Confessions of a Beginning Qualitative Researcher

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"I'm not doing it again!" My pen slaps the tabletop; papers piled high quiver from the disturbance. I rise up out of my chair and bolt toward the window. The air feels charged with electricity—like it does in summertime in the high country before a storm. The last sunlight of the day strikes the tops of the buildings outside my room. I stare at the glow. As tears well up in my eyes, the buildings blur; my mind transforms them into mountains. Eleven stories up, I feel suspended, as though I am teetering on a narrow precipice several thousand feet above the ground. My body is trembling...I see no handholds or footholds* within reach. My voice—like those papers, still quivering, repeats, "I'm not doing it!"

This is a confessional tale. The confessional tale is a writing convention used to "reflect upon method and explore new ways of knowing" (Richardson, 2000, p. 9). Its roots are in poststructuralist thought, which links the self and social science, maintaining that they are known through each other (Richardson). The scenario I just described occurred when my research consultant Dr. Miller and I were meeting in Montreal to discuss what I had hoped would be the final draft of my dissertation. Confidence that this draft would be the last was short-lived, though, for this novice qualitative researcher. Dr. Miller recommended that I rewrite all 15 structural descriptions!*

The Journey Begins

The following tale chronicles my "research odyssey" (Van Maanen, 1988). It explains how I arrived at this crisis and what I learned from it. Using a narrative form to tell my story provides a means for me to demonstrate how knowing the self and knowing about subject are intertwined. My journey is explicated using rock climbing as an extended metaphor. I am an avid rock climber and have realized that, at least for me, rock climbing and being a beginning qualitative researcher have similarities.

Like a multipitch climb,* qualitative research involves many elements, or key stages. For me, all of the stages—choosing a topic, framing the study, identifying

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Note. Definitions of key terms with asterisks (*) are provided in an appendix to the article.
an appropriate methodology, recruiting participants, collecting and recording data, analyzing and interpreting data, verifying the accuracy of the interpretations, and writing the results—involved understanding new theoretical concepts, questioning my own beliefs, and developing a different sense of scholarship. Every step of the way for this empirically trained researcher required tremendous exertion and created strain. Although quantitative and qualitative researchers use similar elements in their work, how they go about putting the elements together makes for distinct differences in both the process and the product (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Doing qualitative research for the first time made me feel like I was wearing a brand-new pair of hiking boots. I experienced stiffness and some discomfort when framing the study, identifying an appropriate methodology, recruiting the participants, and collecting and recording the data. An irritating pinch of uncertainty accompanied me throughout the analytic process. It was the constant friction produced by writing in narrative form that created the most discomfort, however—and the blistering realization that I needed to examine my own epistemological position in order to accomplish my goals.

Was I serious about the proclamation I issued in Montreal that evening? Did I really think I couldn’t, or wouldn’t, rewrite the structural descriptions? Would I really make a decision that would interfere with my reaching the summit of my doctoral studies: the completion of my doctoral dissertation? What was it about being a beginning qualitative researcher that caused such a disturbance?

**Preparation for the Trip: The Need for a Conceptual Shift**

Harnessing with a good supply of protection*—coursework in qualitative methods and books by authors such as Glesne and Peshkin (1992), Creswell (1999), and Patton (1990)—I tied in.* With support from my mentors, I was on belay* and climbing. It was immediately apparent, however, that adjustments in the way I approached the research process would be required of me. Being informed about my intended purpose was necessary to frame the study and map out a route, but selecting the most appropriate way to the top would increase the probability of getting what I wanted: a better understanding of what constitutes older women’s experiences with physical activity.

The only journey of inquiry I had taken previously was a quantitative one during which I became skilled at using experimental methods to test or verify hypotheses or existing theory. During this experience, I embraced the notion that the world is (supposedly) made up of observable, measurable facts. This time, however, I was interested in understanding perception and the meaning of experience. Choosing to do qualitative research reflected my evolving understanding of what constitutes knowledge, as in this paradigm the focus is on process, rather than product or outcomes, and multiple realities rather than one (Creswell, 1994).

As in rock climbing, where the natural features of the rock determine how to proceed, I found that the nature of the research question determined how to proceed when choosing a research design. Because my research question involved understanding the essence* of the experience of being physically active for a lifetime, I chose the phenomenological tradition* to guide the study. It provided an ideal
structure for describing the experiences of long-lived physically active women and an effective format for analyzing the meaning the women made of their experiences. The phenomenological method values the self-knowledge gained through experience as a primary way of knowing.

