Criteria for Conducting and Evaluating Critical Interpretive Research in the IS Field

Par : Marlei Pozzebon

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Marlei Pozzebon, Professeure adjointe
Service de l’enseignement de technologies de l’information
HEC Montréal
3000, chemin de la Côte-Ste-Catherine
Montréal, Québec, Canada H3T 2A7
tél : (514) 340-6754
fax : (514) 340-6132
marlei.pozzebon@hec.ca

Prière de faire parvenir toute correspondance à :
marlei.pozzebon@hec.ca
Abstract

The collection, analysis and interpretation of empirical materials are always conducted within some broader understanding of what constitutes legitimate inquiry and valid knowledge (Doolin, 1998). In the Information Systems (IS) field, there are well-known and widely accepted methodological principles consistent with the conventions of positivism. However, the same is not yet true of interpretive research. The emergence of interpretivism in IS research was advocated by Walsham (1995) and corroborated by a series of special issues in outstanding IS journals. An example of the effort to advance the legitimacy of studies grounded in an interpretive position is the set of principles suggested by Klein and Myers (1999). Their principles are consistent with a considerable part of the philosophical base of literature on interpretivism, offering guidelines for the conduct and evaluation of interpretive research and, hence, meaningfully contributing to the improvement of IS research. However, the particular set of principles they have suggested applies mostly to hermeneutics, and not all interpretive studies follow a hermeneutical philosophical base. They recommended that other researchers, representing other forms of interpretivism, suggest additional principles. A number of IS interpretive researchers have started to use Golden-Biddle and Locke’s (1993) three criteria for ethnographic writing as the basis for evaluating their own research. This paper follows in this vein, advocating the timely emergence of a critical interpretive perspective in IS research and pressing the argument that an extended version of GB&L (Golden-Biddle and Locke) criteria is not only appropriate but comprehensive as an initial framework for conducting and evaluating critical interpretive research.

Résumé

La collecte, l'analyse et l'interprétation de matériaux empiriques sont toujours effectuées au sein d'une plus vaste compréhension de ce qui constitue une enquête légitime et une connaissance valide (Doolin, 1998). Dans le domaine des systèmes de l'information (SI), il y a des principes méthodologiques bien connus et largement admis, qui sont conformes aux conventions du positivisme. Cependant, ce n'est pas encore le cas pour la recherche interprétative. L'émergence de l'interprétivisme dans le domaine des SI a été préconisée par Walsham (1995) et corroborée par une série d'éditions spéciales dans d'excellentes publications du domaine des SI. Un exemple de l'effort fait pour avancer la légitimité des études fondées sur la position interprétative est l'ensemble des principes proposés par Klein et Myers (1999). Leurs principes sont en accord avec une partie importante de la base philosophique de la littérature sur l'interprétivisme, offrant des directives pour la conduite et l'évaluation de la recherche interprétative et, par conséquent, contribuant clairement à l'amélioration de la recherche des SI. Cependant, l'ensemble précis de principes qu'ils ont suggérés s'applique surtout à l'herméneutique, et les études interprétatives ne suivent pas toutes une telle base philosophique. Ils ont recommandé que d'autres chercheurs, représentant d'autres formes d'interprétivisme, suggèrent des principes additionnels. Un certain nombre de chercheurs interprétatifs en SI ont commencé à employer les trois critères de Golden-Biddle et de Locke (1993) pour l'écriture ethnographique comme base d'évaluation de leurs propres recherches. Cet article poursuit cette démarche, préconisant l'apparition opportune d'une perspective interprétative critique en recherche en SI et soutenant l'argument selon lequel une version étendue des critères de GB&L (Golden-Biddle et Locke) est non seulement appropriée, mais complète comme premier cadre pour conduire et évaluer la recherche crítico-interprétative.

Mot-clés

Critical interpretive research; research criteria; intensive research; qualitative research; research tradition, criticality, reflexivity, plausibility, authenticity.
Introduction

The motivation behind this work came of a need to justify the non-orthodox perspective regarding a prevailing view in North-American universities that I had put forth when proposing my thesis, in July 2002. After presenting my critical interpretive viewpoint - a combination of structuration theory and critical discourse analysis - to my committee, I found myself obligated to corroborate the “validity” of my work when finally defending the thesis. As a result, during the months following my thesis proposal defense, I compiled interpretive and critical literature, looking for criteria for “judging the quality” of this type of research. The purpose of this text is to present the provisional ideas I developed during this time and to discuss how to evaluate research carried out from a perspective that I believe is still emergent: critical interpretive.

There are several reasons why the IS field would benefit from an updated review and discussion of the existing criteria for evaluating qualitative research. The use of qualitative methods in IS research is growing rapidly. “As the focus of IS research shifts from technological to managerial and organizational issues,” qualitative research methods become increasingly useful”, Michael Myers argued when announcing the creation of a special section within MISQ, Discovery’s worldwide web archive to support qualitative research (Myers, 1997, p: 241). Such increased interest in qualitative research methods is triggering the need for discussions on the criteria for evaluating qualitative research, “qualitative” not being unambiguously understood since qualitative does not necessarily mean intensive, or interpretive. Behind the term “qualitative”, a variety of philosophical assumptions and research methods co-exist.

Despite the variety of approaches, most of the existing guidelines regarding the evaluation of IS qualitative research up to the 1990s are inspired by underlying philosophical assumptions espoused by a positivistic view (Benbasat et al., 1987; Lee, 1989; Yin, 1994). Markus and Lee (1999) focus our attention on the danger, still present, of judging interpretive research using positivist criteria, and vice-versa. Recent initiatives have emerged suggesting a set of principles for the conduct and evaluation of qualitative research from an interpretive standpoint (Klein and Myers, 1999; Schultze, 2000). I could not find explicit guidelines for evaluating IS critical research. This was corroborated by Klein’s assertion that “if one asks which methods can be taught to aspiring critical researchers, one draws almost a blank card. There appears to be no research methods literature on critical research” (1999, p: 21).

In keeping with my research into critical and interpretive views, I decided to review and compile a set of principles for IS researchers that, in addition to taking an interpretive view, seek to develop a critical appreciation of the way in which information technology is involved in organizational activity. Briefly, this paper has two goals. First, to reiterate the value of a critical interpretive perspective to social investigation, in which social phenomena involving IS or IT are

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1 Actually, even purely “technological” issues are also managerial and organizational. Existing literature on IS tends to separate technical and social aspects (McGivern, 1983); technical and values issues (Markus and Bjorn-Andersen, 1987); and methodologies that need to integrate social and technical realms (Mumford, 1980). Such a distinction between the technical and the social aspects of technology hides underlying mechanisms and exercises of power through which the introduction of new IT is a tool to put into operation specific visions of resource allocation. As argued by Bloomfield and Danieli, 1995), socio-political and technical dimensions cannot be separated: they are inextricably intertwined.

