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# Qualitative Research in the New Century: Map Points in Insider Research

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# Qualitative Research in the New Century: Map Points in Insider Research

## **Abstract**

This paper employs an “insider research” approach to qualitative research wherein the researchers share a point of identification with the participants. It focuses on “Map Points” in the conversational journey of each case study. These points describe situations where either the researcher or the informant took the lead in guiding the journey in a particular direction.

## **Résumé**

### 1. Introduction

This paper describes and discusses both “insider research” approach and the team approach to qualitative research. The paper takes the data collected from a series of interviews which one of the researchers has undertaken as an ongoing investigation into the information seeking behavior of clergy engaged in the task of developing and delivering sermons. This paper does not focus on the sermon or the process a clergy member uses to prepare and disseminate it, but rather it looks at the methodology employed in that research.

It illustrates the potential of the qualitative research interview when the researcher is able to enter into and maintain a conversation with the research informant as an insider in the latter’s community. Some scholars (e.g., Kvale 1996) have seen insider research as an approach that allows for understanding through a rational discourse and reciprocal critique among those identifying and interpreting a phenomenon. In this case, two researchers, both with insider status in relation to the research participants, seek to understand the dynamic process of the interview. Both authors make use of their prior careers as clergy to gain entry into the religious community, to establish rapport with the participants, and to analyze the extensive data set of interview transcripts.

The authors apply a team approach to case study research and evaluation, making use of collegial conversations. The team approach allows for “communicative validation among researchers” and the insider approach encourages such validation “between the researchers and their subjects” (Kvale, p.65). In a collaborative approach, the partners bring complimentary strengths and “develop a symbiotic and reciprocal relationship” (Stamatoplos & Mackoy, 2004, p. 4). In this study, the team consists of two Library and Information Science faculty members who had previous careers in church ministry and who share a mutual interest in studying themes in the realm of information and religion. <sup>1</sup>Both have undertaken research on the information seeking behavior of clergy (Roland 2007; Wicks 1999)<sup>2</sup>. Yet they reflect some differences in philosophical, theological and

social views (see Section 4.2 below) that encourage profitable insights and critiques of each other's interpretation of the data.

## 2. The Literature

There are advantages and cautions associated with insider research. Robert Merton (1972) defined the "insider" as "an individual who processes *a priori* intimate knowledge of the community and its members" (quoted in Hellowell 2006). Hockey (1993) says that as an insider the researcher does not have to deal with culture shock, enjoys enhanced rapport with the subject, is able to measure the accuracy of the responses to questions, and is seen by the respondent as empathetic. Harrison (2001) and Eide and Kahn (2008), while not specifically addressing the topic of insider research nonetheless affirm the value of the qualitative interview for building reciprocity between reviewer and subject and providing a forum in which both parties can make meaning of a situation.

On the side of caution, Gunasekaia (2007) warns that the "informed perspective" of the interviewer may influence both observations and interpretations, and Hellowell (2006) suggests that the researcher reflect on his or her own beliefs and values, as well as the research methodology employed. One potential difficulty with insider research is over-*rapport* between researcher and informant. The knowledge base needed to understand the information processes of certain professions, however, is such that insider status can be more of a help than a danger. This is true of the clergy profession where meaningful conversation about the clergy work world and work tasks is served by insider understanding. Insight is often gained by a conversation which goes beyond the structured, planned questions of the interviewer. Miles and Crush (1993) say that the interview, when conducted by an insider, achieves "a degree of depth, flexibility, richness, and vitality often lacking in conventional questionnaire-based interviews" (Miles and Crush, 1993, p. 85). Portelli asserts that such an approach facilitates the discovery of "not only what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did" (Portelli, 1998, p. 67).

DeShane studied the folk theology of the Pentecostal tradition and concluded that an "analysis of this folk theology demands a believer's perspective" to illustrate the important nuances of meaning and understanding not to mention terms and phrases employed (DeShane, 1996, p. 97). Likewise, Robertson observes that a thorough knowledge of a culture is best gained from being a part of the culture under study (Robertson, 1983). DeShane adds that objectivity is a matter of personal opinion as to what is important and another writer, Rosaldo (1989), argues that it is a myth that researchers can become objectively detached, as if they were blank slates.

