

**Qualitative Methods in Higher Education Policy Analysis:  
Using Interviews and Document Analysis**

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**Abstract**

This article (the third in a short series of works) focuses on the research development, design, and overall approach I utilized in addressing my dissertation research question which aimed to examine the history and experiences of Georgia Institute of Technology's adoption of background check policy. The results of my study offer a documented experience for higher education policy makers and HR professionals at other universities to use as an analogous situation in order to formulate more informed decisions regarding the use or non-use of same or similar policy. In my research approach, my conceptual framework consisted of considering four important policy dimensions, including the normative, structural, constitutive, and technical dimensions. This framework served as a basis and focus, shaping my research process, informing the methodological design, and influencing the selection of data-collection instruments. Using four very specific research design questions, I conducted my research through the lens of the social constructivist adopting an interpretivist approach utilizing a qualitative policy analysis methodology which included the use of interviews and document analysis to address my research question.

**KEYWORDS:** Qualitative Policy Analysis; Qualitative Research Design; Document Analysis; Interview Research; Background Check; Higher Education Policy; Criminal History; Campus Security.

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## Introduction

This article is the third of a short series of works designed to articulate the results and research approach I utilized in my study of background check policy in higher education. This article focuses on the research development, design, and overall approach I utilized in addressing my overall research question: What were the most important events and policy modifications, over approximately the past ten years, that influenced and challenged the Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech) administration to consider, adopt, and revise a formal background check policy?

In this article I explain (1) the approach I used to address relevant positional and political considerations associated with my study; (2) the four research design questions I utilized to develop my research process; (3) the conceptual framework I adopted which served as a basis and focus informing the methodological design and influencing the selection of data-collection instruments; and finally (4) an explanation of my data analysis technique which involved the use of interviews and relevant documents associated with Georgia Institute of Technology's Background Check Policy and Program (referred to as "Policy 8.1" throughout the remainder of this article).

Overall, this study was designed to attend to the concerns expressed by the AAUP (2006) regarding a lack of systematic studies on extensive background check policy in higher education. The main purpose of this study was to examine the history and experiences of Georgia Tech's adoption of background check policy with particular emphasis on what was learned and improved as the policy evolved and changed. Through a constructivist lens and under the iterative tradition, this policy analysis addressed my research question using descriptive and evaluative coding of four types of documents associated with Policy 8.1. As my coding progressed, I categorized codes that share similarities, threading them into groups that logically and intuitively fit together. Working with these categories/groups, I searched for patterns and emerging themes through analytic memo writing. This allowed me to structure a re-creation of the experiences and challenges that influenced related constituents of Policy 8.1 to consider, adopt, modify, and improve formal background check policy. This study offers a documented experience for higher education policy makers and HR professionals at other universities to use as an analogous situation in order to formulate more informed decisions regarding the use or non-use of same or similar policy.

In the first article of this short series, *Evolution of Background Check Policy at Georgia Tech* (Owen, 2012), I provide a full report of the technical dimension of my conceptual framework for this study. This dimension formed the main crux of my research and through interviews and document analysis consisted of exploring: (1) The experiences of key constituents associated with Policy 8.1; (2) The evolutionary changes of Policy 8.1 from its original release in June of 2005 through its three major revisions spanning from 2006-2010; and (3) Program statistics and financial data of Georgia Tech's Office of Human Resources Background Check Program. As a follow-up, my second article, *A Four Dimensional Study of Background Check Policy in Higher*

*Education* (Owen, 2012), provides a comprehensive report of the remaining three (normative, structural, and constitutive) dimensions of my conceptual framework.

### **Positional and Political Considerations**

#### *Dewalt and Dewalt's Degrees of Participation*

Kathleen and Billie Dewalt (2002) argue that “the degree of participation, membership role, and the amount of emotional involvement that ethnographers bring to the field will have an important impact on the kinds of data collected and the sort of analysis that is possible” (p. 6). In agreement with this assertion, the following is designed to explain the complexity of my relationship and position (both level of involvement and awareness of its advantages and disadvantages) with Georgia Tech. As a Georgia Tech employee for approximately the past twelve years, I consider myself not only an ethnographer of Policy 8.1, but also a participant highly involved with its creation. My levels of direct involvement with Policy 8.1 have changed over the past several years, so articulation of my awareness of these changes is warranted.