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included. Second, to review and extend GB&L criteria\(^2\), presenting the results as a step forward in drawing up a set of principles for guiding and evaluating critical interpretive research. By “criteria”, I do not mean a set of fixed standards. Any notion of criteria should be seen as enabling conditions that should only be applied contextually. The terrain upon which judgments are made is continually shifting, and should be characterized by openness, rather than stability and closure (Garrat and Hodkinson, 1998).

**Why critical interpretive?**

My point of departure was the ISWorld.Net special section “Qualitative Research in Information Systems” edited by Michel Myers, which aims to provide qualitative researchers in IS with useful information on the conduct, evaluation and publication of qualitative research. This site, and the collection of references it offers, is of great value to researchers seeking to follow interpretive and/or critical work, helping them to legitimize their choices in the eyes of the mainstream IS community. Myers starts by recalling that, in the same way that different people have different beliefs and values, there are different ways of understanding what research is. All research is based on some underlying assumptions about what constitutes “valid” research and which research methods are appropriate (Myers, 1997). These beliefs and values in research have been called *paradigms of inquiry* (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994), *theoretical traditions* (Patton, 1990) or, simply, *orientations* (Tesch, 1990).

In the IS field, qualitative research has been classified according to three well-known research approaches and assumptions: positivist, interpretive, and critical (Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991). Positivists generally assume that reality is objectively given and can be described by measurable properties which are independent of the observer (researcher) and his or her instruments. Positivist studies generally attempt to test theory, in an effort to increase the predictive understanding of phenomena. Interpretive (or constructivist\(^3\)) researchers assume that reality may be assessed only through social constructions such as language and shared meanings. Interpretive studies generally attempt to understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them. Interpretive research does not predefine dependent and independent variables, but focuses on the full complexity of human sense-making as the situation emerges. Critical researchers assume that social reality is historically constituted and that it is produced and reproduced by people. The main task of critical research is seen as being one of social critique, whereby the restrictive and alienating conditions of the status quo are brought to light. Critical research focuses on the oppositions, conflicts and contradictions in contemporary society, and seeks to be emancipatory i.e. to help eliminate the causes of alienation and domination.

\(^2\) In this text, I will use GB&L criteria to refer to Golden-Biddle and Locke’s three criteria for evaluating ethnography, published in 1993.

\(^3\) According to Schwandt in the Handbook of Qualitative Research edited by Denzin & Lincoln (1994), constructivism is synonymous with interpretivism. Encompassing a loosely coupled family of methodological and philosophical persuasions, these terms are best regarded as sensitizing concepts. Proponents of these approaches share the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it (Constructivism can be seen as a theory about knowledge and learning. Drawing on a synthesis of current work in cognitive psychology, philosophy, and anthropology, the theory defines knowledge as temporary, developmental, socially and culturally mediated, and thus, non-objective. Interpretivism can be seen as an epistemological dimension, where “reality is...constructed by knower” Source: Allen et al. (2000): [http://www.eduquery.com/construct.htm](http://www.eduquery.com/construct.htm)
Although the paradigm debate is starting to provoke a sense of fatigue in many of us, or simply is “not a very interesting way of thinking about research program differences”\(^4\) (Deetz, 1996, p. 194), classifications according to distinct philosophical assumptions remain useful in helping researchers position themselves clearly and argue for the value of their work. Different designations have emerged, such as post-positivism and post-modernism, showing that the struggle among research groups for identity protection and legitimacy has changed its labels, but not its nature.

Recent theoretical discussions within the IS field have reinforced the benefit of combining different perspectives, especially the interpretive and the critical. For instance, Klein (1999) put forward the “full development of all the potential relationships between interpretivism and critical theory as one of the most fruitful avenues for future research” (p: 22). Similarly, Doolin (1998) points towards a critical interpretive perspective, arguing that interpretive researchers need to consciously adopt a critical and reflective stance in relation to the role that IT plays in maintaining social orders and social relations in organizations. Walsham advanced a similar position in his leading book about interpretivism in IS research (1993). The research he describes has elements of both the interpretive and critical traditions and, thus, does not fit neatly into either of these categories. Indeed, he argues that constitutive process theories, such as structuration, are “an attempt to dissolve the boundaries between such traditions, in emphasizing not only the importance of subjective meaning for the individual actor, but also the social structures which condition and enable such meanings and are constituted by them” (Walsham, 1993, p. 246).

Viewed separately, interpretivism and critical theory are far from being homogenous schools of thought. Klein and Myers (2001) recognize at least two different lines of philosophical thinking in the foundations of the interpretive stream of thinking: (a) the first school of thought focuses on human intentions in the use of language and various methods for understanding the meaning of language (such as speech act theory, conversation and discourse analysis); (b) the second school of thought focuses on subjective consciousness, i.e., general conditions of being human and expressing meaning (this school is closely linked to phenomenology and hermeneutics). This brings our attention to the fact that, even within interpretivism, not all studies should be evaluated according to the same criteria.

Regarding critical theory, its foundations are often associated with The Institute for Social Research, i.e., the Frankfurt School. Early critical theory has been characterized as radical social theory (or sociology), a sophisticated form of cultural criticism combining Freudian and Marxist ideas, and a utopian style of philosophical speculation deeply rooted in Jewish and German idealism (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2001). Other authors recognize two distinct schools of critical theory: the Frankfurt School of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Fromm; and the contemporary critical theory of Habermas. Although these two approaches differ, the differences are seen as “subtle” (Steffy and Grimes, 1986).

\(^4\) Deetz (1996) refers to the subjective and objective debate.

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Even though calling for a union of critical research and interpretivism, Klein is “very skeptical if current attempts to integrate the two are founded on a clear understanding of their intrinsic connections” (1999, p: 22). He argues that critical theory is much more theory-oriented than interpretivism, and that critical theory carries a strong legacy of Habermas’ critical social theory. Yet he acknowledges a theoretical link between critical and interpretive research throughout hermeneutics: critical research emphasizes communicative orientation, which implies interest in human understanding, which in turn implies hermeneutics, which is the heart of interpretivism.

I do not fully agree with all of Klein’s assertions, especially that without an explicit reconstruction of the conceptual foundation, the union of interpretivism and critical research is merely “a matter of convenience, if not desperation (...)” (1999, p. 22). First, I agree with Doolin, who argues that to adopt a critical view does not necessarily mean to deeply rely on the critical theory of Habermas and of the Frankfurt School. Being critical may simply imply probing taken-for-granted assumptions inherent in the status quo by being critically reflective, while utilizing whatever theoretical framework is chosen (Doolin, 1998). In combining structuration theory with critical discourse analysis in my own research, I learned from one of the leading figures in critical discourse analysis, Fairclough, that the term critical theory can be used in a “generic sense for any theory concerned with critique of ideology and the effects of domination, and not specifically for the critical theory of the Frankfurt School” (1995, p: 20). We can use the term critical without linking it to Habermas or the Frankfurt School.