## 3. Questions Asked

In this paper the authors try to answer three questions: (1) What do we learn from the data about insider status and its potential to enhance or hinder the research process? From this basic question, another arises, namely, whether, based on the data collected, a testable design model for qualitative research that addresses potential concerns regarding possible bias with the subject matter and over-*rapport* with case study informants can be

developed? (2) In these data can we discern meaningful, identifiable points on the conversational journey of researcher and informant? Are these points similar across participants or unique to one or another subject? (3) What does analysis of the data show about the ability of the team approach to contribute to the credibility of qualitative research? The goal is to step beyond the immediate research project (i.e., the sermon as an information product) to see what is happening in the method itself.

#### 4. Methodology

##### 4.1 Data collection

The research model presented in this paper utilizes the case study method with clergy members and the sermon preparation task. Researcher 1 has completed five case studies to date and each case study consists of three to four interviews conducted over the course of ten to fifteen weeks. The interview sessions are both unstructured and semi-structured in format. Researcher 2 joins in analysis of the transcribed interviews and also conducts an exit interview with each informant.

During the unstructured portion of each interview, informants articulate the decision making process that went into the preparation of the sermon including the selection of scripture, message content, and the desired goals to be achieved. During the semi-structured portion of each interview, the researcher and informant listen to an audio recording of the sermon, stopping at certain points to ask questions, to clarify, and to review various conceptual points, delivery techniques, and interpretations of Scripture.

The researcher prepares for each interview session by attending the worship service, making an audio recording of the sermon, and obtaining a text, outline, or preparation notes of the sermon from the informant. The researcher then reviews the audio recording and sermon text a second time and prepares a set of questions for the semi-structured interview. During the course of each interview several follow up questions are asked based on responses given by the informant.

##### 4.2 Calculating the Attributes in Common Factor

In order to measure the degree of insider status the researcher shared with each informant and to explore how this insider status might affect each case study, the research team devised an "Attributes in Common Factor" scale. Fourteen measures of demographic, experiential, and philosophical characteristics were identified for their potential to influence how case study informants might interpret Scripture and go about the sermon preparation process. The demographic attributes include the age, gender<sup>3</sup>, and ethnicity of the informant. The experiential attributes include being raised in a church home, denominational affiliation, changing denominations, undergraduate education at a school with a denominational affiliation, seminary education, change in career, and years of experience in the ministry. The philosophical attributes include the informants' view of the Bible, descriptors of personal faith and political position, and their view on the validity of other religions. Four questions from the *U.S. Congregational Life Survey, 2001* were used to provide a basis of comparison for the philosophical attributes. These

attributes include one's view on the Bible and on other religions, and descriptions of one's self-identity in terms of politics and in terms of faith.

The degree to which Researcher 1 and an informant share an attribute is assigned. Attributes held in common receive two points. Attributes held partially in common receive one point. Attributes not held in common receive zero points. A compilation of the Attributes in Common (AIC) Factor is presented in Table 1 below.

The two members of the research team share several demographic and experiential attributes in common, but differ significantly in their answers to the four questions from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey used to measure philosophical attributes. Researcher 1 is much more liberal than Researcher 2 on the questions regarding the Bible and other religions and slightly more liberal on the questions of faith and politics. This diversity in philosophical attributes within a collegial working relationship facilitates a system of checks and balances within a rigorous research approach.

It is noteworthy that a high degree of commonality exists between the researcher and the informants in the demographic attributes of gender and ethnicity. The same is true for the experiential attributes of seminary education, being first career clergy, and years of experience. However, there is a very low degree of commonality between the researcher and the informants in the philosophical attributes.

Table 1. Compilation of the Attributes in Common (AIC) Factor

ATTRIBUTE	CASE STUDY 101	CASE STUDY 102	CASE STUDY 103	CASE STUDY 104	CASE STUDY 105
Age	0	2	0	0	0
Gender	2	2	2	2	0
Ethnicity	2	2	2	2	2
Raised in church home	1	1	1	0	1
Denominational affiliation	0	2	0	0	2
Changed denominations	1	2	0	0	0
Undergraduate education	1		1	0	
Seminary education	1	1	1	1	1
First career clergy	2	2	2	2	0
Experience	2	2	0	2	2
Bible view	0	0	0	0	0
Faith descriptor	0	0	0	0	0
Politics descriptor	0	0	0	0	2
Religions view	0	0	0	0	2
AIC FACTOR:	12	16	9	9	12

