Qualitative Methods and Disaster Research

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This paper discusses the existing and potential linkages between qualitative research and disaster research. It begins by considering recent trends in qualitative research relevant to disaster studies and lists misconceptions which readers should peruse before passing judgment on qualitative research. The recent trends will likely influence qualitative disaster research, especially in the areas of data analysis and writing. The paper also identifies strong linkages between qualitative and disaster research, and the unusual opportunities qualitative researchers have enjoyed within disaster research. Beyond these linkages, this essay also identifies both problems and the potential of qualitative disaster research, including expanding data collection methods, nurturing the next generation of qualitative disaster researchers, and latching onto rapidly developing computing technologies for qualitative research. The author concludes with a “wish list” for future qualitative disaster research.

Qualitative research is variously described as field research, ethnography, Chicago School research, or (as if in natural opposition) nonquantitative methods. Typically, qualitative research (QR) involves concurrent data collection (usually interviews, observations, documents, and/or visual records) with data analysis (generally described as the process of searching for patterns or themes in the data). The ways in which qualitative researchers use specific data collection and analysis methods can result in anything from a focused case study to a full-blown, in-the-field-for-months ethnographic inquiry. Most disaster research falls on the interview-based, case study end of the continuum; this paper argues for continuation of that trend but, significantly, for a wider use of the qualitative research tradition.

Most disaster researchers cite Prince’s (1920) Halifax study as the first disaster research. Interestingly, Prince’s methodology incorporated qualitative data, a tradition which continues in disaster studies today. Few social science specialization areas can lay claim to such a rich, established, and long-term qualitative research tradition. This paper proceeds with a brief overview of methodological trends in qualitative research relevant to dis-
Trends in Qualitative Research Relevant to Disaster Research

Researchers employing qualitative research have experienced varying degrees of disciplinary support for their methodological choices. Anthropology has historically provided the strongest support, followed by sociology, political science, and psychology. Fluctuations in the periodic support have echoed larger research trends. The strong Chicago School fieldwork tradition declined, for example, in the rise of public opinion polling and survey data analysis during the 1940s and 1950s.

Midway through the 1960s, though, Glaser and Strauss published a widely acclaimed qualitative study, *Awareness of Dying* (1965), and explained their methodology (a qualitative first) in their follow-up work, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). Glaser and Strauss' work sparked renewed interest in and support of qualitative methods through the 1970s. The first qualitative journals originated in the 1970s, supported by the first significant research guides (Lofland 1971; Schappman and Strauss 1973; Schwartz and Jacobs 1979; Spradley 1980).

Since the beginning of the 1980s, the number of general qualitative research journals, books, and articles has increased dramatically, as has their quality and impact on a variety of disciplines. New qualitative journals and publications appeared in the 1980s and 1990s including the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Qualitative Health Research*, and a Sage Publications series on qualitative methods (now numbering some fifty volumes). Importantly, the *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* published qualitative works from its inception (see observational studies in Carter et al. 1983; interviews in Shamgar-Handelman 1983; interviews in Dombrowsky 1983). Academics produced advanced qualitative textbooks with interdisciplinary utility (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Bogdan and Biklen 1992). In essence, important qualitative advances occurred in the past several decades that have changed how some qualitative researchers work and which imply challenges for qualitative disaster work.

Probably most significantly, a number of the methodological writings over the past decades have focused on a much-needed area of development: data analysis. While many qualitative researchers used to say (in a quas-
grounded theory way) that we search for "patterns in the data," we now encounter myriad writings on how to analyze data and which data analysis technique to use for specific types of data. Qualitative researchers cannot get away with a loosely described data analysis write-up any more. Increasingly, qualitative researchers will need to more fully describe their data analysis techniques, even to select a particular strategy such as Spradley's (1980) Developmental Research Sequence or Lofland and Lofland's (1995) structured ways of identifying units, aspects, topics, and types.