Second, I believe that to be critically interpretive does not require “proper” theoretical justifications because both approaches might just be seen as *intrinsically related*. Interpretive or constructivist approaches aim to produce fine-grained explorations of the way in which a particular social reality has been constructed. Critical approaches aim to focus more explicitly on the dynamics of power, knowledge and ideology that surround social practices. Far from being incompatible, the boundary between interpretive and critical can be seen as a matter of degree: many constructivist studies are sensitive to power, while critical studies include a concern for the processes of social construction that underlie the phenomena of interest (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). I conclude that IS research may be interpretive and critical without any inherent inconsistency. A number of IS researchers would suggest that it is often hard to avoid being critical when conducting interpretive research (Walsham, 1993). Being critically interpretive about IT means that, in addition to understanding the context and process of IS from different interpretations arising from social interactions, researchers will avoid unreflective accounts by connecting these interpretations to broader considerations of social power and control (Doolin, 1998).

The connection between interpretation and critical interpretation is nicely illustrated by Alvesson and Skoldberg’s (2000) understanding of the different levels of reflection during empirical work (Table 1). Empirical research starts from the data-constructing level, where researchers make observations, talk to people and create their own pictures of the empirical phenomena. Preliminary interpretations are developed, the degree of which is often relatively low or somewhat unclear to the researchers themselves. This material is then subjected to further interpretation of a more systematic kind, guided by ideas that can be related to theoretical frameworks or to other frames of reference. Ideally, researchers would allow the empirical material to inspire, develop and reshape theoretical ideas. In fact, it is often the case that
theoretical views allow the consideration of different meanings in empirical material. “The researcher’s repertoire of interpretations limits the possibilities of making certain interpretations” (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000, p. 250). The interpretation level that follows the interaction with empirical material is a step toward critical interpretation. Critical thinking stems from interpretive reflection. Similar reasoning can be applied to understand reflexivity.

Table 1 - Four Levels of Interpretations (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect / level</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interaction with empirical material</td>
<td>Accounts in interviews, observations of situations and other empirical materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>Underlying meanings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical interpretation</td>
<td>Ideology, power, social reproduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection on text production and language use</td>
<td>Own text, claims to authority, selectivity of the voices represented in the text.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do research methods in interpretive and critical research differ?

Just as there are various philosophical perspectives that can inform qualitative research, so too are there various qualitative research methods. As a matter of fact, each research method represents a strategy of inquiry that moves from underlying philosophical assumptions to research design and empirical material interaction (Myers, 1997). Viewed broadly, method is a mode and a framework for engaging with empirical material; method connects theoretical frameworks with the production and productive use of empirical material; method is a reflexive activity where theoretical, political and ethical issues are central (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). Of course the choice of the research method influences the way in which the researcher collects data. Different research methods also imply different skills, assumptions and research practices. The “problem” related to the choice of a research method is not so much one that takes into account how many methods we employ or if those are of a quantitative or qualitative nature, but rather one that regards the attempt to achieve coherence over the whole process (Schultze, 2000).

Given their concern with understanding actors’ meanings, interpretive researchers have often preferred meaning-oriented methods, which differ from positivist researchers’ preference for measurement-oriented methods. In particular, from an interpretive perspective, data collection and representation have been accomplished through interviewing (Spradley, 1979), ethnography (Van Maanen, 1988), participant observation (Myers, 1999) and case study (Walsham, 1993). Actually, Walsham (1993) puts forward a view that the most appropriate method for conducting IS empirical research in the interpretive tradition is the in-depth case study. In terms of data analysis, the methods applied most often are conversational, textual, grounding and expansion analyses (Gephart, 1999).

Regarding critical research, the methodological debate is quite unclear. Myers (1999) puts forward research action as one of critical researchers’ preferred methodological approaches. Klein (1999) not only argues that there appears to be no research methods literature on critical research, but also that this lack of a recognized stock of critical methods provides the primary
motivation for critical researchers to borrow interpretive approaches to data collection. Critical researchers often borrow methods like field research, historical analysis and textual analysis from interpretive research, but utilize them in a context where theoretical ideas are used to encourage political action (Gephart, 1999). The distinctions between critical research and interpretivism most clearly are not methodological in nature – both look for meaning-oriented methods – but are related to the recurrent commitment, or lack thereof, to critique of ideology, domination and status quo.

In my experience conducting doctoral research from a critical interpretive perspective, I found in critical discourse analysis (CDA) a powerful methodology and perspective for studying social phenomena that involves ways of thinking about discourse (conceptual elements) and ways of treating discourse as data (methodological elements) which is quite distinct from most qualitative approaches (Hardy, 2001; Wood and Krieger, 1998). CDA, which has a long history in sociolinguistics (Titscher et al., 2000), is beginning to attract interest in organization studies (Grant et al. 2001; Phillips and Hardy, 2002), and can be seen as emergent in the IS field as well³ (Alvarez, 2001, 2002; Heracleous and Barret, 2001). CDA proved to be an example of a compromise between my interpretive and critical claims. On one hand, CDA reflects the constructivist epistemology underlying my research project. In order to explore the discursive production of aspects of social reality, discourse analysis is fundamentally interpretive (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). On the other hand, because its techniques uncover multiple meanings and representations⁶, and highlight multiple voices and perspectives, CDA becomes very helpful in connecting the discourses of different actors to broader considerations of their social context.

Evolving criteria for evaluating qualitative research

In his article about how to evaluate “good” qualitative research in health care, Devers (1999) stresses two aspects. First, qualitative and quantitative research are often associated with different paradigms: quantitative research is characterized as positivistic, deductive, hypothesis-driven, particularistic, variable-based, objective and outcome-oriented, while qualitative research is characterized as phenomenological, theory-building, holistic, case-based, subjective, and process-oriented. Second, despite these ontological and epistemological differences, many practitioners of qualitative research have adopted criteria rooted in the positivistic paradigm, emphasizing the validity of their methods and the various strategies they have developed to minimize bias and subjectivity. Although not all authors would agree with such a drastic distinction between approaches to research and paradigms, most would concur that the historic use of positivistic criteria for evaluating qualitative research reflects the dominance of quantitative research logic in certain social science disciplines, the IS field included.

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³ The theme of the IFIP WG 8.2 Working Conference, Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain, 12-14 December 2002, was Organizational Discourse about Information Technology.

