

# QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY AND GROUNDED THEORY IN PROPERTY RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

*Much of the research published in the property discipline consists of work utilising quantitative methods. While research gained using quantitative methods, if appropriately designed and rigorous, leads to results which are typically generalisable and quantifiable, it does not allow for a rich and in-depth understanding of a phenomenon. This is especially so if a researcher's aim is to uncover the issues or factors underlying that phenomenon. Such an aim would require using a qualitative research methodology, and possibly an interpretive as opposed to a positivist theoretical perspective. The purpose of this paper is to provide a general overview of qualitative methodologies with the aim of encouraging a broadening of methodological approaches to overcome the positivist methodological bias which has the potential of inhibiting property behavioural research.*

**Keywords:** Qualitative research methods, grounded theory

## INTRODUCTION

In property research, as with social science research, there has in the past been a reliance on a positivist approach that posits beliefs and scrutinises them through empirical testing (Hirschheim, 1985; Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991; Levy and Henry, 2003). However, more recently researchers in a number of disciplines have been acknowledging the difficulties in studying human behaviour within the confines of traditional conceptions of science (Hirschheim, 1985; Myers, 1997; Levy and Henry 2003; Carson et al., 2001). It is argued that in order to understand many behavioural aspects of property markets, the real estate academic community should embrace research that does not merely produce empirical descriptions of markets but also moves to understanding and interpreting them.

A number of other disciplines incorporate interpretivist methodologies where the primary assumptions are that:

*“ ...access to reality (given or socially constructed) is only through social constructions such as language, consciousness and shared meanings. Such interpretive research does not*

*predefine dependent and independent variables, but focuses on the full capacity of human sense making as the situation emerges” (Myers, 1997).*

Levy and Henry (2003) in their analysis of a variety of academic property journals from 1990 – 2000 found a predominance of quantitative research techniques used to answer research questions pertaining to property issues. While this approach is suited to answering many questions and hypotheses, its applicability is questionable when seeking to understand meaning or when the question involves uncovering factors related to particular phenomena. For example, when seeking answers relating to the influence of clients in valuation, quantitative approaches provide limited usefulness since we have no understanding of the factors behind client influence to begin with. For example Worzala et al’s (1998) studied client-valuer relationships adopting a quantitative survey that failed to expose the complexities of the valuation process, noting that respondents:

*“ ... may have been influenced by something ... which we were not able to capture using an anonymous mail survey approach” (Worzala et al, 1998).*

This observation suggests that the research design in this case was too limiting and that a qualitative approach could have provided a richer and more in-depth understanding of the valuation process, isolating the effect of client influence. This is relevant as qualitative rather than quantitative approaches allow researchers to work closely with participants within an organisation and collect information pertaining to their personal thoughts and experiences (Yin, 2003; Bonoma, 1985).

It is suggested that rigorous research can extend the boundaries of property knowledge without taking a positivist approach. It is further suggested that when the goal of research is to develop a conceptual model for the purpose of building theory around a particular phenomenon or process, an interpretive approach utilising a qualitative methodology may be more appropriate. However, if the primary goal of the research problem is to test the validity of a model where all the variables which influence a phenomenon or process is already known, then a quantitative methodology may be more appropriate. As an illustration, Strauss and Corbin define theory as:

*“...a set of well-developed categories (e.g., themes, concepts) that are systematically interrelated through statements of relationship to form a theoretical framework that explains some relevant social, psychological, educational, nursing, or other phenomenon.” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998)*

Qualitative research methodology is not suited for all research problems in property, and one must bear in mind the research goals as well as the research philosophy and epistemology driving the research. In situations where a review of the extant literature

does not reveal significant attempts at constructing a theoretical model of a phenomenon, the researcher may wish to take an alternative research approach to the more traditional quantitative techniques in order to uncover concepts and construct a conceptual model and build theory within a specific context.

