



Essentials of a Qualitative Doctorate

**IMMY HOLLOWAY
LORRAINE BROWN**



Essentials of a Qualitative Doctorate



Qualitative Essentials

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Immy Holloway and Lorraine Brown
August 2012

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Introduction: The Qualitative Doctorate



This book is intended for doctoral candidates who write their dissertations in English, and in English-speaking countries. We are well aware that the doctoral process and some aspects of the language associated with doctoral study differ across such countries, although the major elements of the doctoral journey and terminology are similar. Many places, for example, the United States and Canada, require students to complete work in addition to the doctoral dissertation. In Britain, doctoral students are asked to attend research and ethics sessions in addition to writing a thesis, but these training sessions are not usually assessed. Professional doctorates always include an element of work relating to practice and are more vocationally orientated, but the standards of doctorates are similar in many English-speaking and Nordic countries. There is also a doctorate by publication, which is discussed in [Chapter 10](#). We do not use the term *Ph.D.* in this text, because other forms of the doctorate exist, and this book aims to be useful also to students who undertake other types of doctoral studies.

You might ask: What can I do with a doctorate? Is it worth the effort? What can I achieve? The Research Councils in the United Kingdom (RCUK, 2010) in collaboration with the Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) have examined some of the destinations of doctorate students in the United Kingdom and the value a doctorate holds for employers. A high percentage (44 percent) go into higher education research or

lecturing occupations; others go into specialist roles in health and social work; yet others work in research and development or manufacturing. The figures for the European Union are similar, although they differ slightly. If you have a doctorate it is more likely that you will gain a good salary and higher work satisfaction. Both of us completed a doctorate mainly for our own satisfaction, although it has helped our careers, particularly through publishing papers, books, and doing further research. We learned a great deal in our respective areas, and we are still motivated to learn more. Occasionally the doctoral journey was hard, and we had some of the same problems that you will face during the process of doing your doctorate.

Dozens of books exist that give detailed advice, and some of them are very helpful. Our book includes only essentials for the qualitative doctorate specifically. Although this book may sometimes sound too prescriptive, it is not meant to be. You always have the freedom to do what you wish within the limits of your institutional guidelines. We present only suggestions to make the doctoral journey easier for you, not rigid rules.

In making these suggestions, we've tried to incorporate the most important aspects of the qualitative doctorate. We would advise you to read all the chapters before you start, but read and reread [Chapters 8, 9, and 10](#) in particular, because these cover the main processes as well as the traps and problems of doctoral work.

Differences between Countries

We need to clarify some terms and practices before you read this book. In the United States, the completed doctoral script is called a *dissertation*; in the United Kingdom, it is referred to as a *thesis*; the term *dissertation* indicates a master's study in the United Kingdom. Canada, Australia, and many other countries follow the British model. The requirements are also somewhat different for a number of countries; some doctorates demand a large input of theory, others do not. In the United Kingdom, the transfer or upgrade to the doctorate is an important stage of the journey.

All doctoral students need to be sure of the requirements in their country and their institution.

THE QUALITATIVE DOCTORATE

All universities examine the doctorate, but not all do so orally. In the United States the oral defense is conducted by a dissertation committee and is known as the doctoral defense; in the United Kingdom it is conducted by an examination panel, and it is called *viva voce* (usually referred to in short as *viva*). Australia's universities do not require an oral defense. Whereas in U.S. universities students have a committee that advises and examines, and an advisor who is the main contact with the student throughout,



This photo shows how the Department of Caring Science, Åbo Akademi, Vasa, Finland, announces the completion of the doctoral dissertation. The tradition of hammering the dissertation to a tree comes from the action of Martin Luther, who nailed his theses to a church door.

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U.K. and Australian students interact with one or, more usually now, two supervisors, who meet students regularly and often. They offer guidance throughout the research process.

In this book, for the sake of consistency and to avoid repetition, the North American terms *advisor*, *dissertation*, and *oral defense* will be used instead of the U.K. terms *supervisor*, *thesis*, and *viva*.

I. Perspectives on Qualitative Research



You have decided to do a qualitative doctorate. Why did you make this decision? Did you find that your research question demanded a qualitative approach? Did you prefer the qualitative approach to quantitative inquiry? Do you think that qualitative research is easier?

We discuss the last question first, because many researchers carry out qualitative inquiry believing that it is easy to do. If this is your reason, you will not be able to justify your research—but such justification is an important part of the rationale that you set out in your introduction and methodology chapters. In any case, a good piece of qualitative research is just as demanding as a quantitative study, although for different reasons, which will become clearer during the course of your dissertation.

Qualitative research will give you insight into various perspectives on a phenomenon, on behaviors and feelings, and it allows a deep exploration of different experiences. Researchers study people in their natural surroundings and build up relationships so they can learn to see the world from the participants' point of view, on the basis of a common humanity and sometimes a shared culture, although they can never put themselves wholly into "other people's shoes." Richards and Morse (2007) give you an overview of the type of questions that require a qualitative approach—for instance, seeking knowledge in an area where little is known, where you wish to explore participants' understanding in depth, when you are generating a theory or theoretical ideas.

Distinctions between Qualitative and Quantitative Perspectives

The dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative inquiry has been oversimplified, and the “paradigm wars” are ostensibly over. However, you will find that the debate still continues in academic settings—to the frustration of qualitative researchers. There is no room here to discuss these arguments. We instead focus on the nature of qualitative research, which has its base in the human sciences, such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology; indeed, it has its deeper roots in philosophy and history (see Willis, 2007). This methodology explores how people make sense of their perceived reality. Thus this approach cannot ever be completely precise, because human beings do not always act or think logically and in predictable ways.

Qualitative research differs from quantitative inquiry in

- its perspectives on the nature of being and reality;
- the type of knowledge that is being sought;
- the amount of knowledge that already exists in the area of study;
- the way the research question is approached;
- the collection and analysis of data;
- the presentation of findings.

These issues connect with the concepts of ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Researchers’ assumptions on how the social world can best be studied determine the way the research is shaped. Ontology concerns the nature of existence and reality. Epistemology refers to the theory of knowledge and deals with questions such as what counts as valid knowledge (see also Willis, 2007, p. 10). On these ideas researchers base their methodology—the principles in which their research methods and procedures are rooted. (Ontological, epistemological, and methodological issues are also discussed in Creswell [2007].) [Table 1.1](#) summarizes some of the differences between qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Essential Features of Qualitative Research

[Chapter 10](#) includes a summary of the major traits of qualitative research that you need to take into account throughout your study, including the structure of the dissertation. You probably have already looked through several books on qualitative research, and maybe you have a Master’s that