⁶ Wood and Kroger (2000) provide a useful comparison between CDA and other iterative qualitative techniques like grounded theory, which often hold a systematic, hierarchical and categorical approach, and are inclined to see the narratives, texts or stories gathered for analysis as representing some “underlying thematic structure”. CDA is useful when we are not interested in working with exhaustive categories that could be reduced to a comprehensive collection of representative ones or when we want to avoid taking categories for granted. When we are interested in treating narratives differently (e.g., looking for arguments that have multiple interpretations, those with defensive arguments, things that are unexpected, what is missing, etc.) and in identifying some of the ways that people can use these narratives and stories to bring about certain outcomes, CDA emerges as especially appropriate.

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During the 1980s, a number of qualitative researchers advocated a new set of criteria more appropriate to the uniqueness of the qualitative paradigm. The emergence of the philosophical position known as “post-positivism” led to the development of “slightly” modified positivist criteria that were “more in alignment with the worldview of qualitative research” (Devers, 1999, p. 1163). Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose four criteria that can be thought of as equivalent to internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity. Respecting these four criteria would guarantee the trustworthiness of findings from studies using qualitative methods. In addition, they propose to assess research in terms of authenticity (Gephart, 1999). Post-positivist criteria also often include the concept of transferability, which corresponds to the crucial positivist criterion of generalizability.

Table 2 - Positivist and Post-Positivist Criteria for Evaluating Research (Devers, 1999)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positivist criteria</th>
<th>Post-positivist criteria</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>♦ Internal validity: the degree to which findings correctly map the phenomenon in question;</td>
<td>♦ Credibility: the “truth” of the findings, as viewed through the eyes of those being observed or interviewed and within the context in which the research is carried out;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>♦ External validity: the degree to which findings can be generalized to other settings similar to the one in which the study occurred;</td>
<td>♦ Transferability: the extent to which findings can be transferred to other setting (similar contexts);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>♦ Reliability: the extent to which findings can be replicated or reproduced by another investigator;</td>
<td>♦ Dependability: the extent to which the research would produce similar or consistent findings if carried out as described;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>♦ Objectivity: the extent to which findings are free from bias.</td>
<td>♦ Confirmability: researchers need to provide evidence that corroborates the findings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 summarizes the criteria traditionally used for evaluating research from positivist and post-positivist perspectives. It is noteworthy that several interpretivists argue that the post-positivist criteria are essentially “neo” positivist in nature, a sort of “realism reclothed”. Because they parallel traditional criteria, Lincoln and Guba’s rejection of objectivity and value neutrality would not be as complete as it was intended to be.

The publication of Klein and Myers’ paper is a response to the call to “discuss explicitly the criteria for judging qualitative, case and interpretive research in information systems” (Klein and Myers, 1999, p. 68). They propose a set of principles derived primarily from anthropology, phenomenology, and hermeneutics (Table 3), acknowledging that other forms of interpretivism also exist. The authors also discuss the suitability of a set of principles, arguing that “some authors may feel that, in proposing a set of principles for conducting and evaluating interpretive

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7 Such a discussion is developed in depth in Garratt and Hodkinson (1998).
studies, we are going too far because we are violating the emergent nature of interpretive research, while others may think just the opposite” (p: 68). Their guess is that it is better to have some principles than to have none at all. Garrat and Hodkinson (1998) would add that although no prespecified criteria can ensure universally valid judgments about any type of research, writing about the ways in which our research can be judged helps “refine and develop out thinking about what doing and judging research entails” (p: 535). In addition, any notion of criteria should be applied contextually and placed continually at a risk!

Table 3 - Interpretive Criteria for Evaluating Hermeneutic Research

- The principle of the **hermeneutic circle**
- The principle of **contextualization**
- The principle of **interaction between researchers and subjects**
- The principle of **abstraction and generalization**
- The principle of **dialogic reasoning**
- The principle of **multiple interpretations**
- The principle of **suspicion**

Accordingly, the principles Klein and Myers set forth are not to be mechanistically applied but are open to lively debate about interpretive research standards. Several IS researchers have relied on some of Klein and Myers’ principles to validate their qualitative research. Davidson (2002), Gallivan (2001), Hanseth, Ciborra and Braa (2001), Henfridson and Holmstrom (2002), and Trauth and Jessup (2000) are some examples.

Because their set of principles applies mostly to hermeneutics and not all interpretive studies follow a *hermeneutical* philosophical base, Klein and Myers recommend that other IS authors, representing other forms of interpretivism, suggest additional principles. For instance, Gopal and Prasad (2000) propose a set of criteria particularly adapted for evaluating *symbolic integrationist* work, arguing that this research differs from other social constructionist genres, notably hermeneutics and ethnography. A number of other IS interpretive researchers have used GB&L’s three criteria for *ethnographic writing* (which does not exclude hermeneutics), first published in 1993, as the basis for evaluating their research. Examples are Davidson (2002), Schultze (2000), Trauth and Jessup (2000), and Walsham and Sahay (1999).

In the positivist tradition, it is assumed that adherence to the established standards of methodological rigor that promote *accuracy, universality* and researcher *independence* will yield facts that are *true* and able to speak for themselves. In the interpretive tradition, readers interpret texts *actively* by disclosing meanings in the text *in light of* their own background and experiences. In both traditions, writing practices should demonstrate consistency with the audience’s expectations regarding method and findings. The findings we produce as qualitative researchers are rhetorical, but the creation of *quantitative significance* is as rhetorical as *qualitative interpretation*. Both involve active reader participation (GB&L, 1993; Gephart,
1999). The key difference is that this active and rhetorical relationship between researchers and audience is *purposely assumed* by interpretive researchers: understanding comes from the meaning of contextually grounded experiences from the viewpoint of the actors. “As ethnographers, we position ourselves as human researchers to understand others and to understand ourselves differently and better; to become more effective readers of the lives of others and of ourselves.” (GB&L, 1983, p. 99).

Writing research texts is about *convincing and persuading audiences* and about *building authorial authority* (GB&L, 1993). Van Maanen (1979) fully agrees with the rhetorical effort characterizing the communication between researchers and their audience: “in large measure, our task is rhetorical, for we attempt to convince others that we’ve discovered something of note, made unusual sense of something, or in weak form, simply described something accurately”. Similarly, Silverman (1997, p: 25) asks: “have the researchers demonstrated successfully why we should believe them?” In short, convincing is presented as paramount for interpretive researchers relying on ethnography.

Relying on such an interpretive point of view, GB&L tried to answer a central question from qualitative researchers: “How does ethnographic work convince?” Positioning the *convincingness* of ethnographic texts as central, GB&L proposed three evaluation criteria: *authenticity, plausibility and criticality* (1993). Table 4 shows the three criteria in the first column. The second column presents two additional criteria, recently proposed by Schultze (2000), for evaluating research that, in addition to relying on ethnography, provide a confessional, self-reflexive and self-revealing account of the researcher’s experience.

