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Peer Debriefing in Qualitative Research: Emerging Operational Models

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Using a qualitative research methodology detailed by Lincoln and Guba, peer debriefing sessions were examined by interviewing education graduate students who completed dissertations and who participated in peer debriefing. The following patterns emerged: (a) Trust was the foundation for selection of the debriefer and the debriefing interaction, (b) the focus for the debriefer and researcher was on methodology, and (c) research skills were continuously developed. Analysis of the data also showed that debriefers worked in pairs or in small groups. Some debriefing groups met for the total time from proposal to dissertation defense, and others began at different stages of the research process. As a result, some groups relied on memory or journal notes for the review of collected data. Implications are included.

Peer debriefing supports the credibility of the data in qualitative research and provides a means toward the establishment of the overall trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In debriefing, a researcher and an impartial peer preplan and conduct extensive discussions about the findings and progress of an investigation. Beginning with the first stages of the inquiry, these discussions include issues related to preliminary data collection and initial analysis as well as the next methodological steps and the concluding analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). The peer asks questions to help the researcher understand how his or her personal perspectives and values affect the findings. Such a questioning approach serves to minimize bias within the inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Peer debriefing contributes to confirming that the findings and the interpretations are worthy, honest, and believable. In this way, it is complementary to other strategies used with qualitative research, including prolonged engagement in the research context, member checks, negative case review, referential adequacy, and triangulation. Besides providing basic methodological support, peer debriefing also may provide a means to help the

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researcher cope with the stress that usually accompanies fieldwork (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; McMillan & Schumacher, 1997; Zigarmi & Zigarmi, 1980).

Lincoln and Guba (1985; Guba & Lincoln, 1989) add more concerning the relationship of the student researcher and debriefer. Early in the implementation of an inquiry, the student researcher and debriefer plan and initiate the ongoing debriefing sessions. Both maintain a reflexive journal that stands as a record for reflection as well as part of an audit of the process and a product of the inquiry. As a technique for establishing credibility in the debriefing sessions, the debriefer and the student researcher explore possible areas of bias that may not be apparent to the serious student who is consumed by the details of the project. Lincoln and Guba (1985; Guba & Lincoln, 1989) also state that the debriefer should be knowledgeable of the area of study, as well as the qualitative methodology, and should be a peer whose input challenges and stimulates exploration of alternatives related to the project.

Debriefing is useful at crucial times during the investigation process (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, the debriefer strives to make the researcher cognizant of personal values and perspectives that may taint or bias the interpretation of the data. As the project progresses, the debriefer probes for possible bias concerning legal, ethical, interpretive, and other developing issues. Next, the debriefer and researcher's sessions provide a risk-free forum to test ideas about emerging themes in the data; the labeling of an emerging theme must survive the test of the debriefer's examination. Then, the sessions offer a time and place to openly discuss the next methodological step in the research project, and the debriefer should stimulate discussions about alternative approaches (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The debriefing sessions can also provide personal support for the lonely business of data gathering in the natural setting. An empathetic peer may help the researcher work through on-site issues or personal conflicts that might create blind spots during any phase of the inquiry. Lincoln and Guba (1985) call this "a sympathetic listening point for personal catharsis" (p. 283).

Denzin (1994) and Greene (1994) reinforce the value of peer debriefing in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Denzin stated that debriefing is one technique that increases "the credibility of a project" (p. 513), and Green called peer debriefing one of the "new procedures" to authenticate researcher interpretation (p. 537).

SAMPLING

The sample was selected with a specific purpose in mind: to gather information about peer debriefing during a qualitative dissertation project.

The respondents have the information concerning the implementation of peer debriefing, which is the focus of this study. The sampling technique might be described as typical because the cases were not seen as special or unusual. Of the 11 debriefing groups examined and of the 13 persons who were interviewed, some nominated other former students known to have participated in peer debriefing sessions. Such a nomination sampling could be described as the snowball technique, except that not every case nominated another case (Bogdan & Biklin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1980).

Peer debriefing is cited in the literature as a technique to maintain credibility and trustworthiness. The literature repeatedly states the value and purposes, describes the interaction, and gives a few examples of debriefing sessions. Given the value of the technique and the brevity of procedural guidance, how are researchers operationalizing this procedure in qualitative research?

FINDINGS

Identification of the debriefer is an initial implementation task for the dissertation student. Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) suggest that the debriefer be a professional outside the context of the fieldwork but someone who has a general understanding of the context so that materials can be discussed and analyzed. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasize that the debriefer "is in every sense the inquirer's peer" (p. 308) and that the debriefer know about the methodological issues and have knowledge of the subject area. The choice of debriefer occurs at proposal writing time for students wishing to maintain sessions for the entire dissertation process.