**Route-Finding:**
**The Need for an Analytic Shift**

The characteristics of the phenomenological method affected every aspect of the study. The analytic process I used followed Moustakas’ (1994) guidelines detailed in his book. A caveat of the phenomenological tradition is *epoche*—suspending all preconceived notions about the phenomenon under study. To accomplish *epoche*, in every phase of the research process, I was challenged to consciously identify and bracket my biases. As in rock climbing, where distraction, ignorance, or casualness can contribute to accidents, I had to “stay in the moment.” I did not want to slip and contaminate the data.

When climbing a long, steep pitch, balance and economy of effort are best achieved by using the legs to push the body upward. This is not to say that the arms are never used, but knowing when to use them without relying on them is the key to efficient and safe movement. I must confess that knowing when to suspend my biases during data collection and data analysis—to “use my legs” (to describe the participant’s experiences) or to “use my arms” (to interpret the data)—was a constant challenge for me. When a climber feels unstable, the natural tendency is to hug or cling to the rock. When I felt uncertain about when to suspend my biases during the research process, I clung to my instincts, which were to interpret—exactly what we as phenomenological researchers try to refrain from. Was a fall looming?

Conscious of slipping, I used several methods to verify the accuracy of the findings. I engaged in “active listening” during the interviews, summarizing and paraphrasing the participants’ words to check for understanding. I probed for elaboration or clarification when necessary. When coding the data, I listened to the audiotapes and read the transcripts over and over again. Garnering as true a meaning as possible of the participants’ shared stories was important for the credibility of the study and a responsibility I had to the women who participated in it. Operating within the expectations of qualitative inquiry, I sent transcripts and drafts of the narratives to the participants to verify their accuracy. My research consultant examined the data against my analysis and interpretations as an additional check.

Still, when I wrote the first draft of my dissertation, without realizing it I had slipped into the interpretive mode. As previously indicated, Dr. Miller suggested at our meeting in Montreal that I rewrite the structural descriptions. She reminded me to bracket any preconceived ideas I had about the experience of being physically active. She counseled me to rely heavily on the data—using the participants’ words to describe their experiences—and encouraged me to refrain from leaping to interpretation too soon. So, I rewrote all 15 participant narratives. The summit seemed so far away!

In addition to my struggle with *epoche*, I experienced uncertainty about the analytic process itself. I was uncertain about how to do transcendental phenomenological reduction (providing complete descriptions of the participants’ experiences)
and imaginative variation (moving the analysis from particulars to generalities). I
did not fully understand what Moustakas meant by constructing textural descrip-
tions,* structural descriptions, composite descriptions,* and the exhaustive
description of the essential structure* of the phenomenon. When a climber lacks
confidence, she often hurries to reach her destination. This tendency led me to reach
too far and move too fast. When Dr. Miller read the second draft of my dissertation,
she told me to reread Moustakas (1994) and Giorgi (1997)—that would help clarify
the analytic process. She recommended that I reconstruct the individual textural
descriptions to more purely describe the women’s experiences with physical
activity over the life course and create structural descriptions that were more
interpretative at explicating what it actually was that influenced their experiences.

I did what she recommended. As I strove to suspend my biases and to use
Moustakas’s guidelines for data analysis, however, I realized that it wasn’t the
analytic process that was creating the primary tension that lead to my distress in
Montreal; rather, each time I toiled to revise the narratives, I realized that what was
bothering me was that I did not believe I had the skills to fully embrace a new way
of writing research. I could not find a rhythm for expression, so I lunged or jumped
to reach each hold. I kept wondering whether I could make it. Would I ever get it
right?

Dr. Miller said I had overcompensated. Verbatim quotes dominated the
structural descriptions; they were too similar and redundant to the textural descrip-
tions.

What?! I had completely rewritten everything. I had diligently bracketed my
preconceived notions of the experience of being physically active for a lifetime and
“stayed true” to the participants’ experiences by using their own words in the
descriptions. I had written and rewritten these narratives three times.... I had written
15 participant portraits, 15 textural descriptions, and 15 structural descriptions—45
narratives in all!

Danger lurks when a climber is in a compromised emotional state, par-
cularly when teetering on a narrow precipice. With the recommendation to rewrite
again, I struggled to focus on the act of climbing rather than on its horrible potential
consequences. I was no longer able to hold on. Falling into despair, I found myself
dangling several thousand feet from the ground. After the jolt of hearing myself
proclaim “I’m not doing it again,” I became aware that I had not fallen to my death.
Dr. Miller had me on belay... and, as if from a distance, I managed to hear her say,
“Are you alright?” Taking a deep breath, I took stock. Was I OK? Could I gather
myself and go on?

Yes, my ego was battered and bruised. Nonetheless, as I hung in limbo from
the rope that connected me with Dr. Miller and the summit of my climb, my
dissertation mantra “Stay with it, Mary Ann—stay with it” emerged through the
pounding of my heart. It echoed in my head, ... and I called back—“Yes!”