Table 4 - Interpretive Criteria for Evaluating Ethnography and Reflexive Research

| Interpretive criteria (for ethnography) (GB&L, 1993) | ♦ **Authenticity:** Was the researcher there?  
♦ **Plausibility:** Does the history make sense?  
♦ **Criticality:** Does the text activate readers to re-examine assumptions that underlie their work? |
| Interpretive criteria (for confessional research) (Schultze, 2000) | ♦ **Self-revealing writing:** Does the text reveal personal details about the ethnographer?  
♦ **Interlacing “actual” and confessional content:** Is autobiographical material interlaced with “actual” ethnographic material?  
♦ **Reflexivity:** Does the author reveal his/her personal role and his/her selection of the voices/actors represented in the text? (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) |

Criteria for Evaluating Critical Interpretive IS Research

GB&L’s (1993) and Schultze’s (2000) criteria are based on *ethnography*. Walsham put forward *in-depth case study* as the methodological vehicle *par excellence* to carry out IS interpretive research, as he deems it appropriate “for the view of the nature of knowledge embedded in a broadly interpretive philosophy, which emphasizes the need of detailed understanding of human meanings in context” (1993, p. 247). Walsham argues that the approach to field research for the
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case studies largely derives from the ethnographic research tradition, which leads me to conclude that we can differentiate in-depth case study and ethnography as a matter of degree. This opens the possibility of adopting GB&L’s criteria for evaluating in-depth case study and other forms of intensive research. Given the lack of other studies (and especially IS studies) suggesting criteria for evaluating interpretive research that it is not necessarily of hermeneutic orientation, I propose to review and extend GB&L’s criteria to ethnographic work as the basis for evaluating the quality of intensive IS research studies, especially critical interpretive research. In addition to reviewing “authenticity” as appropriate when the fieldwork is intensive but not necessarily ethnographic, I posit “criticality” as necessary, not optional criterion as proposed by GB&L, when the researcher, in addition to being interpretive, is also critical. I also propose “reflexivity” as an important aspect (although optional) in intensive research.

According to GB&L (1993), the two first criteria, authenticity and plausibility, are seen as essential to any ethnography. The addition of criticality characterizes the emergence of a critical interpretive work. The two last criteria, as proposed by Schultze (2000), reveal the reflexivity that characterizes works like confessional research and several variants of poststructural and postmodern studies. Reflexive accounts show a kind of awareness of the ambiguity of language and its limited capacity to convey knowledge of a purely empirical reality, and an awareness of the rhetorical nature of ways of dealing with this issue (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). The “level” of interpretation (interpretation, critical interpretation, reflexive interpretation) each work of empirical research achieves depends, essentially, on each researcher’s assumptions and purposes.

Table 5 – Criteria for Critical Interpretive Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Alvesson and Skoldberg’s 4 Levels of Interpretations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity &amp; Plausibility</td>
<td>Interaction with empirical material &amp; Interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticality</td>
<td>Critical interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflexivity</td>
<td>Reflection on text production and language use</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 5 proposes a connection between Alvesson and Skoldberg’s (2000) discussion of levels of interpretation (Table 1) and GB&L’s extended criteria (Table 4). Authenticity and plausibility stem from the first two levels (interaction with empirical material and interpretation). Criticality refers to the emergence of a critical interpretation. The two additional criteria proposed by Schultze (2000) illustrate reflexivity characterizing confessional research.

**Authenticity** means being genuine to the field experience as a result of “being there”. Meeting this criterion assures that the researcher was there, and was genuine to the experience in writing up the account (GB&L, 1993, p. 599). This is a moment to discuss more purposively the difference that exists between an ethnographic work and an in-depth case study. As Myers (1999) recognizes, one of the distinguishing features of ethnographic research is participant observation. “The researcher needs to be there and live in the organization for a reasonable
length of time. Therefore, a sufficient amount of material/data must have been collected during the period of fieldwork. There should be some evidence of this involvement in any article produced” (Myers, 1999, p. 12, italics added). In turn, researchers doing case studies strongly rely on in-depth interviews and analysis of archival documents. On-site observation, participant or not, may or not occur, and when it does occur, its intensity often varies from low to medium, but is rarely very high (otherwise we would be inclined to talk about ethnography and not about in-depth case study).

As a result, although researchers conducting in-depth case studies “were there” to some degree, and might even have gained a certain familiarity with the setting, the “being there” is not the same as the immersion that characterizes a traditional ethnographic study. Many facts the researcher will report were not directly observed but “gathered” during interviews and conversations with the social group under study. The closeness to the actions and events of interpretive studies is likely to be higher when the researcher functions as a participant observer or action researcher, and lower when the researcher functions as an outside observer and interviewer. Researchers will thus report evidence based on their interpretations of other participants’ interpretations of the phenomenon investigated (Walsham, 1995).

Nandhakumar and Jones (1997) offer a provocative discussion of how a researcher’s ability to obtain an understanding of actors’ interpretations may be limited in a number of ways. First, researchers cannot assume that they understand the actors’ descriptions of their behaviour and their interpretations in a particular social setting (different meanings of words in each context as well as different meanings of gestures, rules, norms, images, etc.). Relying on an actor’s verbal descriptions alone can, therefore, lead to misinterpretations of what is said. Second, actors may provide a distorted account of their behaviour because their ideas as to what ought to happen in the situation may differ from what actually went on. This is not to say that there is a single true view of what happened but, rather, that actors may interpret their own behaviour in terms of dominant perceptions. Third, secrecy is present in all social actions: actors can deliberately mislead researchers or may not talk to them about certain issues and activities because they feel that discussing these might be impolite or too sensitive. Fourth, actors may be unable to give an account of their actions because they form part of social routines of which they are only tacitly aware. Actors often know more than they can say (Giddens, 1984). Finally, there is always some degree of influence stemming from the researcher’s presence and interaction with the field (Walsham, 1995).

How can the limitations of reporting interpretations of interpretations be overcome? Nandhakumar and Jones (1997) put forward some alternatives. The first is to rely on multiple accounts and to compare them with contextual observation. I found this alternative extremely useful in my own fieldwork. By asking similar questions to several participants occupying different roles (for instance, consultants and clients) and complementing the data with archival analyses, I could draw a rich picture of seven retrospective case studies, to some extent compensating for my absence from the field when the phenomena I investigated actually evolved. Another alternative refers to the nature of interviews. The degree of engagement between the researcher and the subject varies depending on whether the interview is less or more structured. The lesser the degree of structuring of the interview, the greater the chance that researcher will be able to explore the respondent’s answers and to assess their “trustworthiness”
Criteria for Conducting and Evaluating Critical Interpretive Research in the IS Field
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(Nandhakumar and Jones, 1997). Although researchers may use semi-structured guidelines for their interviews, to be quite flexible and creative during the interactions with interviewees, and to ask and extend questions as the researcher deems appropriate, can be of big help.