In this paper the stages of the research process and a discussion of research design will be conducted. This discussion will include a review of non-positivist research philosophy, methodology and methods<sup>1</sup>. A discussion on the trustworthiness<sup>2</sup> of qualitative research techniques will then follow taking into account certain precautions that exist. This paper will then conclude with a call for academics in property research to consider alternative research methodologies when the goal is for discovery and exploration of underlying property issues. The objective of this paper is not to provide a manual of different qualitative methodologies and methods, but to provide a general overview with the aim of encouraging the property academic community to consider non-quantitative possibilities in research methodology.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The nature of any research problem should drive the methodology adopted. Before undertaking a research exercise an understanding of the underlying assumptions behind 'valid research' is essential in order to justify the methodologies and methods to be employed in the research design (Myers 1997). Justification of the methodological choice should relate to the theoretical perspective that underpins the research (Crotty 1998). Theoretical perspective is something that:

*".. reaches into the assumptions about reality that we bring to our work. To ask about these assumptions is to ask about theoretical perspective" (Crotty, 1998).*

In addition to the theoretical perspective, justifying methodological choice also reaches into the understanding of what constitutes human knowledge, what kind of knowledge will be attained from the research and what characteristics this knowledge will have.

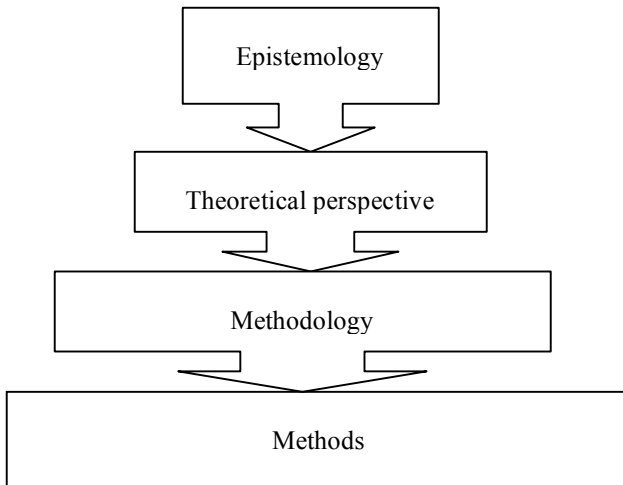
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<sup>1</sup> *Methodology is defined as the plan of action (e.g. Grounded Theory) and Method is the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data related to some research question or hypothesis (e.g. interviews). This is discussed later in the paper.*

<sup>2</sup> *Reliability is of much concern in quantitative research, as is trustworthiness in qualitative research. While both refer to a similar issue of whether our results are a true reflection of our subject, reliability in a quantitative study is dependent on accurate measures to determine if we are actually measuring what we are suppose to be measuring. In qualitative research, as there are no numerical measures, it is not possible to determine the internal consistency or a statistic of reliability, it is up to the qualitative researcher to provide evidence of reliability by carefully documenting the data collection and analysis process, hence the term "trustworthiness" is used to assess how reliable the results are, that is, can we trust that the results are a "true" reflection of our subject.*

These issues relate to the epistemology informing the theoretical perspective and the type of methodology governing the choice of methods. The epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods thus constitute the four primary elements of research design as illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Four Elements of Research Design**



*Source: Crotty (1998)*

Each of these elements will be explored followed by a discussion relating to the trustworthiness and generalisability of qualitative findings.