In Dewalt and Dewalt’s participant observation work they explain that there are multiple levels of participation. Referencing Russell Bernard (1994), Dewalt and Dewalt explain that “participant observation should be distinguished from both pure observation and pure participation.” Used by some sociologists and psychologists, pure observation attempts to remove the researcher (to the maximum extent possible) from the activities and interactions being observed so the researcher is unable to influence the dynamics of the circumstances being observed. The other end of this extreme, pure participation is sometimes referred to as “going native.” This expression describes a researcher when he/she “sheds the identity of investigator and adopts the identity of a full participant in the culture.” Unfortunately, (and for many good reasons) this “is generally associated with a loss of analytic interest and often results in the inability of the researcher to publish his/her materials” (Dewalt and Dewalt, 2002, p. 18).

In order to construct a method to gauge a researcher’s place between these two extremes, Dewalt and Dewalt recruit a typology developed by James Spradley (1980). Dewalt and Dewalt believe, however that “Spradley’s categories seem to confound the degree of participation with the degree to which an ethnographer becomes emotionally involved,” and while these are related, “these can and should be separated” (p. 19). Thus, in modifying Spradley’s categories (focusing only on the aspects of participation), Dewalt and Dewalt discuss several levels of participation that can act as a useful guide for uncovering a researcher’s stance within a study. These levels are non-participation, passive participation, moderate participation, active participation, and complete participation.

Non-participation, the first level, occurs “when cultural knowledge is acquired by observing phenomena from outside the research setting.” Examples of this type of participation can include viewing television, reading magazines or similar texts, and other forms of media. Passive participation (level two) exists when the researcher is physically at the location where observations are being made but he/she “acts as

a pure observer.” That is, the researcher “does not interact with people.” Even though the researcher still has no interaction, as in non-participation, this level elevates the researcher’s involvement because he/she is on site and can/does have an option to interact if he/she chooses. The third level is referred to as moderate participation. This occurs when the researcher is “at the scene of action, is identifiable as a researcher, but does not actively participate, or occasionally interacts, with people in it.” Active participation (the fourth level) happens when a researcher “actually engages in almost everything that other people are doing as a means of trying to learn the cultural rules for behavior.” This level has a much greater level of immersion of the researcher into the setting he or she is observing, but still the researcher holds tightly to his/her objectivity and is not yet considered a full member of the culture being studied. Finally, the step beyond active participation is complete participation. At this level of participation the researcher actually “becomes a member of the group being studied” (p. 19-21).

This fifth level of participation is not to be confused with the expression “going native” (explained previously) because in complete participation the researcher does not lose the analytic interest needed to be regarded as a credible researcher. Dewalt and Dewalt summarize the importance of these categories:

The balance between observation and participation achieved by an individual researcher can fall anywhere along the continuum. The key point is that researchers should be aware of the compromises in access, objectivity, and community expectations that are being made at any particular place along the continuum. Further, in the writing of ethnography, the particular place of the researcher on this continuum should be made clear. Methodological notes, field notes, and diary entries should report the level of involvement of the researcher in the community or group being studied, and the degree to which the researcher comes to identify with the community. (Dewalt and Dewalt, 2002, p. 23)

#### *Researcher Connection with Georgia Tech*

My career at Georgia Tech (and in the field of human resources management) formally began in April, 2001. Early in my involvement with Policy 8.1, I worked in Georgia Tech’s Office of Human Resources (around January 2005) where I was assigned to draft the first Georgia Tech policy devoted to assigning a campus code of conduct for pre-employment background investigations. This heavily immersed me in the creation, implementation, and campus enforcement of Policy 8.1. In this assignment I was held accountable for comparing other higher education pre-employment background check policies; researching all the applicable laws, regulations, and risks involved with adopting such policy; and recruiting a reputable third-party company to contract with and conduct Georgia Tech’s pre-employment background check investigations. During this time (for approximately a two and a half year period), this placed my level of participation in alignment with Dewalt and Dewalt’s complete participation (as an active member of the culture being studied).