Aware of the differences of degree of “being there”, as noted before, I have reflected on the appropriateness of authenticity as a criterion for evaluating in-depth case studies as it seems, indeed, more appropriate for ethnographic work. However, in the absence of another term, I propose to provisionally keep authenticity for evaluating in-depth case studies, but with nuances that respect the nature of this kind of interaction with the field. For instance, instead of proving that we were there, we must prove that we had enough interaction with participants and enough access to archival documents to compensate for the lack of direct immersion during the development of the phenomena under investigation. Consequently, when researchers doing case studies “particularize everyday life”, they are trying to provide enough details, not from deep immersion in the field but from their interaction with actors deeply immersed in the field. They are telling the reader that they are not reporting facts but their “interpretations of other people’s interpretations”.

Schultze (2000) offers a comparison between GB&L’s authenticity and the well-known positivist criteria: reliability and validity. Reliability refers to the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observers on different occasions. For ethnography, reliability is established through the reader’s assessment of the ethnographer’s reasonableness in interpreting events, or through sharing their sensemaking work as developing interpretations and hypotheses with others outside the field during the course of the fieldwork. Validity expresses the extent to which an account accurately represents a social phenomenon or event. It relates to the representativeness of the data and, for the ethnographer, the truthfulness of an ethnographer’s interpretation. In addition to the vast amounts of different kinds of data from a variety of sources, respondent validation or member checking after the fieldwork has been concluded constitutes a strategy for enhancing validity (Schultze, 2000). Although useful for reasons of clarity, this comparison between authenticity and reliability/validity reminds us of the risk of constantly recreating a sort of “realism reclothed” instead of reaffirming research values of a quite different ontology, nominalism.

Table 6 summarizes ways of expressing authenticity in intensive research (ethnography and/or in-depth field study) and offers examples of how IS researchers have dealt with authenticity. For instance, in the method section, Schultze (2000) provides a detailed description of the variety of roles she played as a participant in the field, enhancing the authenticity of her research by allowing the reader to reconstruct the research process and assess whether her interpretation of events was reasonable in light of her relationship with the different groups of participants.

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9 Actually, from a nominalist ontology that usually underlies interpretive research, there are no facts but different perspectives on reality, and each researcher is always a “storyteller” whose accounts of social reality are valid within a given frame which, hopefully, is shared with his/her audience. As a result, even if it is vital to establish some credibility with the reader by describing some detail of how they have arrived at their ‘results’, concepts like authenticity or credibility are never a guarantee against personal biases, in both the writers and their readers. Any “observer” (qualitative or quantitative, interpretive or positivist) will always be subject to bias as a result of previous experience, limitations in knowledge, values, beliefs and attitudes (Vitalari, 1995).

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Table 6 – Ways and Examples of Expressing Authenticity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Ways to…</th>
<th>Examples from IS literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Has the author been there (in the field) or had enough interactions with participants to compensate for the lack of direct immersion?</td>
<td>(1a) Particularizing everyday life from researchers’ direct immersion or from the interaction with participants and archival documents. Examples: providing enough details of everyday life as lived by members of the field, demonstrating familiarity with the vernacular of the field, describing what members think about their lives in the field, etc. (Schultze, 2000, p. 30)</td>
<td>Walsham and Sahay (1999) use many quotes from the participants themselves and describe “getting lost in the heat of the Indian day” (p. 59-60). Schultze (2000) provides rich descriptions, with many quotes, of her presence in everyday life. (page 32-33) Trauth and Jessup (2000) provide rich detail about the organization, the participants and their perceptions. They also make use of excerpts from the transcripts to illustrate emerging interpretations. (p. 68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1b) Delineating the relationship in the field Examples: describing how close the researchers were, whom they talked to and observed, the nature of their relationship and their influence on others (Schultze, 2000, p. 30)</td>
<td>In addition to describing the length of their stay and the context of their fieldwork, Walsham and Sahay (1999) add further material on their role and attitudes. (p. 60) Schultze (2000) provides rich descriptions of her relationship in the field. (page 32-33) Trauth and Jessup (2000) reveal their connections to the context and how their past experiences helped them in engaging in interpretive fieldwork. (p. 68-69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Has the author been genuine to the field experience?</td>
<td>(2a) Depicting the disciplined pursuit and analysis of data Examples: describing how researcher collected and analyzed data, presenting “raw data” such as field notes, documents and transcribed interviews, conducting post-hoc respondent validation (Schultze, 2000, p. 30)</td>
<td>Walsham and Sahay (1999) identify the types of data collected and detail the processes of data collection. They also give five examples of the themes produced by the interactive movement between data collection and analysis. Schultze (2000) provides a detailed description of her method. (page 32-33) Trauth and Jessup (2000) share the process of developing their interpretations openly with readers, rather than simply presenting it to them as a finished product. (p. 69)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Plausibility** is defined as the ability of the text to connect to the reader’s worldview (Walsham and Sahay, 1999) and it addresses the rhetorical strategies used to compose a text that positions the work as relevant to the concerns of the intended audience (Schultze, 2000). Whereas authenticity is concerned with the conduct of fieldwork, plausibility addresses the “write up” phase (Schultze, 2000). In order to establish plausibility, researchers should be concerned with two interconnected components. First, they need to “make sense”, which means to deal with
common concerns, establishing connections to the personal and disciplinary backgrounds and experiences of their readers. For instance, the researcher will structure the text in a way that is consistent with the academic article genre, i.e., with specified headings and the use of citations (Schultze, 2000). Second, they need to offer a distinctive research contribution to a disciplinary area (GB&L, 1993). A plausible ethnography will identify gaps in the literature or delineate a novel theoretical perspective to justify the research and differentiate its contribution (Schultze, 2000).

This latter aspect - convincing that there is a contribution to the field - is one of the most important aspects to be considered. The value of any empirical research depends on the extent to which the author tells us something new and relevant. However, from a critical perspective, we would ask: new and relevant for whom? What is new for one person might not be new for another. More polemically, what is relevant strongly depends on everyone’s assumptions, purposes and expectations (Benbasat and Zmud, 1999; Lee, 1999; Lyytinen, 1999). Myers (1999) reminds us that it is essential for researchers to convince the reviewers and editors who serve on the editorial boards of our journals that their research contribution is new and relevant.