## **RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY: EPISTEMOLOGY**

*“Epistemology is concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate” (Crotty, 1998).*

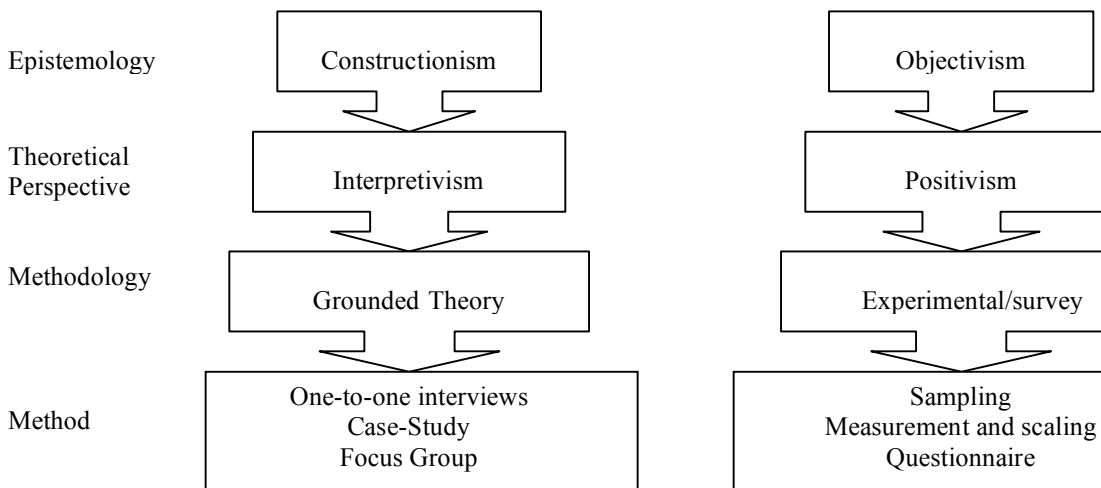
While there are numerous epistemologies, this paper seeks only to discuss and compare two of these in order to demonstrate the applicability of opposing approaches. The epistemology underlying most academic property literature can be classified as objectivist, in that:

*“meaning, and therefore meaningful reality, exists apart from the operation of consciousness” (Crotty, 1998).*

Researchers accepting this view hold that if they go about their research in the correct way it is possible to discover objective truth (Crotty, 1998). An alternative epistemological viewpoint can be described as *constructionism*, constructionists typically reject the objectivists' view of human knowledge contending that there is no objective truth waiting to be discovered. Truth therefore exists only through interaction with the realities of the world. This view assumes meaning is constructed rather than discovered.

Underlying this approach is the premise that different people construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon (Crotty, 1998). Constructionism, by definition, permits the researcher to explore the views and comprehension of the different participants within the subject context and recognises that each may have experienced a different understanding of the same situation, flexibility not available to objectivists. Figure 2 depicts the elements research design relating a particular qualitative methodology, grounded theory, and compares it with a more traditional experimental or survey approaches.

**Figure 2: Four elements of the research design relating to a qualitative methodology and a quantitative methodology**



*Source: Adapted from Crotty (1998)*

# RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

After identifying the epistemology governing a qualitative research problem it is imperative to consider the theoretical perspective and the assumptions behind it. The theoretical perspective can be described as:

*“The philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes. (Crotty, 1998).*

As an illustration of two qualitative perspectives, a comparison should prove a useful guide. The first perspective, *positivism*, relates directly to the epistemology of objectivism, assuming that individuals have direct access to the real world. Positivism subscribes to the theory that it is possible to obtain hard, secure objective knowledge about the external reality (Carson et al., 2001). In comparison, *interpretivism* holds that individuals do not have access to the real world, suggesting that their knowledge of the perceived world (or worlds) is meaningful in its own terms and can be understood through careful use of interpretivist procedures (Carson et al., 1998). This approach sits comfortably within the constructionist view.