Those who say, "We used grounded theory," will be increasingly challenged to identify which grounded theory, due to the significant schism between Strauss (see Strauss and Corbin 1992) and Glaser (1992). To make data analysis even more challenging, see Miles and Huberman's second edition (1994) of *Qualitative Data Analysis* and their detailed, step-by-step strategies for handling and interpreting data. The coming decade will doubtless see us trying and critiquing these various strategies, and refining them even further.

Beyond data analysis, we must reflect on our strategies for how we "write up" qualitative research (Van Maanen 1988; Wolcott 1990; 1994) as well as what our writing choices mean for various respondent and reader constituencies (Richardson 1990; 1994; see also Van Maanen 1995). The commonly chosen qualitative disaster case study can now be written in a variety of styles (Yin 1994; Stake 1995). When we make choices about how we write up our findings, the format, content, and even tone mean something to the audience for which we write. Because qualitative disaster researchers write for multiple constituencies, we need to thoughtfully and accordingly prepare our findings. Recent writings on qualitative writing compel us to consider the impact of each work we use and the implications of what we intend to say; qualitative work requires sensitivity and an ethical base from initiation through the final report. It would be even nicer if reviewers for articles would think similarly. I'll never forget the reviewer who recommended that I get rid of "all those interview quotes." I always include interview quotes so that readers can assess my findings and to help practitioners use them in making connections with their own situations. The reviewer further remarked that the quotations should be replaced with statistical tables. I believe that qualitative researchers must educate others in what it is that we do, how we do it, and why we do it.

Disaster research and qualitative research share common disciplinary interests. Today, qualitative research can be found in nursing, dance, sociology, psychology, anthropology, education, political science, family studies, health studies, social work, and communications. Many of these
disciplines also contribute to disaster and hazards research. Additionally, qualitative research is at an all-time high of usage and appreciation—and is at a significant point of change. I see more reflection on the process and outcome of qualitative research than ever before. These trends cannot help but impact qualitative disaster research. Before I continue with this thread, however, I would like to address some commonly held misperceptions that exist and may influence how readers approach this paper.

Common Misperceptions About Qualitative Research

From teaching graduate-level qualitative research courses, serving on various discipline-based graduate committees, presenting qualitative research, attempting to and actually publishing qualitative research, and experiencing both journal and grant proposal reviews, it is apparent to me that a number of common misperceptions exist about qualitative work. My favorite review experience came a few years ago when one reviewer remarked, "this would be a good project if only it was quantitative... PI should revise and resubmit as a quantitative proposal." Proposal quality aside, I think it is fair to say that the reviewer missed the value, merit, and potential contributions of qualitative research. But this reviewer only reflects a larger concern which flavors the experiences of those working qualitatively. It is not uncommon to hear one's colleagues denigrate qualitative scholarly activity as "not empirical" or "just exploratory." What they are really saying is that the work is not perceived as empirical because it is not quantitative or positivistic—as if these qualities were the hallmarks of good science. The debate is really an argument over paradigms, such as in the debate over positivistic versus naturalistic paradigms (Guba 1981; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Erlandson et al. 1993) currently influencing much of the recent qualitative methodological writings. While the positivistic paradigm carries heavily institutionalized academic support, the naturalistic paradigm fits more appropriately with qualitative research approaches and, in my opinion, with disaster research (more on this later). Today, qualitative researchers can select from a variety of perspectives and paradigms (such as constructivist, interpretivist, critical theory, feminism, ethnic modeling, and naturalist, see the articles in Denzin and Lincoln 1994).

This unnecessarily dichotomized quantitative-versus-qualitative debate fosters an inappropriate juxtaposition based on the assumption that quantitative research is more objective and that qualitative efforts are more value-laden or subjective. Erlandson et al. (1993, p. 15), as based on Lincoln and Guba (1985), tell us that objectivity is "largely an illusion." Value-free science is no more possible in positivistic than in naturalistic science.
Qualitative researchers, especially those working from naturalistic and feminist paradigms, acknowledge this dilemma and have devised strategies to work through the impact of potential bias.

