was your role within it?

3. Theoretical Note

It is here that you begin to make meaning about your data. What are your initial explanations? What is your data telling you?

4. Analytic Memo

This is the place where you are trying to bring several inferences together. You might, for example, review your theoretical notes and begin to see patterns or recurrent themes in your data. You would also attempt to link your analysis to the literature in your field.

Research Issues to Reflect On

1. The wider relevance of the setting and the topic, and the grounds on which empirical generalizations are made, if any, such as establishing the representativeness of the setting, its general

features or its function as a special case study with a broader bearing.

2. The features of the topic or setting left un researched, discussing why these choices have been made and what implications follow from these decisions for the research findings.
3. The theoretical framework they are operating within, and the broader values and commitments (political, religious, theoretical and so on) they bring to their work.
4. Critically assess their integrity as researchers and authors, by considering:
 - a. The grounds on which knowledge claims are being justified (length of fieldwork, the special access negotiated, discussing the extent of the trust and rapport developed with the respondents and so on)
 - b. Their background and experiences in the setting and topic
 - c. Their experiences during all stages of the research, especially mentioning the constraints imposed therein.
 - d. The strengths and weaknesses of their research design and strategy.
5. Critically assess the data, by:
 - a. Discussing the problems that arose during all stages of the research;
 - b. Outlining the grounds on which they developed the categorization system used to interpret the data, identifying clearly whether this is an indigenous one used by respondents themselves, or an analyst-constructed one, and, if the latter, the grounds which support this;
 - c. Discussing rival explanations and alternative ways of organizing the data;
 - d. Providing sufficient data extracts in the text to allow readers to evaluate the inferences drawn from them and the interpretations made of them;
 - e. Discussing power relations within the research, between researcher(s) and subjects and within the research team, in

order to establish the effects of class, gender, race and religion on the practice and writing up of the research.

6. Show the complexity of the data, avoiding the suggestion that there is a simple fit between the social world under scrutiny and the ethnographic representation of it, by:

- a. Discussing negative cases which fall outside the general patterns and categories employed to structure the ethnographic description, which often serve to exemplify and support positive cases;
- b. Showing the multiple and often contradictory descriptions proffered by the respondents themselves;
- c. Stressing the contextual nature of respondents' accounts and Outlining the grounds on which they developed the categorization system used to interpret the data, identifying clearly whether this is an indigenous one used by respondents themselves, or an analyst-constructed one, and, if the latter, the grounds which support this;
- d. Discussing rival explanations and alternative ways of organizing the data;
- e. Providing sufficient data extracts in the text to allow readers to evaluate the inferences drawn from them and the interpretations made of them;
- f. Discussing power relations within the research, between researcher(s) and subjects and within the research team, in order to establish the effects of class, gender, race and religion on the practice and writing up of the research.