## Positivism Versus Interpretivism

*“... reality is objectively given and can be described by measurable properties which are independent of the observer (researcher) and his or her own instruments” (Myers, 1997).*

Based upon the above quote, positivist studies tend to test theory in order to increase the predictive understanding of certain phenomena (Hirschheim, 1985; Myers, 1997). Carson et al (1998) identifies a number of characteristics of positivism which are useful to consider:

1. The positivist or natural sciences school relates to facts or causes of social phenomena and attempts to explain causal relationships by means of objective facts
2. Positivist research concentrates on description and explanation
3. Thought is governed by explicitly stated theories and hypotheses
4. A research topic is identified through the discovery of an external object of research rather than by creating the actual object of study
5. Researchers remain detached by maintaining a distance between themselves and the object of research
6. Researchers try to be emotionally neutral and make a clear distinction between reason and feeling, science and personal experience
7. Positivists seek to maintain a clear distinction between facts and value judgements

8. Positivists search for objectivity and strive to use a consistently rational, verbal and logical approach to their object of research
9. Statistical and mathematical techniques for quantitative processing of data are central to the research methods adopted
10. Positivists use a set of formalized techniques for trying to discover and measure independent facts about a single reality which is assumed to exist, driven by natural laws and mechanisms (Carson et al., 2001).

Alternatively, interpretivism (according to Carson et al., 2001):

1. Is inspired by a series of qualitative concepts and approaches
2. In broad terms takes account of the important characteristics of the research paradigm on the opposite continuum from positivism
3. Allows the focus of research to be on understanding what is happening in a given context
4. Includes consideration of multiple realities, different actors' perspectives, researcher involvement, taking account of the contexts under study, and the contextual.

In the context of studies seeking to understand the behaviour of various players within the property profession, interpretivism may be an appropriate theoretical perspective to effectively investigate the complex nature of reality (Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991). This is further illustrated in studies undertaken by Levy and Schuck (1999 and 2005) investigating the influence of clients in the valuation process. It is important to note that these studies attempted to assess the nature of reality of the two major players in the valuation process rather than attempting to explain causal relationships by means of hypothesis testing or statistical analysis (Levy and Henry, 2003). It does, however, use a personal interpretation to explain the different experiences of both valuers and clients in the valuation process based upon their *understanding* of reality.

A summary of the main characteristics and fundamental differences between positivism and interpretivism is provided in Figure 3. Where positivism assumes direct access to the real world and a single external reality, consistent with traditional property research, interpretivism does not assume a direct access to the real world and thus no single external reality, consistent with interpretivist approaches such as those taken by Levy and Schuck (1999 and 2005). Additionally, positivists assume that it is possible to obtain hard, secure and objective knowledge. As a result, positivist research is able to focus on generalisation and abstraction to a wider context. Conversely interpretivists believe that an understanding of the world can only be achieved through knowledge as perceived by individuals. This implies that any interpretivist research study attempts to understand and explore problems within *a specific context*.

**Figure 3: Broad Definitions/Explanations of Positivism, Interpretivism and Epistemology**

	<b>Positivism</b>	<b>Interpretivism</b>
<b>Epistemology</b>		
Nature of ‘being’ nature of the world	Have direct access to the real world	No direct access to the real world
Reality	Single external reality	No single external reality
‘Grounds of knowledge’ relationship between reality and research	Possible to obtain hard, secure objective knowledge	Understood through ‘perceived’ knowledge
	Research focuses on generalisation and abstraction	Research focuses on the specific and the concrete
	Thought governed by hypotheses and stated theories	Seeking to understand specific context

*Adapted from Carson et al (2001)*

## **METHODOLOGY**

The determination of an appropriate methodology can be described as:

*“The strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes”.* (Crotty, 1998)

As outlined previously not only is the interpretivist approach affected by epistemological philosophies but in turn it affects the methodological stance for a study and justifies an alternate methodological approach from that of a positivistic enquiry. Figure 4 illustrates this within the context of positivism and interpretivism.