My level of participation with Georgia Tech’s Policy 8.1 changed in May of 2007. At that time I was promoted to a position in the Georgia Tech economic development office as the unit’s Human Resources

Manager. This was an important personal and professional change for me and my study, because it shifted my level of involvement/participation to the third level or moderate participation with the Georgia Tech's Office of Human Resources and Policy 8.1. After my employment change, I was no longer responsible for managing the administration of Policy 8.1, and I lost much of my insider status with the Georgia Tech Office of Human Resources. However, one of the benefits of leaving the Georgia Tech Office of Human Resources came in the form of an increased separation from my personal attachment to Policy 8.1. No longer being responsible for managing Policy 8.1 allowed me to research and digest the competing arguments for and against background check policy more effectively, because my livelihood no longer depended on the success of the program. Robert Bogan and Sari Biklen (2007) explain that "exactly what and how much participation varies during the course of a study." In the beginning, researchers usually spend time teaching the community they are involved with and gradually gain acceptance and often a level of membership. "As relationships develop, he or she participates more," which was exactly the case in my six years (from April, 2001 to May, 2007) of employment with Georgia Tech's Office of Human Resources. At later stages of the research, "it may be important once again to hold back from participating," because too much participation can lead to "the researcher getting so involved and active with subjects that their original intentions get lost" (p. 92).

#### *Background Checks as a Controversial Topic*

Along with awareness of my participation levels, it was also important for me to keep in mind that background checks (and the broader issue of unresolved tensions between privacy and security) are controversial and potentially politically charged topics. Because of this, remaining neutral was sometimes a challenge. According to Bogan and Biklen (2007), "It is not uncommon for human service organizations to have dissention and political wrangling" (p. 100). Those occupying non-academic business leadership positions within Georgia Tech generally advocate for universally utilized extensive pre-employment background checks for all new hires (including professorships). However, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) has expressed great concern regarding any forced change in the manner in which academia recruits and selects new members for employment positions. This tug of war between business and academia leaders in higher education added additional concerns that were important for me to keep in mind throughout my study. Bogdan and Biklen warn that

in organizations with conflict, people may vie for your allegiance, wanting you to identify with one side or the other. They try to convince you that the way they see things is right and that you should join them in their struggle against those they define as the enemy. Although as a strategy it is trying at times, and close to impossible at others, in general it is best to remain neutral. If you identify with one side, it will be difficult to understand or have access to the people on the other side. . . . Spread yourself around, spending time with various people. Have a sympathetic ear to all sides and do not talk about one group in front of the other. (p. 100)

### **Initial Research Design & Crotty's Four Research Questions**

My choice of research design was reached through careful consideration of the multiple research options available, the main goals of my study, my conceptual framework, and the implications of my epistemological stance. In order to articulate my research design as well as clarify and situate my epistemological stance, some clarification of how I selected my approach (and terminology associated with it) is needed. I used Michael Crotty's (1998) four basic questions for initiating and developing my research design. These four questions include: (1) What methods will be used?; (2) What methodology will be employed?; (3) What theoretical perspective will support the research proposal?; and (4) What epistemology will inform the research proposal? I have found that many research authors have complimented and competed with each other over appropriate use of terminology associated with research method and design. My aim here is not to advocate who is correct in these debates; however, I use Crotty's four questions because they offer a comprehensive approach (or guide as I have use of it here) toward making appropriate decisions regarding overall research design.

First, what methods will be used? Methods as defined by Crotty are "the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyze data related to some research question or hypothesis" (p. 3). There are several methods available to researchers, some of which include participant observation, statistical analysis, questionnaires, life histories, interviews, and document analysis. For my study of Policy 8.1, I utilized interviews and document analysis in order to collect appropriate data in support of addressing my conceptual framework and research question.