A related misconception concerns the allegedly poor validity or reliability of qualitative research. However, those who issue such negative salvos lack understanding of methodological advances in QR during the past decade. The terms validity and reliability are not always appropriate in qualitative research, especially for those working from a naturalistic paradigm. The point of this paper is not to give full details, but the terms increasing numbers of qualitative researchers use today include trustworthiness, credibility, authenticity, and dependability. A variety of techniques can be used to enhance each of these characteristics, ranging from prolonged engagement to triangulation to peer debriefers. Qualitative researchers today are also inviting external review on their research process through creating methodological audit trails and employing “outside auditors” (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Schwandt and Halpern 1988; Erlandson et al. 1993).

A final issue within the quantitative/positivistic versus qualitative/naturalistic debate is the concern that qualitative research is not generalizable beyond the context under study. However, Lincoln and Guba suggest “the prevailing view is that science grows through the accumulation of generalizable knowledge. However, ... total generalization is never possible, even in the physical sciences.” Rather than concern themselves with the generalizability issue, many qualitative researchers embed their interpretations within a deep contextual foundation emphasizing the time, place, and circumstances within which a disaster event, response, or process occurs. Contextualizing enables readers to better understand how analysis arises and supports the researcher’s theoretical explanation (more later).

An established qualitative tradition exists within disaster research as an appropriate means of conducting scientific inquiry. To maintain and strengthen this scholarly tradition, disaster researchers need to employ qualitative research regularly, to encourage graduate students to do likewise, and to consider paradigmatic shifts and methodological advances made in QR over the past decade. Doing so may mean effectively challenging misperceptions about QR, experimenting with paradigms and collection/analysis techniques. As a way of considering these possibilities, I discuss here why qualitative research is appropriate for disaster research as based on a naturalistic paradigm, note where methodological gaps exist and could be filled in by current qualitative disaster research (QDR), and ponder what the future might hold for qualitative disaster research.
Why Qualitative Research in Disaster Research?

Shared History and Strong Support

A strong reason why qualitative and disaster research fit together well is because they share a common history. For example, much of the increased interest and writings have coincided with the emergence and establishment of various disaster and hazards centers. Concurrently, some disaster and hazards centers have institutionalized the use of qualitative research. It is rare to find a substantive area so supportive of qualitative work.

The long tradition of QDR, as used by single researchers like Prince, became more firmly entrenched when disaster research institutions appeared. Let me give the example with which I am most familiar, the Disaster Research Center (DRC). E. L. Quarantelli and Russell Dynes established DRC in 1963 at The Ohio State University, using fieldwork methods as a major research foundation. DRC’s fieldwork tradition extended from the founders back through sociologist Herbert Blumer, Quarantelli’s thesis advisor at the University of Chicago. Blumer was part of the Chicago School, a group of social scientists (primarily sociologists) who sent their students into Chicago’s neighborhoods to do fieldwork.

The Chicago School legacy of going into the field was passed on to Quarantelli’s and Dynes’s students, some of whom have become directors of additional hazards institutions. For example, Dennis Wenger at Texas A&M University’s Hazards Reduction and Recovery Center encourages both quantitative and qualitative work; Kathleen Tierney, codirector of the Disaster Research Center (now at the University of Delaware) continues to send students into the field with qualitative tools; Henry Fischer and the Social Research Group at Millersville University use interviewing in their studies; David Neal, Director of the University of North Texas’ Institute of Emergency Administration and Management, uses visual, documentary, observational, and interview data collection methods in his research; and William Anderson, who oversees much of the National Science Foundation’s disaster research, provides funding for well-developed qualitative projects.