Plausibility also recalls the dilemma of generalization. According to Klein (1999), the ultimate goal of IS research is to produce some form of knowledge that has relevance outside the context of the original research setting. When the researcher assumes a positivist stance, the status of such knowledge is likely to be “law-like generation”. In assuming an interpretive stance, the researcher appears more conservative and talks about “tendencies”. Walsham (1995) explains such a difference by drawing on the nature of theorizing in the social sciences from an interpretive stance: social structures do not exist independently of the actions and conceptions of the human agents in them; therefore, the generative mechanisms of such structures should be viewed as tendencies that are not wholly predictive for future situations. The validity of drawing inferences from one or more individual cases depends not on the representativeness of such cases in a statistical sense, but on the plausibility and cogency of the logical reasoning used in describing results from the case, and in formulating inferences and conclusions from those results (Walsham and Waema, 1994).

Table 7 summarizes ways of constructing plausibility and offers examples of how IS researchers have constructed it. For instance, Walsham and Sahay (1999) show that their ideas of actor-network theory could be applied to other technologies (not only GIS) and other contexts (not only their Indian case).
### Criteria for Conducting and Evaluating Critical Interpretive Research in the IS Field

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#### Table 7 – Ways and Examples of Constructing Plausibility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Ways to…</th>
<th>Examples from IS literature</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| (3) Does the history make sense to me? | (3a) Normalizing unorthodox methodologies  
Examples: adhering to academic article genres, using conventional sections like method, results, discussion and references. | Walsham and Sahay (1999), Schulzte (2000) organize the paper in a manner that is consistent with that of scientific account (with sections of introduction, research methods, setting description, results, discussion and conclusion). In addition, they use tables and figures. |
|  | (3b) Drafting the reader.  
Examples: using “we” to include the authors and the reader.  
(Walsham and Sahay, 1999). | Walsham and Sahay (1999) use the “we” in several situations.  
Schultze (2000) does not use this strategy (actually, only once on page 6). |
|  | (3c) Legitimating the atypical  
Examples: making reference to familiar categories and experiences, showing the scope of the application of the findings (Walsham and Sahay, 1999), aligning the findings with common, everyday experiences (Schultze, 2000). | Walsham and Sahay (1999) show that their ideas of actor-network theory could be applied to other technologies (not only GIS) and other contexts (not only their Indian case). (p. 61)  
Schultze (2000) compares the informing practices of her participants with her own, establishing a strong alignment with readers’ everyday experiences. (p. 33) |
|  | (3d) Smoothing the contestable  
Examples: justifying contestable assertions (Walsham and Sahay, 1999). | Walsham and Sahay (1999) describe a rich picture and add quotes from participants in order to support contestable assertions. (p.61) |
| (4) Does it offer something distinctive? | (4a) Differentiating findings – a singular contribution  
Examples: showing “missing” areas in the past, outlining the difference between present and past work (Walsham and Sahay, 1999), providing the development of a novel theoretical approach (Schultze, 2000). | Walsham and Sahay (1999) identify underrepresented areas to which their paper contributes and how their work goes beyond traditional concerns. (p. 61)  
Schultze (2000) highlights shortcomings in previous literature and her contributions with respect to substantive insights (page 33) and argues the need for practice-oriented research in the area of knowledge work. |
|  | (4b) Building dramatic anticipation  
Examples: creating expectation. | Walsham and Sahay (1999) add a “little spice to their writing”, as described in page 61. |
Criticality refers to the ability of the text to entice readers to reconsider taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs (GB&L, 1993). It entails the ability to propose an understanding of ourselves and others in a new and better way, including novel ways of thinking (Schultze, 2000). In the ethnographies that GB&L examined, they found that criticality was achieved by challenging readers to pause and think about a specific situation, by provoking them to answer questions, and by guiding readers through novel ways of thinking (Schultze, 2000). The dimension of criticality positions researchers to challenge conventional thought and to reframe the way in which organizational phenomena are perceived and studied. Although criticality was proposed by GB&L as a somehow “optional” criterion, I propose it as essential to critical interpretive research.

“Good research, from a critical perspective, is one that enables a qualitatively new understanding of relevant fragments of social reality, furnishing new alternatives to social action” (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). Critical interpretive studies should necessarily activate such a criterion in order to be able to outline and question prevailing views, to contradict conventional wisdom and multiple viewpoints, which are often in conflict. More attention should be paid not only to multiple narratives that give voice to and allow the construction of multiple worlds, but also to the role of the researcher, of his or her understanding, insights, experiences, interpretations (link with reflexivity). Multiple narratives will not give us any single representation but they may offer us more interesting ways to think about the organization (Garcia and Quek, 1997).

Table 8 summarizes ways of raising criticality and offers examples of how IS researchers have been triggering it. For instance, Schultze (2000) raises questions about the value of subjectivity in science. In my fieldwork, I have invited the reader to critically re-examine classical and widely discussed assumptions about ERP projects and user participation. Some examples are: to critically discuss outsourcing, a clear trend in the field; to call into question notions like best practices, global principles and the wide suitability of ERP packages; to critically comment on issues like “user resistance” and “change management”; to revisit traditional concepts of project success and to propose a critical view of user participation; to revisit CSF like “best people full time”, “top management support” and “strong leadership” and outline other CSF like “end-user empowerment” and “participative practices”, etc.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Ways to…</th>
<th>Examples from IS literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(5) Does the text motivate the readers to re-examine assumptions</td>
<td>(5a) Carving out room to reflect Examples: including “spots” in the text</td>
<td>Walsham and Sahay (1999) and Schultze (2000) do not use explicit “stop signs”. Both provide only implicit illustration of this strategy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>underlying their own work?</td>
<td>where readers stop and reflect about a specific situation (Walsham</td>
<td>Walsham and Sahay (1999) invite readers to critically examine their own views and approaches. (p. 62)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Sahay, 1999; Schultze, 2000).</td>
<td>Schultze (2000) uses this strategy in the discussion section, where she challenges readers to answer questions about their own assumptions, subjectivity and objectivity. (p. 33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5b) Stimulating the recognition and examination of differences</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examples: actively provoking the reader to answer questions (Walsham</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Sahay, 1999), challenging other academics to think about their</td>
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<td>assumptions and work practices through cultural juxtaposition (Schultze,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2000).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5c) Imaging new possibilities Examples: using metaphors, stimulating</td>
<td>Not found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>criticality in the reader (Walsham and Sahay, 1999).</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Reflexivity** implies reflection on text production and language use (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). As outlined by Hardy et al. (2001), work on reflexivity is well developed in areas like sociology of science but has attracted less attention in organization and management theory. I think the same could be said about information systems research. Excepting recent work of Schultze (2000), far less attention exists in our field. In their book dedicated to “reflexive methodology”, Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) stress that much good qualitative research is unreflective, often paying much more attention to tasks such as gathering and analyzing data than to different elements of reflexivity, both during the process of research and in the final textual product.