The second important question is what methodology will be employed? More specifically stated, what will be "the strategy, plan of action, process, or design" (p. 3) behind the choice and use of specific methods? Examples of methodologies include experimental research, survey research, grounded theory, case study and, my approach for this study, policy analysis with blended characteristics of ethnography. For the current discussion, my reference to ethnography aligns closely with what Grbich (2007) calls a "classical ethnographic approach" in that its use can be valuable when a researcher intends to "describe a culture and its operation, belief system, etc." especially through "intensive analysis of a key event" (p. 39). Translated to my study, this means that my policy analysis intended to analyze the specific experience of Georgia Tech's (the culture being studied) adoption of formalized background policy (the key event affecting the culture studied).

The third question qualitative researchers should ask is what theoretical perspective will support a research proposal? By theoretical perspective I mean "the philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding it's logic and criteria" (p. 3). Some theoretical perspectives include positivism, postmodernism, and critical theory. Interpretivism is the theoretical perspective that informs my study of Policy 8.1. According to Yanow (2007) "from an interpretive perspective the evidentiary material that the researcher analyzes is constructed by participants in the event or setting being studied" (p. 409). Interpretivism can be understood when it is contrasted with the positivist

approach. A positivist would employ the methods of the natural sciences and, by way of “allegedly value-free, detached observation, seek to identify universal features” of the phenomenon that offer explanation of “control and predictability.” The interpretivist approach, “to the contrary, looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social world” (p. 67). Similar (and related) to Crotty’s claim here, Thomas Birkland asserts that when studying the policy process itself, it is important to keep in mind that

the actual act of identifying a problem is as much a normative judgment as it is an objective statement of fact; thus, if analysis proceeds from the identification of a problem, and the problem is identified normatively, then one cannot say that any subsequent analysis is strictly neutral (Birkland, 2005, p. 15).

To explain this contrast further, interpretivism is sometimes associated with the thought of Max Weber (1948) who suggested (as cited in Grbich, 2007) that “in the human sciences we are concerned with *Verstehen* (understanding)” (p. 67). Grbich claims that Weber’s interpretive approach, *Verstehen*, can be contrasted with his explicative approach (*Erklären*, explaining) which typically focuses on causality, often found in the natural sciences. My study revealed some the reasons or causes for Georgia Tech’s decision to adopt formal background check policy; however, my purpose was situated within the interpretivist tradition in that my primary goal in analyzing Policy 8.1 was to seek understanding.

Finally, the fourth important question according to Crotty is what epistemology will inform a research proposal or what is “the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby the methodology” (p. 3)? Examples of epistemologies include objectivism, subjectivism, and the epistemological stance for my study, social constructivism. Many authors of qualitative research have defined and discussed the nature and associated terminology of social constructivism. According to Grbich (2007), constructivism assumes that “there is no objective knowledge independent of thinking” and reality is socially imbedded and existing entirely in the mind. This makes reality a moving target, because it is “fluid and changing” and is constructed “jointly in interaction by the researcher and the researched.” Grbich claims (in alignment with my method and study’s purpose/design) that the constructivist approach works well with studies that have characteristics of ethnography in that they can involve “thick contextualized description and textual perusal using discourse analysis.” This is achieved through seeking “common patterns of meaning through preliminary and thematic analysis” with a major focus on “in-depth understanding of the problem and identifying related issues” (p. 8-9).

Corrine Glesne (2006) suggests that a majority of qualitative researchers adhere to social constructivism or a constructivist paradigm and that “this paradigm maintains that human beings construct their perceptions of the world.” The constructivist approach does not apply the scientific values of validity, objectivity, or generalizability “in the same way (or at all)” as in the traditions of a positivistic or logical empiricist approaches. In general, constructivists reject scientific inquiry that assumes it is possible to remain

entirely objective and “hold that knowledge of the world is not a simple reflection of what there is, but a set of social artifacts of what we make is there” (p. 6-7).

In summary, because I argue that reality is a social construct, it was important to understand that as I studied Policy 8.1, I viewed the policy itself as a socially constructed attempt to define the reality and rules that govern an administrative function of Georgia Tech. Policy 8.1, as it was created and re-created through revisions over time, is (and has been) connected to a broader social context. The normative and constitutive dimensions of my conceptual framework (which I explain below) helped me to remain cognizant of this broader social context.