Other institutions besides those with DRC connections use, fund, or promote the use of qualitative methods. As an illustration, many of the last decade’s qualitative disaster projects have been “jump-started” with project funding from the Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center (NHRAIC), located at the University of Colorado at Boulder in the United States. Gilbert White, a geographer, founded NHRAIC in the 1970s; his student, sociologist Dennis Milioti, currently directs NHRAIC in conjunction with Mary Fran Myers, project manager for many of the NHRAIC
funded “Quick Response Grants.” NHRAIC’s work connects researchers to practitioners and serves as a clearinghouse and publisher for disaster studies, and as a conduit for qualitative disaster research to reach both academic and user communities. Because the projects involve quick response into the field, a large number necessarily rely on qualitative research, sometimes subsequently developed into both larger quantitative and/or qualitative studies.

Most recently, Florida International University opened an International Hurricane Center in the aftermath of 1992’s Hurricane Andrew. Part of the studies that came out of FIU included interviews and observations with low-income victims (Morrow and Enarson 1996). The qualitative tradition of going into the field proved valuable in identifying needs of underserved groups as well as strategies that these groups used to recover from disaster.

Funding and support for projects centralizing or using qualitative research methods have come from the National Opinion Research Center (via the Army Chemical Center, Department of the Army, in the 1950s), NHRAIC, the National Science Foundation, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (for example, DRC’s 1980s emergency-time emergent group study), the National Institute of Mental Health, the Army Corps of Engineers (such as Oak Ridge National Laboratory’s Chemical Demilitarization Project), and NASA (UNT’s current remote sensing and emergency management project).

General Compatibility

The naturalistic paradigm in QR acknowledges the existence of multiple realities, holistic investigation, the mutual influence of researcher and respondents, and the use of thick, rich description to form a context for understanding (Erlandson et al. 1993). Guba (1981, as discussed in Erlandson et al. 1993) emphasizes that naturalistic inquiry focuses on relevance, emergent theory, attention to tacit knowledge, the researcher as the instrument, a flexible research design responsive to the research, and a natural setting over a laboratory setting. These paradigmatic dimensions fit well with disaster research efforts.

Because disasters challenge communities in unexpected ways, and with unanticipated consequences, QDR can capture human behavior at its most open, realistic moments. To borrow from Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical perspective, people drop their frontstage behavior allowing researchers to capture realistic behavior. We get to see backstage behavior, which is best captured by those trained in observational data gathering. Researchers emerge from the field with data relevant to disasters and potentially useful for building theories of crisis occasion human behavior. Rather than a
standardized, preset format, qualitative researchers usually prefer to remain flexible, rendering them more able to capture new ideas and to allow fresh perspectives to emerge from the data being collected. Rich insights can result. For example, much of the recent literature on gender, race/ethnicity, age, social class, and societal developmental levels (much of it qualitative) empirically demonstrates that socially, economically, and culturally diverse communities experience realities at variance from standardized, bureaucratically streamlined responses (Neal and Phillips 1995; Morrow and Earson 1996; Miller and Simile 1992).

One personal example I experienced came in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew. I had spent the day interviewing outreach personnel for a disaster services organization. They had assured me they were engaging in outreach to the farmworker population, had even been in each of the farmworker housing communities. The following day, I happened upon a local farmworker labor organizer who invited me to visit one of the communities. I abandoned the day’s tentative schedule, visited the site, and listened as community leaders asked me how to get in touch with the disaster service organization. It was an entire week after the hurricane hit; the organizational representatives had lied to me. The emergent, flexible methodology (based on a naturalistic paradigm) resulted in papers on organizational barriers to service delivery (see Phillips et al. 1994) and the ways in which bureaucratized structures inadequately respond to emergent needs (Neal and Phillips 1995).

Furthermore, because qualitative research is grounded in people’s actual experiences, the possibility of identifying new, relevant questions becomes more likely. While disaster researchers know that we often see the same stories or “lessons learned” in disaster after disaster, qualitative research bears the possibility of identifying new questions. Qualitative methods and naturalistic paradigms permit the researcher to follow interesting questions and to alter the research design to pursue promising areas of inquiry (Erlandson et al. 1993; Spradley 1980). In so doing, qualitative research can empower and give voice to respondents (particularly disaster managers and victims). And, because so many data often accumulate in qualitative studies, new research questions and theoretical insights can potentially emerge. Although such new possibilities might seem serendipitous, the theoretical sensitivity required to produce innovative notions really results from immersion in the field, deep in the context of people’s lives.