Choice of Debriefer

All dissertation students in this study chose debriefers with whom a high level of trust had developed over time. This trust grew from association with each other in a variety of situations. Each had grown comfortable with the other through interaction during a wide range of roles and experiences. Debriefers and dissertation students told of being together as classmates, office mates, professional colleagues, coresearchers, copresenters, and friends. Typically, more than two associations were enumerated. The students also chose debriefers with knowledge of the cultural phenomena being studied and persons with a similar background in qualitative methodology. Knowledge of the context and process saved time because detailed explanations were not necessary. Trust played most significantly in the decision because other knowledgeable persons and

professional associates were available but were not considered unless a high level of trust existed.

Although Lincoln and Guba (1985) warned against using members of the dissertation committee as debriefers, one student did ask the chair of the committee. The student and the chair testified that an authoritative, senior relationship did not exist between them because feelings of trust had accumulated in prior social situations as coresearchers and friends. The student insisted that at no time was there a fear to hold back ideas or a fear of negative judgments. The dissertation chair/debriefer stated that extra precaution was taken to maintain an open, trusting, nonjudgmental relationship in which both persons developed alternatives, examined divergent perspectives, and questioned activities.

This feeling of trust created a place and a time for open dialogue about ideas, writing, fears, and frustrations. Shy students would freely suggest possibilities about data and openly examine such possibilities. As the debriefing sessions proceeded, the trust grew. Within this context, students said the following:

- This may be the only place where this kind of encouragement can be found.
- We know how to share, how to dialogue. We had learned over the years; we knew each other.
- Some things you can only say to a peer.
- There was nothing I couldn't discuss.
- I could ask anything.
- My debriefer helped me confirm my ideas by talking through situations with me step by step. Even things that I thought were big mistakes could be talked through. This gave me a nudge to go on.

Dissertation students trusted that the information shared during the sessions would not be discussed outside of the confidential debriefing forum, and the debriefers appeared to uphold this trust and responsibility. Such an assurance supported the integrity of the researchers, protected the anonymity of the respondents, and assured nondisclosure of sensitive subjects that were told to the debriefers. Even after the students had defended the dissertations, the debriefers never revealed details of the research. Debriefers referred to such situations as "sensitive ethics issues" or "concerns for confidentiality." For example, "There was a problem of ethics. We brainstormed alternative approaches to use in the field with respondents and possible consequences concerning this issue. Then [the dissertation student] chose the option that appeared most appropriate." The debriefer never described the ethics problem or the persons involved. This was 3 years after the student had defended the dissertation.

Commitment to the Methodology

Formal debriefing relationships began with thoughtful initial planning. The participants arrived at consensus concerning roles and tasks. Every debriefer and dissertation student described the debriefing meetings as important for the final product of the dissertation. The reason for conducting the sessions was to develop a high-quality dissertation. Most students discussed the use and maintenance of the reflexive journal at this time. Each described the debriefer's role as one that provides a check for bias, tests next steps, and examines analyses. The primary focus of all discussion during the sessions was to support qualitative and/or naturalistic methodology.

Some dissertation students began formal debriefing meetings with other dissertation students at the time of the development of the proposals. After meeting with chairs, the students shared suggestions and discussed how a suggestion might apply to either project. Discussion during debriefing meetings tended to follow the progress of the study, and debriefing sessions consisted of brainstorming alternatives concerning the following: entry issues, building rapport, observation approaches and sites, interview questions, interview schedules, and data gathering with early analysis. When debriefers were also dissertation students, the students looked for similarities and differences at each phase of the studies. For example, entry and rapport building with interviewees at different sites would have interesting contrasts with entry and rapport building for observation in one junior high school. Identifying attributes for comparison added new understandings of both situations.

Other debriefers told of using research methodology literature to test interview questions or to expand interpretative skills for data analysis. For example, one debriefing group applied the activities suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990) to emerging data to develop analytical sensitivity (p. 41). Other authors offer similar methodological suggestions for beginning researchers to develop skills, which could be used in debriefing sessions. For example, Bogdan and Biklen (1992) provide examples of field notes and ways to expand field notes (p. 108) and Miles and Huberman (1984) give questions for reexamination of field notes and early analysis (p. 73).

Typical questions that debriefers asked to check for bias at any stage included, "What are some possible alternative steps?" "What are other ways to state the question?" "Who else might have similar or different information?" "What brought you to this conclusion?" "How do you think the respondent gained this knowledge?" "Did you ever think of . . . ?" "Have you considered . . . ?" "Could you explain . . . ?" Two debriefers told how discussion helped students sort out ethical issues. Debriefers did not give answers but helped the students to evaluate alternatives and choose solutions.