Reflexivity was defined by Clegg and Hardy as “ways of seeing which act back on and reflect existing ways of seeing” (1996, p: 4), and by Morrow as involving “metatheoretical reflection that is a form of inquiry in its own right” (1994, p. 228). Reflexive research often includes researchers in the subject matter they are trying to understand. Hardy et al. (2001) complement this notion: “we cannot confine our attention to the relationship between researchers and the research subject, but must also examine the relationship between researchers and the research network of which they are part” (p. 533).

Schultze defined the reflexive dimension of her work with two elements: self-revealing writing and interlacing actual ethnographic material and confessional content. A self-revealing text
demands a personalized author, the use of personal pronouns to consistently highlight the point of view being represented, and the construction of the researcher as a reasonable yet fallible individual with whom the audience can identify (Schultze, 2000). Regarding the second feature, confessional writing interlaces the actual ethnographic content with the confessional material, meaning that any statement about the “foreign culture” is also a statement about the ethnographer's and the reader's culture.

Table 9 – Ways and Examples of Experimenting Reflexivity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Ways to…</th>
<th>Examples from IS literature</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| (6) Does the author reveal his/her personal role and personal biases and assumptions? | 6a) Self-revealing writing  
Examples: describing researcher’s personal role (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000), using personal pronouns, revealing personal details about the researcher, disclosing details like mistakes made (Schultze, 2000). | Schultze (2000) uses “I” in abundance in the descriptions of her own informed practices as well as in the excerpts from the field notes. She also presents herself, giving information about age, gender, race, etc. She also provides examples of mistakes she made with respect to contaminating the data. (p. 34)  
Trauth and Jessup (2000), although not talking about reflexivity, do reveal personal information about themselves, like gender, occupation, etc. (p. 68) |
| (6b) Interlacing “actual” and confessional content  
Examples: using autobiographical material interlaced with “actual” ethnographic material but limiting such material to information that has relevance to the subject of the research (Schultze, 2000). | Schultze (2000) avoids overemphasis on self-reflexive and autobiographical material by describing participants’ practices after describing her own practices. (p. 34) |
| (6c) Qualifying personal biases  
Examples: describing researcher’s selection of the voices/actors represented in the text (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). | Not found. |

To Holland (1999), reflexivity involves reflecting on the way research is carried out and understanding how the process of doing research shapes its outcomes. This calls into discussion the responsibility of researchers to “declare their biases”. Hardy et al. (2001) point out that, from an interpretive standpoint, this does not mean to “remove” such biases, but to render them visible though personal disclosure, so that readers can take them into account. In other words, any research is seen as one representation among many possible representations, and researchers present their representations for interpretation by the reader (Hardy et al., 2001).

Table 9 summarizes ways of experimenting with reflexivity and offers examples of how IS researchers have been living it. The well-known and recent example is the confessional work of Schultze (2000).
carried out by Schultze (2000). She gives us examples of reflexivity by disclosing unflattering details about herself, by highlighting mistakes she made in the field, and including personal field notes that recount moments of severe frustration and anxiety.

**Concluding remarks**

By choosing emergent (and nontraditional) ways of making sense of IS phenomena, we assume some important risks and cope with many difficulties. Critical and interpretive studies are increasing in number and are starting to be regularly published at IS conferences, in journals and in books, but they do not have, as of yet, the wide acceptance that positivist studies have. As Walsham outlines, any theoretical choice is always “a way of seeing and a way of not-seeing” (1993, p. 6). The same applies to methodological choices: each one is a way of interacting with empirical material that is guided by the researcher’s background, bias and worldview, with pros and cons. As researchers, we will always deal with some degree of uncertainty about our choices and interpretations, which are not created, shared or applied in a social vacuum, but are involved in communication, interpersonal relations, identity construction, and convincing others (and ourselves) that our propositions are sound (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000).

In this paper, I put forward the argument that critical interpretive research is an emerging and valuable perspective on IS research that takes part in the 20-year perspective promoted by WG 8.2. How can we, if we so choose, determine which set of criteria to adopt in conducting and evaluating critical interpretive work? The fact that a critical interpretive perspective is essentially constructivist and emergent does not mean that qualitative judgments cannot be selected and made. Writing about ways to develop and judge any type of intensive research helps refine and develop our thinking about what conducting and evaluating intensive research leads to, and also serves as a device for sharing ideas with others about these things. Most important, to discuss a set of criteria for conducting and evaluating intensive research represents a key component in building a research tradition of which we are a part. “Established approaches to doing and judging research are our collective prejudices, neither to be slavishly accepted nor willfully rejected, but which should be placed continuously at risk” (Garratt and Hodkinson, 1998, p.535).

In this paper, I have also tried to compile different sets of criteria that have emerged regarding the wide interpretive perspective (Klein and Myers, 1999; Gopal and Prasad, 2000; GB&L, 1995). What complicates this exercise is that it is difficult to treat equally categories like hermeneutical philosophical base (Klein and Myers, 1999), symbolic integrationist work (Gopal and Prasad, 2000) and ethnographic writing (GB&L, 1995). For instance, while hermeneutic can be defined as a broad theoretical tradition, ethnography can be defined as a research strategy. Both are far for being mutually exclusive. Although I was aware of these categorical distinctions, I decided to respect the way researchers identified the nature of their own studies. Future research can refine the above discussion by clarifying distinctions regarding criteria vis-à-vis ontological or epistemological assumptions, i.e., broad paradigms, perspectives or traditions (e.g., interpretivism); criteria vis-à-vis theoretical traditions (e.g., hermeneutic or symbolic integrationism), and criteria vis-à-vis research strategies (e.g., case study or ethnography).\(^{10}\)

\(^{10}\) I thank Charo Rodriguez for her insightful comments on this topic.
Analyzing the nature of criteria in qualitative research from a hermeneutic perspective, Garratt and Hodkinson (1998) developed a provocative argument: “criteria can only be located in the interaction between research findings and the critical reader of those findings” (p. 515). They assume that most writing about the ways in which research should be judged is concerned almost exclusively with the ways in which research was done, and does not take into account the ways in which the standpoint of the reader will influence their judgment of that research. As a result, all criteria for judging research quality contain within them a defining view of what research is, and any attempt to pre-select the criteria against which a piece of research is to be judged is also “predetermining what the nature of that piece of research should be” (p. 525). The authors are not saying that qualitative judgments in research cannot be made but, rather, insisting that the idea of deliberately choosing any list of universal criteria in advance of reading a research report is antithetical to the process of understanding the experience. All these thoughts about research, quality of research, criteria for research, and building a research tradition, albeit partly subjective, are drawn from the evolving wisdom within the research network of which we are a part.
References