The idea of context, an integral feature of naturalistic and feminist inquiry, has supported QDR for decades. Long based in Quarantelli’s C-Model (1987; see also Lofland and Lofland 1995; and Strauss and Corbin
context is essential for interpreting qualitative findings and for rendering those findings useful to practitioners. Good qualitative researchers lean on thick, rich descriptions of research settings (Geertz 1973). Reliance on such description provides context—an understanding of the time, place, and circumstances in which a disaster event occurs. Context provides support for emergent theory and for framing researchers’ interpretations. Developing a detailed, contextual base for qualitative disaster studies also enables practitioners that rely on the research to make comparisons with their own contexts. As an analogy, I think that most educators recognize that a well-contextualized story beats out a concept and definition any class period. Another useful dimension of providing context is to generate insights unimagined in other settings. An emergency manager in Ohio, for example, might not be terribly concerned about earthquakes but could usefully intuit messages from good description and analysis of earthquake recovery process.

A final reason for why qualitative methods and disaster research fit well together is that disaster research has always furnished one of the more unimpeded specialization areas for researchers. In addition to the research institution support and funding noted earlier, I believe that many qualitative researchers have found disaster journals more willing to print their work than publications in their own disciplines. Few academics can say that the top journal in their disciplinary specialization (such as a gerontology journal) would accept their qualitative work as willingly as the International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters, Disaster Management, and Disasters (among others) have done. Because of this intertwining between qualitative methods and the substantive area of disasters, qualitative disaster research has been able to make meaningful contributions and even to thrive. I suspect that few disciplines or specialty areas can lay claim to such a multigenerational, multidisciplinary methodological legacy.

Use of Qualitative Methods in Disaster Research: Problems and Potential

Problems/Inadequacies

Disaster researchers using qualitative methods experience several problems or inadequacies, including unexplored levels of analysis, uneven use of data collection techniques, insufficient longitudinal research, and inadequate proposal quality. Several key methodological reviews (Mileri 1987; Drabek 1986) note that the higher the level of analysis, the fewer the studies. This is especially true in qualitative research. More research has been done at the individual or group level, for example, than at other levels. Organ-
izational research, typically case studies, appears less frequently. Other levels of analysis, such as neighborhoods (for an interesting example, see Guillet 1993) and communities, remain understudied. Qualitative work also offers possibilities for qualitative comparative studies, yet another area that disaster researchers need to develop further. Anthropologists have contributed the most here (Oliver-Smith 1996).

The most commonly used qualitative method in disaster research is undoubtedly interviewing (ranging from fairly focused projects to longitudinal, in-depth studies or even life histories), usually resulting in a case study format. Other data collection methods, such as observation, photography/videography, and documents/records (Bogdan and Biklen 1992; Jackson 1987) appear far less frequently, typically individually or sometimes in combination with interviewing. This latter situation is truly a shame, because triangulated studies result in stronger qualitative research. Combining interviews with additional field methods allows the researcher to enhance credibility and trustworthiness of the data and findings, permits for that desirable thick, rich context to develop, and facilitates emergent questions and problems.

A few recent studies have provided some potential for regenerating underused qualitative methods. For example, Scanlon’s (1996) retrospective look at the Halifax explosion uncovered new data, much of it qualitative in nature, including interviews and “unobtrusive measures” (Webb et al. 1981), that is, documents. I hope that we see additional use of documentary evidence, including much of that stored in disaster and hazards research center archives. Existing, unobtrusive measures can be problematic (Musson 1986; Webb et al. 1981), but they can be used creatively as the sole data source or as part of a triangulated strategy. I hope that we see more such QDR in the future.