Debriefers described and dissertation students confirmed that mental activity seemed charged or ignited during many discussions. Talking about

issues made each person think of other ideas. The murky became clear and sharp, and new descriptions surfaced. Students believed these results were "born" from the activity of thinking out loud together.

When one debriefer and a dissertation student reached a roadblock, the chair or a member of the committee offered assistance. When the student had not selected an alternative or could not determine the possible consequences of an alternative, more experienced advice was available. When indecision prevented moving ahead with the analysis of the data, it was time to call in the reinforcements. In this case, the peer debriefer and the student agreed help was needed.

Typically, students decided the time and place of the next session at the end of every discussion. If other commitments interfered, the time was adjusted; communications were maintained by telephone. During data gathering, the struggle of balancing personal needs, professional responsibilities, research schedules, and debriefing sessions became hectic. At such hectic times, most students held long discussions on the telephone or at least touched base by telephone with the debriefers. The students interviewed reinforced the idea that the researcher controlled the topic of conversation, time, and place of the meeting. The debriefer stimulated the examination of the topic.

Concurrent Researchers as Debriefers

In some debriefing groups, all of the members were conducting independent, concurrent research projects, but in some groups (pairs), only one person, the dissertation student, had research issues to share. Debriefers who acted solely as a support for the dissertation students commented that the process always contributed new ideas about the phenomena and research endeavors, but participating as a contributor was the most satisfying, which might be similar to what Schratz (1993) calls a sociodynamic situation. Although Schratz distinguishes between the interaction of a research team (in which the team collectively reflects on a shared project), and peer debriefing (in which members collectively reflect on individual projects), the dynamics stimulating mental activity take place in both situations. One student referred to the satisfaction of "reciprocal sharing." For example, the group worked on issues for each person's project, and the results were immediately applied to one project and applied later to another. Assistance and support were given and received by all members. Problem solving on one project often related to another project, so each member had a vested interest in working through problems for the betterment of each project. When students acted as codebriefers, gaining and giving was constant and interactive.

Another member of a dissertation/debriefer team told the story of how the members of the group prepared for meetings with their dissertation

chairs. Each person had a different chair. Before meetings, the group discussed the issues that needed input or approval from the chairs. After the meetings with the chairs, the group pooled the information and discussed how each chair's comments might apply to the other projects.

Personal Support

During the interviews, both the debriefers and dissertation students always mentioned first that peer debriefing supported qualitative methodology, but toward the end of the interviews, the interviewees expressed grateful comments about the personal support given by the debriefers. This support developed over time. As the sessions proceeded, the support just happened or developed because the sessions were going on during stressful and methodologically important times. Some support related to task completion. Students said that the debriefing sessions forced them to get organized and meet deadlines. Others commented that checking methodological steps helped in the overall planning or organization of their projects.

Dissertation students always emphasized encouragement. As students moved from one stage of their projects to another, the debriefers confirmed the progress. One dissertation student said that it was like having a cheerleader who chanted, "Way to go, way to go, next step, next step" (although not necessarily in those words). Brainstorming alternatives for the next methodological step meant getting closer to completion. Encouragement occurred when someone else confirmed the progress and reinforced the student's confidence in moving one step closer to completion.

Besides celebrating the passage of phases during the research, the debriefer was a source of peer recognition. Students made the following comments:

- What a joy to tell the results of an interview and have another person who finds the information interesting.
- How inspiring to share the interpretations of findings and have a peer whom you respect remark on the value of your effort. In fact, to truly mean the remark enough to want to hear how you came to such conclusions.

Students commented that debriefers offered an appreciation for the research findings, written efforts, and idea development. One student remembered the debriefer saying, "I had never thought of this quite like this. I see what you mean." Such acknowledgment from a peer provided recognition for thoughtful work and gave encouragement.

The debriefers also helped some researchers reduce stress by listening to frustrations, which often develop during the research process. Students who gathered data in the field over long periods of time and who collected massive amounts of data told of such frustrations. As the data mounted, the complexity of analysis increased and so did the stress. Sympathetic listening and

talking through the analysis of problems and issues helped. One student commented that help coping with stress made it possible to return to the research site as a participant and help others cope with stress. Another student simply commented that it was nice to have company through the journey.

Transferable Models

Each debriefer and student researcher group had member characteristics different from other groups. As data from interviews, the journal, and documents were examined closely, two models surfaced that may be somewhat transferable to other types of debriefing groups and to other time spans. Although there was variation within all groups, categories clustered around group membership and the length of the debriefing commitment. In the first model, related to membership, the categories that seemed to include all groups were pairs and multiple members of more than two persons. Multiple membership, however, may vary from three to many more members.

