Two Techniques for Qualitative Data Analysis: Descriptive Narrative and Generalization

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WORKSHOP

TWO TECHNIQUES FOR QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS:
DESCRIPTIVE NARRATIVE AND GENERALIZATION

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Numerous innovative techniques for qualitative data analysis have been emerging and gaining consideration and acceptance in IS research. Among these are analytic induction, hermeneutics, ethnography, participant observation, content analysis, grounded theory, case studies and action research. Previous years’ workshops have dealt with these basic techniques: in 1993, ICIS featured a panel on interviewing and evaluation; similarly in 1992, there was a workshop on action research and ethnography; in 1991, an ICIS panel provided a workshop in analytic induction and hermeneutics; and in 1990, an ICIS panel discussed how researchers make sense of qualitative data.

This workshop regards techniques for reporting qualitative research results in ways that highlight the importance of the findings for both research and practice. This is a critical problem, because the qualitative analysis typically denies the researcher concise and meaningful ways of summarizing their data (such as descriptive statistics) or projecting their implications onto a future population of cases (such as inferential statistics). Analytic techniques for solving these problems are extremely important for establishing the credibility of the data analysis and the relevance of the conclusions to information systems practice. This workshop will demonstrate complementary qualitative techniques for describing the underlying data and generalizing the implications of qualitative analyses. As in previous years, the long range purpose of the current workshop is to help participants acquire some “how to” skills that they can try out at home on their own research projects. The workshop will also prove very useful for those who must review qualitative projects and make recommendations for improvements in the analysis and reporting. We will conduct the session as a workshop, giving descriptions of these techniques and providing a “walk through” using one or two examples (taking actual research studies as illustrations). The examples will be selected to illustrate different facets of the techniques, to identify special issues in using the techniques with IS subject matter, and to elucidate the techniques’ contributions to IS research.

Richard Baskerville will begin the session by briefly describing the underlying motivation for the emergence of these techniques in IS research. He will then introduce the two workshop presenters.

Brian Pentland will examine strategies for writing up and publishing research based on ethnographic data. Unlike most quantitative research, where clear formulas exist for presenting findings (hypotheses, method, results, discussion), ethnographic research often requires innovative textual forms and rhetorical strategies. In particular, ethnographers face the problem of creating descriptive narratives that are convincing and “scientific” without the aid of conventional scientific rhetorical devices (e.g., hypotheses and inferential statistics). This problem is exacerbated by the stringent page limits imposed by most journals and conferences.

Pentland will discuss a set of specific techniques for writing up ethnographic data for publication. These techniques help to
establish the authenticity and validity of qualitative data and the overall contribution of the research. Pentland will illustrate these techniques with examples from his own published work on software support hot lines and financial auditors. He will supplement this with some additional examples from the literature, and will provide a set of references on writing up qualitative work. In addition to providing some guidance to potential authors, this presentation and the accompanying references should be helpful to people who may have occasion to review qualitative research.

**Geoff Walsham** will examine approaches to the issue of generalization from qualitative research, with a particular focus on the results from in-depth case studies. He will outline an interpretive perspective on the nature of knowledge, which will be used to underpin the description of four types of generalizations: the development of concepts, the generation of theory, the drawing of specific implications, and the contribution of rich insight.

Walsham will provide citations to the literature to illustrate each of these types of generalization. He will also draw on his own published work to provide some detailed examples. One example involves an in-depth case study of the development of information systems in a financial services company over an eight year period. This case will be used to illustrate generalizations in terms of the generation of new theory and the drawing of specific implications for information systems strategy and its implementation.

Participants should leave the workshop with sufficient knowledge and confidence to begin exploration of these approaches on their own. To encourage the dissemination and practice of the techniques, we will provide handouts for participants, including summaries of key concepts, transparencies, and bibliographies. Handout materials will also aid participants in the process of executing these techniques or reviewing material that uses these techniques.