Visual techniques also remain underused, although the NHRAIC-funded Cohn and Wallace (1992) study of the Exxon Valdez disaster moves disaster research in an interesting direction. A picture is truly worth a thousand words, especially as an educational tool for illustrating one’s findings. However, what visual techniques might we apply to disaster studies in coming decades? With the increasingly available camera, video, and computing technology for our use, visual techniques could become a “hot” method (Curry and Clarke 1977; Wagner 1979; Collier and Collier 1986; Hockings 1995). The “native instant” method could even put visual recording devices into the hands of emergency managers, shelter residents, or neighborhood associations (Worth and Adair 1972; Blinn and Harrist 1991). Imagine the data we could collect from the real emic perspective.
I also urge qualitative disaster researchers to further explore the possibilities of observational studies. Much of what I have seen in U.S. research has involved observational research done on shelters or in emergency operating centers, usually at the individual or organizational levels of analysis. I would like to encourage us to expand our substantive focus and to employ a range of observational strategies, from complete observation to full participant observation. Why not live in a recovering community for a couple of years, observing at the neighborhood or even community level? Observation also serves qualitative research well as a means of triangulating and strengthening other methods. Nonverbal behavior can tell us as much sometimes as verbal response.

In addition to the above concerns, I see a significant lack of longitudinal research, which qualitative research could supplement. Disaster researchers use the onetime case study far too frequently, when intensive immersion in the field over long periods of time could meaningfully augment our limited-time glimpses of human behavior in disaster. The most understudied disaster phase has always been recovery. Longitudinal qualitative research would fit well methodologically with needed substantive recovery studies, if only academic researchers could spend that much time in the field, and secure the funding to do so!

While qualitative projects have not been the majority of funded disaster studies, it may not be the method so much as the quality of the proposals submitted. To be fair, though, no standards currently exist on how to put a qualitative proposal together. Furthermore, in my experience, most prospective funder’s guidelines suggest a quantitative or positivistic framework. Unfortunately, qualitative disaster research does not always fit so readily into existing standardized formats. Until recent years, few works even existed on how to put together a qualitative proposal (Marshall and Rossman 1995). Thus, a fair amount of variation in proposal style and substance has resulted. Part of the confusion comes from the lack of a common format; part of the responsibility rests on the shoulders of qualitative researchers who do not always adequately explain their methodology. Reviewers cannot help but wonder what a qualitative researcher will actually do if funded; likewise, most reviewers remain unaware of methodological advances which should be included in qualitative proposals these days.

Potential

In this section, I concentrate on two trends, both of which are future oriented and will influence qualitative disaster research: the next generation of researchers and computing technologies. Disaster research has recently
concerned itself with producing the next generation of researchers (Anderson 1990) in order to continually advance science and encourage fresh perspectives. In my experience, and those of colleagues I spoke with recently, the next generation possesses a strong interest in qualitative research. In my own recent graduate qualitative methods class, 22 students from seven different disciplines enrolled. A waiting list develops each semester due to limited space (I can only monitor so many students in the field in a variety of “interesting or exotic” locations), and other departments have offered qualitative courses in recent years to meet student needs (nursing, psychology, education, family studies). Qualitatively oriented faculty are in demand on our campus to serve on graduate committees. I hear similar stories from other qualitative disaster researchers. In one session at last summer’s NHRAIC Hazards Conference in Denver, graduate students presented their research—and about one third had used qualitative methods. Informal conversations with several of these students revealed interest in QDR, but also concern for what professors and future colleagues would think of their methodological choice. Supporting students’ choices for either qualitative or quantitative work (or, preferably, both) is essential; promoting high standards for qualitative disaster research is mandatory.

Second, the 1990s have ushered in computer software for managing and potentially analyzing data (e.g., Ethnograph, Martin, HyperResearch, and QSR Nudist, to name a few; see Weitzman and Miles 1995). These packages tend to be most useful in managing and coding large segments of data such as observational notes and interview transcripts (Richards and Richards 1994; Weitzman and Miles 1995). Eagerly awaited updates might produce packages more useful in analyzing data; for now, however, that task remains largely with the researcher. While my own experiences with such software have been both positive and negative, I find qualitative computer programs generally useful. However, the software on balance is more useful for data management and coding than for actual analysis—the human being is still far superior in telling us what the coded data mean.