The second debriefing model related to time, and the categories were total progress and retrospective analysis. In the total progress category, the groups met from the start to the finish of the dissertation but at different times, for different purposes, and for a different total number of times. In the retrospective analysis category, the groups began meeting during data analysis. Such groups could conceivably begin at any time; for example, a group could start during data collection.

When three or more students in a group had ongoing projects, no member was at the exact point of another member, so the starting and ending points varied among members in a group. This variance related to schedules of completion and helped the students learn from others. For example, one person finished an interview and showed others the transcribed field notes. The others learned about the interview and transcription, which prepared students who were just beginning to interview.

In the total progress group, the debriefing began with proposal writing and ended at the final defense of the dissertation. In each session, credibility checks were conducted upon which subsequent checks were built, and the checking continued throughout the inquiry. Discussion dominated the sessions, although early sessions and final sessions included the review of some written material, for example, reviewing field notes, checking the logic of categories, sharing graphic representations of data, or tracing the development of conclusions.

In retrospective analysis, debriefing sessions began formally near the end of the research project. Discussion during the sessions centered on explaining and defending the logic of categories, themes, and sources that determined the research design and conclusions. The students helped each other step away from the data and examine possible bias during data analysis. For the

most part, these dissertation students depended on recall or referred to the reflexive journal to retrace steps and patterns of logic. Members reflected on similarities and differences within and between projects. Other activities developed by the dissertation students included teaching each other possible contents for dissertation chapters, comparing advice given by different advisors, and identifying report styles for the findings. Although discussion dominated most of the sessions, these students also gave editing assistance during the writing phase.

A Developmental Process

Peer debriefing provided research experiences that were transferred to other research projects. In the initial debriefing experience, a student of qualitative research learned ways to ask questions about the developing project. The student gained confidence in helping others and encouraging others. From previous practice and experience, the debriefer learned to recognize when to work out and talk through issues concerning bias, methodological planning, and data analysis.

Such experience, coupled with the completion of a dissertation, gave special skills that were invaluable for coaching others. In fact, some persons were chosen as debriefers on the basis of these skills or experiences. A student commented, "My project benefited from her dissertation and previous debriefing experience." One person was recommended for debriefing by a chair because the chair believed these kinds of experiences would serve the new project.

Peer debriefing provided continuous professional development for some of the interviewees. First, some debriefers continued to help dissertation students and gained knowledge about all phases of the project: design, entry, data gathering, analysis, and other issues unique to that project. Second, one debriefer developed a project with a colleague who also became a codebriefer. A working knowledge of qualitative research, which developed through previous experience and through collaborative problem solving, was applied again in this new association.

The illness of a debriefer required one dissertation student to change debriefers during the dissertation process. The debriefer had completed basic and field methods courses for qualitative research and had completed the dissertation. The dissertation student had completed only an introductory course in naturalistic inquiry but had not taken the advanced field methods course. The experienced debriefer helped the student develop skills for note taking and compiling field notes. The written field notes were shared with the debriefer who wrote questions in the margins. The debriefer also shared examples of the detailed field notes needed for qualitative research. With this help, the student's field notes became more detailed and descriptive. Early in

the fieldwork, this first debriefer became ill, and a second debriefer took her place. The second debriefer had completed the introductory and the advanced field methods courses as well as her own dissertation. This debriefer understood the problems associated with the "mountains of data" that accumulate during long periods of time in the field and could help organize and logically develop a management plan as the information increased. In addition, the debriefer had constructed graphic presentations for her own dissertation; she was able to provide a sample, which showed the dissertation student how to develop a similar representation of the data to show connections and the flow of ideas.

In one peer debriefing group, no professor in that particular department had a background in qualitative research, and the students had no qualitative researchers on their dissertation committees. Two students had taken two courses in qualitative research, and the third student had taken one course. The students helped each other, read literature together to clarify questions, discussed ways all three projects were alike and different, and sought help outside the department when necessary. They relied heavily on each other's experience during each debriefing session.

As these students completed the first debriefing experience and their dissertations, a cadre of knowledgeable researchers who helped others evolved. In departments in which there are few professors to guide qualitative researchers, peer debriefing provided training and practice for persons to develop skills that would support other dissertation students. Some students who finished course work but who still had fieldwork and the writing of the dissertation to complete were able to find debriefers who were experienced and who could provide valuable methodological support. The knowledge and skills that developed during peer debriefing equipped a cadre of student researchers to support qualitative methods.