**Figure 4: Broad Definitions/Explanations of Positivism, Interpretivism and Methodology**

<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Positivism</b>	<b>Interpretivism</b>
Focus of research	Concentrates on description and explanation	Concentrates on understanding and interpretation
Role of the researcher	Detached, external observer	Researcher wants to experience what they are studying
	Clear distinction between reason and feeling	Allow feelings and reason to govern actions
	Aim to discover external reality rather than creating the object of the study	Partially created what is studied, the meaning of the phenomena
	Strive to use rational, consistent, verbal, logical approach	Use of pre-understanding is important
	Seek to maintain clear distinction between facts and value judgements	Distinction between facts and value judgements are less clear
	Distinction between science and personal experience	Accept influence from both science and personal experience
Techniques used by the researcher	Formalised statistical and mathematical methods predominate	Primarily non-quantitative

*Adapted from Carson et al (2001)*

Using an interpretivist framework, when the focus of a study is on understanding and interpretation, the researcher is encouraged to apply personal experience and prior knowledge rather than just being a detached observer. This framework accepts influences from both science and personal experience (Carson et al 2001). As a result, a model that is developed based on an interpretivist framework (suggesting a qualitative approach) will also be affected by the researcher's interpretation of the data collected from the interview transcripts. This should, however, not be confused with lack of rigour or trustworthiness, as will be outlined in the following section.

## Qualitative Research Methodologies

*“Any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification”* (Strauss and Corbin, 1999), and

*“...the label qualitative methods has no precise meaning in any of the social sciences. It is an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world”* (Cassell and Symon, 1994).

While the above quotes may adequately describe qualitative research, Miles and Huberman (1994) prefer not to specifically define qualitative research but focus their understanding of qualitative research on data in the form of words, such as observations, interviews or documents. They hold that data collection activities are typically carried out in close proximity to a local setting for a sustained period of time and that the data is not usually accessible for immediate analysis, requiring some processing. For example, interviews will generally need to be audio-taped, transcribed and, where necessary, corrected. All of these definitions signal a wide range of potential methods that take into account the philosophical considerations discussed above and the research question driving the study, driving the search for an appropriate methodology.

Some examples of different types of qualitative methodologies include ethnography, phenomenological research, action research, discourse analysis, and grounded theory. For the purposes of this discussion, we will consider only one – “grounded theory” because it is the most appropriate methodological choice when it comes to the issue of building theories.

### Grounded Theory

One of the major determinants in identifying a qualitative rather quantitative methodology is the aim of the study. A qualitative methodology such as grounded theory should be a more effective methodology when the aim of a study is to ‘build’ theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Carson et al (2001) suggest that three characteristics are required of a research problem in order for grounded theory to be applicable. The first of these is that the research should be interpretivist; the second is that the research should be about complex social processes between people; and finally, there should be virtually no existing theories about the phenomena or that existing theories are demonstrably inadequate.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe developing theory as a complex activity entailing not only conceiving or intuiting ideas but also formulating them into a logical, systematic and explanatory scheme. While it was considered that grounded theory should be based

exclusively on data collected from the research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), in more recent times Strauss and Corbin (1998) acknowledge that the researcher brings a considerable background in professional and disciplinary knowledge to an inquiry. These positions recognise that a prior understanding of the literature can therefore be used effectively in developing theory in a number of ways. These include:

- i. Concepts derived from literature may provide a source for comparing data at a dimensional level. For example, if a concept from the data proved similar or opposite from the literature, comparisons can be made in terms of their properties and dimensions.
- ii. Familiarity with relevant literature enables an enhanced sensitivity to subtle nuances of data and increases the awareness of the researcher as to what to look for, including which questions to ask respondents.
- iii. Before commencing a project, the researcher is able to turn to the literature to formulate questions that act as a starting point during initial observations and interviews.
- iv. The literature can also be used to confirm findings and determine situations where the literature may be incorrect, over simplistic and only partially explaining the phenomena (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Once it is identified that grounded theory is the most effective methodology for a study, the above steps should guide the first stage of the research process and data collection. Based on the review of pertinent literature, prior knowledge and experience of the researcher, it may be useful to formulate of a preliminary conceptual model before moving on to the primary data collection stage. Strauss and Corbin (1998) note the benefit of following this advice:

*“...experience and knowledge are what sensitize the researcher to significant problems and issues in the data and allows him or her to see alternative explanations and to recognize properties and dimensions of emerging concepts”* (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

## **METHODS**

Research methods in this context are described as the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data related to some research question (Crotty, 1998). In order to fulfil the aim of the research from a grounded theory approach, a number of research methods can be considered.