### **Conceptual Framework Guiding the Research**

The following is an explanation of the conceptual framework I utilized to guide my study. Selection of this framework came about after careful consideration of how to address my research question given the results of my literature review. This framework served as a basis and focus shaping my research process, informing the methodological design, and influencing the selection of data-collection instruments. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) espouse the importance of utilizing a conceptual framework after completion of the initial literature review. A well designed conceptual framework serves as the “scaffolding of the study” consisting of “categories” and “descriptors” (or dimensions as described below). These initial categories/dimensions serve as the “backbone” of a study and help in developing the research process and methodological design, which in turn facilitates choice of data-collection methods (p. 58-59). Serving as a “repository” for my data collection, my conceptual framework offered a basis for informing various iterations of my coding scheme. Used as a “working tool” in connection with my research question, this framework provided “an organizing structure” (p. 61) for reporting my study’s findings.

#### *Cooper, Fusarelli, and Randall’s Policy Model*

Developed by (and borrowed from) Cooper, Fusarelli, and Randall (2004), my conceptual framework, designed for understanding organizational policy, consisted of considering four important dimensions. These included the normative, structural, constitutive, and technical dimensions. The normative dimension “includes the beliefs, values, and ideologies that drive societies to seek improvement and change.” The normative dimension is important because it considers the goals, needs, and assumptions of policy (the aspects of policy and policy-making that are often not easily explained through the logical and systematic approaches of positivistic methods). Study in this dimension included consideration of the organizational mission and cultural make-up of Georgia Tech. The structural dimension “includes the governmental arrangements, institutional structure, systems, and processes that promulgate and support policies.” The structural dimension advocates that “analysis of the role and effects of federal, state, and local institutional structure is critical” for understanding policy. Focus on this dimension included



exploring/explaining the organizational structure of Georgia Tech as well as how Policy 8.1 was influenced and affected by related federal laws and University System of Georgia (USG) policy. The constitutive dimension includes “theories of the networks, elites, masses, interest groups, ethnic/gender groups, providers and ‘end users,’ and beneficiaries who influence, participate in, and benefit from the policymaking process.” Focus on this dimension included consideration of some of the organizations and interest groups that share close professional relationships with Georgia Tech. These relationships were important because they can (and often do) have a strong influence on Georgia Tech policy decisions. For a comprehensive report of results within these three dimensions see *A Four Dimensional Study of Background Check Policy in Higher Education* (Owen, 2012). Finally, the technical dimension of this framework consists of “planning, practice, implementation, and evaluation” or what Cooper, Fusarelli, and Randall refer to as “the nuts and bolts of policymaking” (p. 43-44). This dimension formed the main crux of my research and through interviews and document analysis consisted of exploring: (1) The experiences of key constituents associated with Policy 8.1; (2) The evolutionary changes of Policy 8.1 from its original release in June of 2005 through its three major revisions spanning from 2006-2010; and (3) Program statistics and financial data of Georgia Tech’s Office of Human Resources Background Check Program. In the first article of this short series, *Evolution of Background Check Policy at Georgia Tech* (Owen, 2012) I provide a full report of this technical dimension of my study.

### **Use of Interviews and Document Analysis**

As Eugene Bardach (2009) reminds us, “In policy research, almost all likely sources of information, data, and ideas fall into two general types: documents and people” (p. 69). When determining what type of data to use for my policy analysis, I also found good use of the advice in Dvora Yanow’s (2007) assertion that document reading can also be part of an observational study or an interview-based project. Documents can provide background information prior to designing the research project, for example prior to conducting interviews. They may corroborate observational and interview data, or they may refute them, in which case the researcher is ‘armed’ with evidence that can be used to clarify, or perhaps, to challenge what is being told, a role that the observational data may also play. (Yanow, 2007, p. 411)