### 4.3 Map Points

Interview transcripts were coded with qualitative analysis software and analyzed by the research team for instances of how insider status affected the data collection process. The researcher for the base study developed the concept of “Map Points” to describe key situations in the conversational journey of each case study. Map Points designate places where an interaction took place within the conversational journey that affected the future direction of the conversation. Map Points were identified by a combination of particular conversational roles played by both the researcher and the informant. Each case study is analyzed for the occurrence and lack of occurrence of different Map Points, and for their frequency and progression of occurrence across the interviews.

Twelve unique Map Points have been identified to date. These are arranged in three categories and presented in Tables 2a, 2b, and 2c below. The first category, Map Points of Curiosity, describes situations which one would normally expect in an interview in that the researcher asks a question in order to gain information. The researcher is directing the conversation and the informant is engaged, open, and forthcoming. The category includes a Map Point in which the informant is directing the conversation and puts the researcher in the role of Confidant in order to share a personal struggle. The researcher may be curious to know more about the situation, which may lead to follow up questions in the immediate or subsequent interviews.

Table 2a – Conversational Map Points of Curiosity

MAP POINTS OF CURIOSITY	DEFINITION
1. Researcher as Learner and Informant as Expert	The conversation is about a situation of which the researcher does not have prior knowledge or experience and the informant is able to teach the researcher.
2. Map Point Researcher as Reviewer and Informant as Explainer	The researcher is simply reflecting on the sermon message and asking questions to gain greater clarity, seeking to understand the thinking and context of the informant. This gives the informant the opportunity to explain, to think out loud. This may be a point that informants find beneficial.
3. Researcher as Confidant and Informant as Seeker	The informant confides in the researcher a personal struggle that might be shared only because the researcher is perceived to be one who would understand given the common background of ministry.
4. Researcher has Issues and the Informant Enlightens	The Researcher is speaking from the context of his personal history and emotion has come into play. Red flags have been raised. Perhaps presumptions have been made. The Informant enlightens the Researcher from his or her perspective.

The second category, Map Points of Concurrence, describes situations in which there is easy agreement between the researcher and the informant regarding the topic of conversation. These are situations in which both parties realize they are on the same page, are standing on common ground, or the information being shared is factual in nature.

Table 2b – Conversational Map Points of Concurrence

MAP POINTS OF CONCURRENCE	
5. Researcher and Informant on the Same Page	The researcher and informant share a common point of experience, philosophy, history, etc., that helps to establish and maintain rapport.
6. Researcher as Biographer and Informant as Story	The researcher is asking questions about the life history of the informant in order to gain insight and demographic data in order to gain a more detailed picture of the life context of the informant.
7. Map Point Researcher as Tangential Conversationalist and Informant as Listener	The researcher takes over the conversation and shares a story from his past experience which may be motivated by a desire to rescue a struggling informant, to build rapport, or to share a point of common ground.

The third category, Map Points of Potential Conflict, describes situations in which there is the potential for either the researcher or the informant to be in an uncomfortable position. The researcher may question a belief, value, or practice of the informant. The informant may confide more information about a situation than the researcher cares to know. Such encounters have the potential to jeopardize the case study. This risk may be mitigated by the insider status of the researcher, which facilitates an ability to initiate such conversational encounters from a position of commonality with and respect for the informant so as to allow the informant the opportunity to continue the conversation.

Table 2c – Conversational Map Points of Potential Conflict

MAP POINTS OF POTENTIAL CONFLICT	
8. Informant as Inquisitor and Researcher as Defender	The informant turns the tables on the researcher to ask questions of the researcher.
9. Researcher as Confidant and Informant as Confessor	The researcher is placed in the role of a confidant as the informant confesses a difficulty or a frustration that is short term in nature and probably related to one particular situation of sermon preparation.
10. Researcher as Confidant and Informant as Venting	The researcher is placed in the role of a confidant as the informant vents a concern or frustration about the congregation, the denomination, or the ministry. It is assumed that the researcher understands and may have had similar experiences in ministry and also realizes there is little that the informant can do about the situation.
11. Researcher as Inquisitor and Informant as Defender	The researcher pushes the informant on a particular sermon point, underlying belief, or value in an effort to dig deeper, to achieve greater clarity. This may push the informant out of a comfort zone. It may be motivated by the researcher's contextual history.
12. Map Point Researcher as Sympathizer and Informant as Evangelist	The researcher fails to question the informant on a statement that academic rigor begs to be asked, but the researcher is consciously or sub-consciously conflicted about the topic and thus fails to follow through on the conversation.