Writing in Narrative Form:
A Shift in Identity

The universal fear of falling, appearing weak, frightened, inadequate, or ridiculous,
leads many novice climbers/researchers to “tighten up” both mentally and physi-
cally. Although a degree of self-confrontation is inevitable when a new route is
chosen and new skills are applied for the first time, I underestimated the degree of exposure created by engaging in qualitative research. Although I struggled with efficiency of movement and rhythm during the analytic stage of the climb, writing in narrative form was the ultimate challenge. What otherwise might have been rated a 5.3 or 5.4 climb became a 5.11 climb for me. The writing process was like encountering an overhang—looming, impenetrable, and seemingly insurmountable. As I looked around the corner, I saw no alternative routes. Writing in narrative form was necessary in order to complete the journey.

Did I rewrite? Yes. Did I agonize over it? Absolutely. To comply with this request required the realization that the structural descriptions were inaccurately conceptualized. Deeper than that, however, I realized in hindsight that my willingness to retract my protest was critical to allowing me to shift identity from that of a technical writer, who scientifically explicates "reality," to a narrative writer, who richly portrays a world that is "socially constructed, complex, and ever-changing" (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 6).

The women who participated in my study asserted self-proclaimed identities—one was a "hiker," one a "dancer," another a "runner." These identities were not always present or stable, though; they emerged over time and depended on context and interactions with others (Tsang, 2000). For me, becoming a "qualitative researcher" required conceptual and analytic shifts in my understanding of research method and design and a paradigm shift in my identity as a scholar—from technical writer to narrative writer. These shifts have not completely resolved my conflicts, though. I cannot yet consider myself a true "mountain goat" of narrative writing, cavorting over the rocks with ease. In fact, although I experienced the realization for the need to transform my identity, I continue to struggle to achieve rhythm and efficiency in writing narratively at this moment. My boots are still new—although they are not quite so stiff.

Phenomenological research values the self-knowledge gained through experience as a primary way of knowing. This confessional tale chronicles the excitement, the uncertainty, and the exhaustion I experienced on my journey into new territory as a beginning qualitative researcher. I had no idea at the start of the climb that I, the researcher, would learn so much about myself in the process. My route paralleled some of the very guidelines for understanding human science from a phenomenological perspective—the dependence of knowledge on self-experience, the importance of self-reflection, bracketing biases, and arriving at a description of the essence of the experience. Looking back over my metamorphosis, I realize that in order to achieve balance, I had to go to extremes, but it was worth the climb!

References


Appendix: Key Terms

Rock Climbing

Handholds and footholds: Features in the rock that provide opportunities for balance points, where holding on by hand and/or by foot is possible.

Multipitch climb: A pitch is the distance covered by a rope length. A multipitch climb is one that involves a number of slopes to be climbed.

Protection: Miscellaneous hardware that is carried to place in cracks in the rock. The climbing rope is hooked into these forms of protection to support the climber so that if he or she falls, the distance of the fall will be minimal.

Tied in: Having a knot tied in the rope, which is connected to the climber’s harness and backed up by a locking carabiner (a steel loop with a locking pin).

On belay: Connected by rope to another climber’s body. The belayer controls the rope to keep it from developing unwanted slack and, in the case of a fall, reduces the length of the fall by holding the rope tightly, which is called braking.

5.0–5.12 climb: The degree of difficulty of a climbing route is classified using a system that ranges from 5.0, level ground, to 5.12, which is vertical.

Overhang: An outcropping of rock.

Phenomenological Research Methods

Structural descriptions: “A vivid account of the underlying dynamics” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 135) of the phenomenon of interest. What influenced the participants’ experiences and how their lives were shaped by these factors.

Essence: What constitutes an experience.

Phenomenological tradition: “Phenomenology is more than just a variation of qualitative research” (Kerry & Armour, 2000, p. 8); it is both a philosophy and a methodological approach. The Husserlian tradition advocates a presuppositional
approach whereby all preconceived notions about the phenomenon under study are suspended, because the goal of phenomenological research is to understand the phenomenon of interest from the participants' points of view. The phenomenological method focuses on "appearances and arrives at essences" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58); it is committed to describing experiences, not explaining or interpreting them.

**Textural descriptions:** Rich, thick descriptions that reflect what constitutes the phenomenon of interest and what meaning it has.

**Composite descriptions:** Accounts that, by summarizing the individual textural and structural descriptions, provide thematic integration.

**Essential structure:** A "single, unifying meaning of the experience" (Creswell, 1999, p. 55), without which the phenomenon would not be evident (Giorgi, 1997).