#### *Responsive Interviewing*

In my process of conducting interviews with important key constituents of Policy 8.1, I utilized an approach proposed by Herbert and Irene Rubin (2005). Their work emphasizes the importance of using a model called “responsive interviewing.” Responsive interviewing is Rubin and Rubin’s term for depth interviewing research. The responsive interviewing model “relies heavily on the interpretive constructionist philosophy, mixed with a bit of critical theory, and then shaped by the practical needs of doing interviews.” This approach is somewhat the opposite of a strict positivistic approach in that the design of the process “remains flexible throughout the project” and the goal is not to reach definitive answers or truth, but rather to seek out how the interviewee “understands what they have seen, heard, or experienced.” According to the

interpretive constructionist researcher, the goal of an interview is to find out how people perceive an occurrence or object and, most importantly, “the meaning they attribute to it” (p. 27). It is imperative to note that this framework served as a “compass” and not a rule. Rubin and Rubin explain this importance in that

a philosophy should not be a list of commands or instructions to always do this or never that. Even the strongest advice may be offset in some situations by a broader good to be achieved. But, especially when you feel lost, having a compass -a research philosophy- is useful because it provides guidance, suggests what to pay attention to, and alerts you to problems that may arise. (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p. 36-37)

My interview technique included three types of questions: main questions, follow-up questions, and probes. The main questions were designed to focus on the substance of the research problem and to stay on target with addressing my research puzzle. The follow-up and probe questions helped ensure that I pursued depth, detail, vividness, richness, and nuance. Depth refers to “asking about distinct points of view while learning enough of the history or context” to be able to “put together separate pieces” of what I heard “in a meaningful way” (p. 130). Also, when you are looking for depth, you “seek explanations from conversational partners who have had diverse experiences or hold different opinions” (p. 131). Seeking depth can lead to “richness” which means that “interviews can contain many ideas and different themes,” often including those that I did not anticipate being part of my study. Richness “allows a depth interviewer to unravel the complexity of other people’s worlds” (p. 134). Rubin and Rubin define vividness as coming from “asking background questions and learning enough about the overall context to personalize your report so that you can present your interviewees as real people rather than abstractions.” The practice of seeking “vividness” is used to obtain narrative reports or to “request step-by-step descriptions of what happened,” (p. 132) whereas “nuance” implies that there are multiple shades of grey in interviewing and that it is important to look beyond just the black and white answers (by highlighting subtlety of meaning).

Utilizing my well-developed professional relationships with multiple Georgia Tech Offices across campus, I identified current and former campus staff members who have had a strong association with Policy 8.1. My initial interviews led me to others, allowing the responses of my interviewees guide me to new data. In order to stay organized throughout my interview field work, I created an interview guide which compiled a checklist of important interview procedures and my main interview questions (with notes about follow-up and probe questions). Using a model provided by the Georgia State University Research Services and Administration Office, I created an informed consent document for all my interviews. It is important to note that my data collection process included acquiring approval from both Georgia Tech and Georgia State University’s Institute Review Board (IRB). Using an IRB approved informed consent document from Georgia State University, I was able to obtain formal consent to conduct my interviews (and use real names with professional titles) from all my participants.

### *Document Analysis*

Document analysis was used as my main method of data collection and analysis. Interviewing, as discussed above, was an additional method; however, my interviews eventually became documents after each interview was transcribed and converted into written form. Lindsay Prior (2003) has conducted extensive work on the use of documents in research and claims that “in most social scientific work, of course, documents are placed at the margins of consideration” (p. 4). Yet as articulated by Max Weber’s (1978) perceptive analysis of bureaucracy in his work *Economy and Society* (as noted by Prior), “The modern world is made through writing and documentation” (Prior, 2003, p. 4). Prior takes Max Weber’s assertions and provides insightful discussion regarding the nature of documents in organizations:

- Documents form a field for research in their own right, and should not be considered as mere props for action.
- Documents need to be considered as situated products, rather than as fixed and stable things in the world.
- Documents are produced in social settings and are always to be regarded as collective (social) products.
- Determining how documents are consumed and used in organized settings, that is, how they function, should form an important part of any social scientific research project.
- In approaching documents as a field for research we should forever keep in mind the dynamic involved in the relationships between production, consumption, and content. (Prior, 2003, p. 26)

### *A University’s Identity Defined through Documents*

What characteristic about any organization gives it identity and separation from other similar or completely different organizations? How are these characteristics defined and given unmistakable meaning? What about the identity of a university? Prior offers the following perspective:

A university (any university) is in its documents rather than its buildings. The charter together with other documents names the university, provides warrant to award degrees, and legitimizes the officers of the university and so on. Naturally, a university has buildings and equipment and lectures and students, but none of those things are sufficient for the award of university status. Only the charter can define the organization as a university, and in that sense provide the one necessary condition for its existence. (p. 60)

If this perspective holds true, this places documents (and the act of documentation) in a very important position among universities. If the charter is the supreme identifying document, then a university’s formal policies and correspondences must also hold a very high level of importance.