The set of Map Points is a useful research tool in at least two ways. First, it serves as an interpretative framework for the analysis of the interview transcripts.

Second, it serves as an evaluation tool on the work of the researcher. The former is important for establishing a qualitative research methodology that can be consistently utilized for working with a user group that has received little attention from the LIS field and which can also be adapted for work with other similar user groups. The latter use of the Map Points set is important for monitoring the effect of insider status on the research process. For the purposes of this paper, the focus is on the second of these strengths.

## 5. Findings

***Finding 1:*** As presented in Table 3a below, a direct correlation appears to exist between the frequency of encountering the Researcher as Learner and Informant as Expert Map Point as a percentage of the total number of Map Point Encounters and the Attributes in Common Factor. In case studies 101, 102, and 105, with whom the Attributes in Common Factor are highest, the frequency rate of this Map Point as a percentage of all encounters is 29% and higher. For case studies 103 and 104, with whom the Attributes in Common Factor is lowest, the frequency rate is 12% and 19% respectively.

TABLE 3a – Map Points of Curiosity Encounters by Case Study

<b>MAP POINTS OF CURIOSITY</b>	Case Study 101	Case Study 102	Case Study 103	Case Study 104	Case Study 105
Attributes in Common	12	15	9	9	12
Number of interviews	5	4	3	4	3
Researcher as Confidant and Informant as Seeker	1	0	0	0	0
Researcher as Learner Informant as Expert	14 (33%)	6 (29%)	2 (12%)	5 (19%)	8 (35%)
Researcher as Reviewer Informant as Explainer	6	5	8	5	10
Researcher has Issues Informant Enlightens	3	0	0	1	0
SUB-TOTAL	24	11	10	11	18
PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL MAP POINT ENCOUNTERS	55.81%	54.55%	58.82%	40.74%	78.26%

***Finding 2:*** As presented in Table 3b below, an inverse correlation appears to exist between the frequency of Map Point Encounters in the category of Potential Conflicts as a percentage of the total number of Map Point Encounters and the Attributes in Common Factor. In case studies 103 and 104, for which the Attributes in Common Factor is lowest, the frequency of encounters in this category are 29% and higher. In case studies 101, 102, and 105, for which the Attributes in Common Factor is highest, the frequency of encounters in this category are less than 18%.

Table 3b – Map Points of Potential Conflict Encounters by Case Study

<b>MAP POINTS OF POTENTIAL CONFLICT</b>	Case Study 101	Case Study 102	Case Study 103	Case Study 104	Case Study 105
Attributes in Common	12	15	9	9	12
Number of interviews	5	4	3	4	3
Informant as Inquisitor Researcher as Defender	0	0	1	0	0
Researcher as Confidant Informant as Confessor	0	0	1	3 (11%)	1
Researcher as Confidant Informant as Venting	1	0	1	0	2
Researcher as Inquisitor Informant as Defender	6 (14%)	2 (10%)	3 (18%)	5 (19%)	1 (4%)
Researcher as Sympathizer Informant as Evangelist	0	0	0	1	0
SUB-TOTAL	7	2	6	9	4
PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL MAP POINT EVENTS	16.28%	9.09%	33.00%	33.33%	17.39%

*Finding 3:* As Table 3b also indicates, an inverse relationship may exist between the frequency of encountering the Researcher as Confidant and Informant as Confessor Map Point and the Attributes in Common Factor. In Case Study 104, the researcher and the informant share a low Attributes in Common Factor, but the researcher is placed in the role of confidant in 11% of the Map Point Encounters. In Case Study 102, the researcher and the informant share a high Attributes in Common Factor, but the informant never places the researcher in the role of confidant throughout the case study.