It is the research philosophy and methodology, together with a number of logistical considerations that usually guide the choice of the most appropriate data collection methods. More specifically, they help to highlight the appropriateness of using different

methods in order to develop a model of the phenomenon of interest. For example, a case-study approach, one-to-one in-depth interviews, or focus group discussions may be the most useful in gathering data. Because of the broad nature of this methodological framework, this paper will only briefly describe some of the different techniques used in qualitative methodology. Readers are encouraged to refer to qualitative methodology books for more depth.

### **Case Study Method**

The case study method investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context, where multiple sources of evidence are used to construct or inform the phenomenon (Yin, 1984, p. 23). One of the decisions that the researcher must make using this method concerns whether to conduct a single case (e.g. a study of just one organization or industry) or multiple cases (e.g. a study using different organizations or players within the same industry). Data can be collected through documentation review (e.g. email, observation) and interviews.

When deciding the most appropriate method of data collection, it is important to first consider its feasibility. For example, case studies that are designed to observe a particular process in action, may require observation of processes that are commercially sensitive or to be present at meetings where the respondents may not feel comfortable being recorded. Also, it may be difficult to keep an accurate record of telephone conversations and email records between participants. In such circumstances, it would be necessary to explore other more appropriate methods, such as one-to-one in-depth interviews.

### **Focus Groups**

Focus group discussions are another qualitative method that is commonly used to gather data, especially when the researcher is interested in the outcomes of brainstorming sessions and is not worried about the effect of others in a small group in influencing opinions. These discussions take place in small groups of between six to eight individuals, representing the group of interest, and are directed by a moderator who controls the flow of the discussion. However, focus group discussions are not an appropriate method for collecting data when the topic is sensitive and the participants are not likely to speak openly and frankly in the presence of others.

### **One-to-One In-depth Interviews**

In cases of sensitive subject matter and complex decision-making processes, individual in-depth interviews provide a far more effective tool and create an environment where participants would be likely to speak more openly and frankly (Anastas, 1988). Several other advantages of one-to-one in-depth interviewing include the encouragement of personal thought, respondent attentiveness to questions, and the offering the ability of the interviewer to sense non-verbal feedback (Sokolow, 1985). This alternative form of case-based research consists of recording the experiences of a number of participants by way of one-to-one interviews. This results in the collection of rich, in-depth and informative

data. In-depth interviews are regarded as an effective alternative to observing a case-study in action as they provide a method that permits direct observation of the people involved in the process and the ability to listen to what those people have to say (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). In addition to this, participants could be encouraged to identify “real life” situations, including discussing and evaluating their specific experiences about the question.

## **THEORETICAL SAMPLING AND DATA SATURATION**

Theoretical sampling is concerned with theory construction and is not with the representativeness of a given population (as in quantitative research). In theoretical sampling the concern is to check and refine the researcher’s emerging categories of the phenomenon (Urquhart and Fernandez, 2006). Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest that sampling should be directed by the logic and the types of coding procedures used in analysing and interpreting data. The method of analysis utilised in this situation is described as “open coding”, which aims to:

*“... discover, name and categorise phenomena according to their properties and dimensions, it follows that the aim of data gathering at this time is to keep the collection process open to all possibilities. Sampling is open to those persons, places and situations that will provide the greatest opportunity for discovery”* (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

This description highlights that the sampling method used for an interpretative qualitative study is a relatively open one. For example, in a study on the effect of client-valuer influence within the context of the valuation process, the main sampling criterion could be that respondents have extensive experience in undertaking valuations for at least seven years and hold senior positions in their organisations. Thus, it is anticipated that by collecting information from and drawing on the combined extensive experience of the respondents that a clear description of the valuation process and the roles of the client and valuer would emerge.