### *Advantages and Limitations of Document Analysis*

Darrel Caulley (1983) asserts, in alignment with Prior’s similar claims about documents in research, that “though document analysis is routinely carried out in program evaluation, its full potential is rarely tapped” and the resources and “literature on the subject of document analysis is very meager” (p. 28). In its most rudimentary form it is “analysis of documents to gather facts.” However, gathering of facts through

document analysis is not an easy endeavor. Caulley warns that “the facts of history and evaluation never come to us ‘pure,’ since they do not and cannot exist in a pure form; they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder” especially since the facts we find in documents “have been selected by the recorder.” For this reason, our major concern “should be with the selective device through which the facts were churned; what facts were selected to be written down and which were rejected” (p. 19-20)? When I entered the field to gather documents related to Policy 8.1, I was confronted with important decisions as to which documents are more important and/or relevant than others. Caulley offers a few general rules/guidelines for selecting appropriate documents:

- Incomplete observation and faulty memory are reasons for inadequacy of testimony. The longer the *time interval* between the incident described and the writing of the document, the less reliable the document. *Therefore, choose the document that is closer to the event described.*
- Some documents are intended as aids to one’s memory, some are reports to others, some as apologia, some as propaganda, and so on. So documents differ as to their purpose. The more serious the writer’s intention to make a mere record, the more dependable the document.
- The testimony of a schooled or experienced observer and reporter is generally superior to that of the untrained and casual observer and reporter. (Caulley, 1983, p. 23)

Caulley also cautions about “interested witnesses.” An interested witness can be an author of a document where the document serves as a “perversion of the truth” in order to support or “benefit someone or some cause dear to himself or herself.” For example, brochures that promote educational programs are biased and usually do not provide balanced information about the effectiveness or credibility of the program. To complicate this circumstance further, “often the benefit to be derived from the perversion of the truth is subtle and may not be realized” (p. 24). Jerome Murphy (1980), as cited by Caulley, recommends that when evaluating a program, the researcher should focus on records that report “about its origin, history, operation, and impact.” More specifically, a researcher should seek “copies of the law, rules, regulations, guidelines, and legal interpretations” that help to “set forth the legal basis for the the program” (p. 123). Other examples of important program documents include annual reports, financial statements, newsletters, budget justifications, and especially “documents on the inner workings of programs.” Documents of this kind can include minutes of meetings, organizational charts, staff reports, and, of particular importance to Caulley, memoranda. Memoranda are “a particular rich source of information since this is the primary means of communication for program personnel.” In addition, memoranda “reveal the information on which decisions are made, the arguments for such decisions, and who is making the decisions.” A savvy researcher will also pay particular attention to the distribution lists on memoranda as this often gives strong indications as to “who is important in making decisions and thus who might be interviewed for further information” (Caulley, 1983, p. 25).

## Data Inventory

### *Policy 8.1 Releases*

The Policy 8.1 releases comprised the formal policy statements that the Georgia Tech Office of Human Resources (OHR) published to the campus on four separate occasions. These included the first release in June 2005 and each subsequent revision released in October 2007, November 2009, and May 2010. Analysis of each of these policy statements offered evidence of changes implemented in response to what was learned from each previous release.

### *Interview Transcripts*

My data collection through interviewing relevant constituents associated with Georgia Tech's Pre-Employment Background Check Policy and Program produced five robust interview transcripts. Participants I successfully recruited for interviews include (all of whom consented to using their real names and titles):

- (1) Russ Cappello, former (retired as of 2004) Director of Employment and Employee Relations for Georgia Tech's Office of Human Resources;
- (2) Dr. Jean Fuller, former (retired as of 2006) Director of Employment and HR Policy for Georgia Tech's Office of Human Resources;
- (3) Scott Morris, current (hired in January, 2011) Associate Vice President of Human Resources for Georgia Tech's Office of Human Resources;
- (4) Rick Clark, current Director of Admissions for Georgia Tech's Office of Undergraduate Admissions (2009-Present); and
- (5) Erroll Davis, former Chancellor of the University System of Georgia (2006-2011).