Table 3c – Map Points of Concurrence Encounters by Case Study

<b>MAP POINTS OF CONCURRENCE</b>	Case Study 101	Case Study 102	Case Study 103	Case Study 104	Case Study 105
Attributes in Common	12	15	9	9	12
Number of interviews	5	4	3	4	3
Researcher and Informant on the Same Page	3 (7%)	7 (32%)	0	1 (4%)	0
Researcher as Biographer Informant as Story	8	1	1	5	1
Researcher as Tangential Conversationalist Informant as Listener	1	0	1	1	0
SUB-TOTAL	12	8	2	7	1
PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL MAP POINT EVENTS	27.91%	36.36%	11.76%	25.93%	4.35%

*Finding 4:* A direct correlation may exist between the frequency of encountering the Researcher and Informant on the Same Page Map Point and the Attributes in Common Factor (see Table 3c). In Case Study 102, the researcher and

the informant share the highest Attributes in Common Factor and the frequency of this Map Point encounter as a percentage of the total is 32%. The Map Point is not encountered at all in Case Study 103, which has the lowest Attributes in Common Factor and it is encountered only once (4%) in Case Study 104. However, the Map Point was not encountered at all in Case Study 105 with whom the researcher shared a high Attributes in Common Factor.

## 6. The Team Approach

The two researchers maintained an ongoing dialogue about the cases as they unfolded. Researcher 1 did the interviews and the initial work of identifying Map Points. Researcher 2 read the transcripts and conducted the exit interviews and contributed the categories for the Map Points. Together, the authors made observations and asked questions of the data, clarified understandings of the Map Points, and informed each other when there was confusion over how a particular clergy member operated in his theological or denominational world. For example, in case #1, Researcher 2 was able to clarify differences between fundamentalists and evangelicals and suggest questions which might have been asked of the informant to gain a better understanding of that person's own grasp of the distinction. However, it should be said that these points of clarification were not frequently necessary. Yet, the team approach did help greatly with the analysis as each researcher played off the other in asking, 'What are the data telling us?'

## 7. Conclusions

One of the questions the research team was interested in answering was whether insider status enhanced or hindered the research process. Comments already made suggest that insider status helps more than hinders. The common knowledge shared (in this case, about sermon preparation and delivery, and about the dynamic of a local church ministry) allows for easy conversation with little explanation of basics needed. At the same time, as has been discussed above, the researcher is able to learn still more. Also, the data collected and analyzed thus far show that any potential concerns about bias and over-rapport is minimized by the academic integrity of the investigators and by the use of the team approach to analysis.

The second question asked at the start was whether meaningful, identifiable points on the conversational journey of researcher and informant could be identified. Twelve Map Points have been so identified in the five cases studied to date. Further analysis of the transcripts, and additional case studies yet to be undertaken, will likely reveal additional ones. The four most frequently occurring Map Point encounters are found across all five case studies, while three Map Point encounters are present once in three different, individual case studies.

The third question concerned the value of the team approach. This question asks, 'What does analysis of the data show about the ability of the team approach to contribute to the credibility of qualitative research?' Differences between the two

researchers, in terms of religious background and belief, are seen to contribute to validity and to dialogical intersubjectivity through rational discourse and reciprocal critique of each other's work. Thus, there is a dynamic of similarities and differences between researchers (and between researcher and participant in the case studies) which yields a positive result.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> This mutual interest inspired the creation of the Center for the Study of Information and Religion (CSIR), housed in the School of Library & Information Science at Kent State University. The Center exists to facilitate research within the LIS field that is focused on the various institutions and agents of religion and their effect on social knowledge through the use, dissemination, and diffusion of information. See <http://csir.slis.kent.edu>.

<sup>2</sup> Roland's dissertation centers on just one case study and inspired a paper by both authors which was presented at the 2009 Research Applications in Information & Library Studies (RAILS 5) Conference in Sydney, Australia (Roland & Wicks, 2009) in which the initial thinking about the research process was explored. The current paper carries forward that analysis, making use of four additional case studies.

<sup>3</sup> Gender and years of experience in ministry have been found to influence the way individuals evaluate a sermon. In one study, male subjects, for example, rated the sermons of experienced, female pastors negatively in terms of inspiration, relevance, and the likelihood of recommending the sermon to others. (Maybury & Chickering, 2001)