Other technological advances can further link computers with disaster and qualitative research. Those interested in using visual data, for example, can employ scanners for photographs or slides and can duplicate and store video for potential analysis (just think of what a digital camera could do with your computer!). Furthermore, we can now share much of these data electronically, even creating World Wide Web sites for use by other researchers and practitioners (readers might want to browse the International Research Committee on Disasters Web page at http://www.fas.unt.edu). Whereas disaster research clearinghouses have, in the past,
offered quantitative databases for researchers to share, such organizations
now might want to offer qualitative databases. Many of us now subscribe
to NHRAIC's electronic newsletter, Disaster Research (DR); about a dozen
qualitative methods discussion lists exist. As electronic journals continue
to appear and evolve, disaster researchers will need to consider creating an
Internet journal.

One example of a unique QDR/computing technology project is the
remote sensing effort being undertaken at the University of North Texas
where Sam Atkinson and David Neal obtain remote sensing data, create
text, and offer "lessons learned" for practitioners and students (the Web site
is http://www.ias.unt.edu:9876). UNT's remote sensing project has based
some of its material on qualitative studies, including observational, inter-
view, and visual data, and it plans to gather more as part of this NASA-
funded project. We will likely see more of this type of work in the future.

Conclusion: A "Wish List" for Disaster
Researchers Using Qualitative Methods

The past decade's rapidly expanding methodological writings serve
disaster research well. The future looks very interesting and methodologi-
cally challenging. Qualitative and disaster researchers will need to become
more competitive and sophisticated in writing proposals, conducting re-
search, and publishing their work. The future looks very promising for
qualitative disaster research. Forging ahead on the crest of a methodologi-
cal, theoretical, and technological explosion, so to speak, many possibilities
spill out before us. With this optimism in mind, "lessons learned" from
doing and reading past qualitative disaster research, and having spoken with
colleagues, my "wish list" is that:

• qualitative disaster research be used to fill substantive and theoretical
gaps in our knowledge base;

• qualitative disaster researchers become more conversant with ontolog-
ical and epistemological debates within qualitative research;

• qualitative disaster research become increasingly interdisciplinary, to
drawn upon the methodological, theoretical, and substantive strengths
and insights that cross-disciplinary research teams can offer;

• qualitative disaster researchers submit better-developed proposals
reflecting methodological and technological advances, and that theory
be considered as an integral part of such proposals (either as an
initiating and sensitizing framework or as an end result);
• reviewers better educate themselves about methodological advances in qualitative research so that they can provide more useful reviews, demand higher quality, and recognize well-developed proposals;
• qualitative disaster researchers work diligently to incorporate standards for heightening the trustworthiness and credibility of their data and research, such as audit trails, outside auditors, peer debriefers, and triangulation and that they engage in cognizant and careful data management and analysis;
• qualitative disaster researchers work to explore and use data-gathering techniques in addition to the often-used interview;
• qualitative disaster researchers seek out opportunities and ways to conduct studies at higher levels of analysis, especially at the organizational and community levels—and that these have the potential to foster comparative analysis or to become part of a comparative database;
• a variety of theoretical models be tried out;
• qualitative disaster researchers more fully and thoughtfully write up their methods so that we may better evaluate their research and so that their articles can better inform readers of how data were gathered and analyzed;
• we find ways to share qualitative data with researchers and practitioners via existing clearinghouses and resource centers;
• qualitative disaster researchers seek out and use technological advances, whether in data management software packages or through sharing research through the Internet with other researchers, practitioners, respondents, the lay public, and students; and
• qualitative disaster research be exceptionally well-written, in thoughtful, informative, context-rich ways that are meaningful to respondents, practitioners, students, policymakers, and researchers.

References