The use of theoretical sampling (Strauss and Corbin 1998) provides a general rule that when building theory, data should be collected until each category is saturated. The final number of participants in the sample is then determined when the outcome of the interviews becomes repetitive and no new themes emerge. In other words, when the research becomes saturated with information (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Carson *et al.*, 2001; Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

## DATA INTERPRETATION

The main aim of qualitative data is to discover the perceptions and experiences of the participants so that the researcher can then extract themes. These themes are then grouped into categories that relate to the phenomenon under investigation. For example, data collected using in-depth interviews are transcribed and then coded using the “open coding” technique (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The open coding technique is a process of discovering the properties and dimensions of the concepts contained in each of the interviews. The process of open coding allows the researcher to expose the thoughts, ideas and meanings contained within the text of interviews. In general, during the open coding process data is broken down into discrete parts, closely examined and compared for similarities (or differences). Open coding is effective in theory building as it allows the researcher to identify concepts or *labelled phenomena* (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

In order to achieve an effective coding process, each interview or focus group discussion should be audio taped. Once completed, these should be transcribed and then coded. The researcher, a judge and an arbiter should undertake the coding process. The researcher first analyses one selected interview and labels the main concepts, backed up with evidence from the transcripts. Descriptions for each of these concepts are then defined. A second academic with knowledge of the research topic can be elected as judge and examine the outcome of the analysis. Agreement is then reached between the researcher and the judge regarding the accuracy and relevance of these definitions, concepts and ideas. This process is then repeated for the remaining interviews. New information from each additional interview is used to add to the factors and sub-factors further explaining concepts and ideas. Themes that are repeated in subsequent transcripts are used to further clarify each description and to allow additional in-depth understanding of participants’ perceptions of the phenomenon. Once the process is completed for all interview transcripts and it is clear that any additional interviews would not add substantially to the understanding of the phenomenon from the perspective of participants, saturation has been reached. Once the process of coding all interviews is completed, a third person can be selected to act as arbiter to ensure that the factors identified are a true reflection of the interviews. In addition to defining the concepts the researcher should delve deeper into the data and identify further relationships, search for patterns and themes across the interviews, and allow themes to emerge from the data.

After analysing one group of participant interviews, it may be evident that further interviews with a different group within the same industry would provide an additional understanding of the process and the role this different group plays in the process. This second group’s perceptions can then be “triangulated” with the data collected from first group’s interviews by determining the perceptions of both players in the process. Triangulation provides support for the trustworthiness of the research.

Finally, in order to ensure that the revised model and other findings from the research are an accurate reflection of the understanding of the process, two or three respondents from

both groups should be interviewed to determine their feedback on the accuracy of the results. The feedback respondents are shown a copy of model derived from the research outcomes and they are thus able to confirm, from both the groups' perspectives, that these models are in fact a true and accurate reflection of the phenomenon and the process. This safeguard enables the researcher to have confidence that the results.

## **TRUSTWORTHINESS OF QUALITATIVE FINDINGS**

It is not uncommon for findings from qualitative research to be criticised by academics as failing to meet certain standards of trustworthiness. However, trustworthiness within the context of qualitative research can be assessed by the concepts of credibility, dependability and conformability. Carson *et al.* (2001) suggest that these can be achieved by the following:

- i. Careful use, interpretation and examination of appropriate literature
- ii. Careful justification of the qualitative research methodologies employed
- iii. Careful structuring of the data analysis to ensure full and descriptive evaluation and assessment, particularly in relation to data of key significance (Carson *et al.*, 2001).

Each of these strategies must be considered within any qualitative research design. In addition to the strategies set out above, a number of authors have attempted to produce criteria to evaluate the credibility, dependability and conformability of qualitative findings. Strauss and Corbin (1990) list seven criteria to evaluate how well a grounded theory study has been done. Miles and Huberman (1994) describe 13 tactics for testing or confirming findings. Other authors have also suggested ways to improve the quality of qualitative research results including Denzin and Lincoln (1994), Lincoln and Guba (1985), Patton (1990), Wallendorf and Belk (1989) and Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman (1993).