Themes

Themes developed from analysis of the data from interviews of dissertation students and debriefers, from documents, and from a reflexive journal. The following connections or patterns emerged.

First, as noted in the findings, trust was the foundation for initiating and sustaining the debriefing process. Dissertation students found persons with whom talk was easy, free, and unrestrained. Students trusted that sessions were confidential. Trust made such open and free discussion possible. Confident in this trusting relationship, students shared first drafts of written work. The students exposed their feelings, failings, creative work, and germinating ideas to these trusted peers. The dissertation students trusted the debriefers to remain committed to supporting the methods and committed to the role of an empathetic helper who did not force personal perspectives but assisted

in the development of alternatives. Persons feel such trust because there is no fear of being hurt personally or professionally.

Second, the betterment of the final product was the primary focus for all debriefers and dissertation students. Each person in the peer debriefing team was committed to his or her debriefing role of monitoring bias. The primary topic of discussion in all interviews was how much the sessions stimulated creative thought, which contributed to the overall goodness of the product. Dissertation students talked at length about the development of interview ideas, questions the debriefers asked during data analysis, and other support for the research process. The debriefers talked about the importance of the role of the debriefer in relation to bias and also how their skills in taking field notes or in analysis gave special support to the overall effort.

Third, peer debriefing was a developmental process. Skills for debriefing were learned, developed, and applied within groups, and skills were practiced as students became debriefers for others. The joint striving (Wasser & Bresler, 1996) or collective reflection (Schatz, 1993) provided time and practice for skills that were transferable to other group learning or peer debriefing situations. Every debriefing session provided an opportunity to learn about new research findings and helped to develop understanding concerning research processes and practices. The students confirmed that these experiences were transferred to other situations and research projects.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

From the descriptions of students' implementation of peer debriefing and from the themes that emerged from the experience, several implications are suggested.

First, the credibility of the research findings is an important indicator of the quality of a research project. Because the reader of a report judges the credibility of the findings from procedures and processes such as peer debriefing—which are maintained during data collection, data analysis, and interpretation—researchers should fully describe the debriefing experience. From this study, many variations emerged, and more variations seem possible. There may be as many variations as there are research questions. Because models appear to vary in structure and process and because credibility is an important research issue, researchers should fully describe debriefing so that research consumers have criteria to judge the processes within the research report that contribute to the credibility of the findings. Researchers should include when the sessions began, who the debriefer was and why this particular person was chosen, and how often the sessions were held. The researcher should note any special or outstanding contribution the debriefer gave to the sessions.

Second, the peer debriefing process has value-added payoffs during the dissertation project and later, as well as being a technique that contributes to the credibility of research findings. Debriefing offers opportunities for continuous professional development at any stage of a career and provides a way to remain actively involved in research. Providing debriefing assistance to another colleague enables a professional to gain knowledge about a subject area or new methodology or both. As the debriefer works with a researcher, the credibility of the project is supported, and additionally, the debriefer closely observes the development of one more research project: new issues of entry, data gathering, data analysis, and reporting.

Third, because every research question fits a specialized design and because the design develops along an individualized time line, there are no blueprints for procedures and activities, only guides. A lock-step list of procedures is not possible with so many possible approaches. People with diverse educational backgrounds and experiences develop questions for research that are varied and that require varied and creative ways to explore and report. Such variance defies any set time line for entry, data collection, data analysis, and report styles. The peer debriefing experience of others can offer guidelines that are transferable to other situations, but no more.

Peer debriefing is one procedure to build credibility for the research project. It is a procedure for credibility that enriches the participants and supports the qualitative methodology. Through this forum of free, open discussion and reflection made possible by trust, task groups (such as those of debriefers) reflect on data, ideas, and method. Learning or a way of knowing develops as such groups try to make meaning from the data, ideas, and methods (Schon, 1987). This conversational "place" offers a rich resource for collaborative learning about research and specific research questions (Baskett & Marsick, 1992). Students who carefully followed the qualitative procedures detailed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) in *Naturalistic Inquiry* implemented peer debriefing to monitor bias and affirm the credibility of the findings. The dissertation students and debriefers in this study continued to debrief other researchers and to employ debriefing procedures on collaborative research projects after the first debriefing experience, which will most likely be the same for future students who study this methodology.

Peer debriefing offers opportunities to experience and to practice group learning processes such as collective reflection and collaborative decision making, which can be transferred to other problem-solving issues and learning groups. As professions continue to employ collaborative techniques for research and other problem-solving activities (Schon, 1983; Schratz, 1993; Wasser & Bresler, 1996), participants of the peer debriefing process will have skills that can be applied to new situations.

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