Carson *et al.* (2001) formulated 13 specific techniques that can be used to ensure credibility, dependability and conformability of qualitative research results (Figure 5). In order to ensure that a qualitative study fulfils the requirements of credibility, dependability and conformability each of these techniques is evaluated individually.

**Figure 5: Criteria For Evaluating Credibility, Dependability and Conformability**

	<b>Technique</b>
1	Researching in the field, that is in the natural setting of the phenomena, for example, a respondent’s own surroundings
2	Using purposive or theoretical sampling rather than statistically random sampling, for example where interviewees might be chosen more because of their relevance than because they were representative
3	Comparing results across different contexts such as different user types
4	Depth and intimacy of interviewing, like ‘one-to-one’ conversations/discussions’
5	Prolonged and consistent observation, like observations of how consumers behaved across numerous/similar retail outlets and many time periods
6	Negative case analysis, that is, asking questions designed to find exceptions to a rule in a theory that therefore invalidate the ‘rule’
7	Debriefing by peers to help researchers search out in their minds what they have seen or heard, which helps guard against bias and produces new insights
8	Maintaining journals or memos of what was done and thought throughout the research study
9	Triangulation of data from several sources, such as different interviewees and newspaper cuttings, from different sites, and from different methods of collection and analysis, for example using observations and interview data
10	Checks by members of the group, that is, asking respondents to comment on drafts facts and their interpretations of those facts
11	Independent audits
12	Having a number of interviewers carry out interviews, followed by interviewers discussing the meaning and interpretations of the data
13	Presenting the findings of the research study to the original respondents in a focus group meeting and then inviting respondents to comment and provide feedback and discussion in relation to the findings

*Source: Carson et al (2001)*



## GENERALISABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Finally, an important consideration in qualitative methodology is the question of generalisability. This deals with the extent to which the results of a qualitative study is applicable in other situations, contexts or groups. Generalisability is of utmost concern to quantitative, positivist researchers where stringent statistical tests are applied to ensure this criterion. Qualitative, interpretive researchers, however, are more concerned with gaining an in-depth understanding of their participants with the assumption that this view will be context and time specific (Wainwright, 1997). While some data, by definition, is not generalisable (case studies where the population =1) data gained from qualitative studies adds richness to the pool of understanding of the field and can be used to test, support or question data gained from larger populations.

Dick and Swepson (1997) suggest that generalisability is possible in action research (a qualitative research methodology). They suggest that if several studies in diverse settings give similar findings or using “indirectly-relevant literatures to test the relevance of findings” (Dick and Swepson, 1997). Some scholars, while not dismissing the importance of generalisability, are critical about the traditional ways of thinking about the issue (e.g. Wolcott, 1990; Denzin, 1997; Ward-Schofield, 1993; Janesick, 1994; Morgan and Drury, 2003). They argue that while traditional notions of validity, generalisability and reliability are imperative in quantitative methodologies, it is not appropriate in qualitative studies since the concern of qualitative research is an understanding and interpretation of individual cases (Janesick, 1993).

Ward-Schofield (1993) suggests a re-conceptualisation of the term, generalisability, to better reflect the explanatory power of qualitative research. This paper suggests that using terms such as “fittingness”, “comparability” or “translatability” to describe the content and context of a qualitative study reflects the generalisability of the particular study to similar situations or contexts. This is akin to discussing the trustworthiness of qualitative data. Within the context of rigorous research methods, qualitative scholars such as Donmoyer (1990) and Denzin (1997) argue that theory can be inferred beyond the particular circumstance. It is suggested here that when existing theory has not considered all the dimensions relating to particular phenomenon, then in a spirit of discovery and with no claim of offering a definitive theory, the quest of a qualitative researcher is to find new dimensions that should be tested.

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