After completing all my interviews, I found that each provided a variety of avenues in addressing each dimension of my conceptual framework. However, there were differences in each of the interviews (and interviewees) that are important to note. For example, my interviews with Russ Cappello and Jean Fuller primarily focused on talking about Policy 8.1 before it was adopted as a formal written policy in June, 2005. Logically this made sense because Russ retired from Georgia Tech in early 2004, and Jean retired approximately two years later. In contrast, my interviews with Rick Clark and Scott Morris contained a lot of discussion about the current version of Policy 8.1 after its three revisions spanning from 2007-2010. Due to the fact that Scott Morris only recently started his employment at Georgia Tech (in January, 2011), our conversation was dominated mostly with discussion of his thoughts about how to improve the current Policy 8.1 (for which he is now directly responsible as the new Associate Vice President of Human Resources). In my interview with Rick Clark, Director of Georgia Tech Admissions, the majority of our interview discussed students and the screening process his office uses during matriculation. Finally, my interview with Erroll Davis mainly discussed his decision to implement background check policy at the BOR level. This interview

was particularly relevant as Eugene Bardach (2009) describes that in policy analysis it is often good practice to seek out “the political ideology of the agency chief” (p. 11). I also tried to contact Dr. Hugh Hudson, former Executive Secretary for the AAUP, Georgia Chapter and Professor of History at Georgia State University; however, he did not respond to my requests for an interview.

#### *InfoMart Reports*

When Policy 8.1 was being created, the Georgia Tech Office of Human Resources contracted the process of obtaining and reporting applicant background information to an Atlanta-based company called InfoMart Inc. Upon my request, InfoMart provided me with several monthly and annual background check activity reports, as well as financial data that detailed the costs associated with their services. These records provided valuable historical program statistics and cost documentation of Georgia Tech’s OHR Background Check Program.

#### *Supplementary Documents*

Additional documents, which I refer to as supplementary documents, were documents discovered through following leads produced from my interviews and literature review. These documents are referred to as supplementary because although they were not specific to Policy 8.1, these documents helped in adding additional context to each of the four dimensions of my conceptual framework. These documents include:

- (1) A January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2007 letter to USG Chancellor Erroll Davis from Hugh Hudson (former Executive Secretary of the AAUP, Georgia Chapter) expressing concerns regarding the 2007 USG mandate for a system-wide pre-employment background check policy;
- (2) A September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007 memorandum from Rob Watts of the USG to all USG Presidents and Chief Business Officers articulating recent revisions to the USG Background Check Policy (which includes a copy of the 2007 USG Policy);
- (3) May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2011 version of USG Background Investigation Policy;
- (4) The 2010 Georgia Tech Fact Book, available online and published annually by the Office of Institutional Research and Planning.
- (5) The 2010 Georgia Tech Mini Fact Book, available online and published annually by the Office of Institutional Research and Planning.
- (6) Various official online governmental documents used to analyze important federal laws and regulations that directly impact Policy 8.1;
- (7) Various personal analytical documents including my field notes, important annotations from related readings, written and electronic (using Nvivo qualitative data analysis software) journal entries, analytic memos, etc. created throughout my study to guide and steer my reflections.

### **Data Analysis Technique**

My method of data analysis, through the lens of a constructivist, involved using descriptive and evaluative coding of my interview transcripts and relevant documents associated with Policy 8.1. Using my conceptual framework as an initial starting point, and NVivo data analysis software as a supplementary tool, I organized and coded my data as it related to the four major categories (or dimensions) of my conceptual framework. As my coding progressed, I categorized codes that shared similarities, threading them into groups that logically and intuitively fit together. Working with these categories/groups, I utilized analytic memo writing and searched for pertinent information that led me toward a deeper understanding of the experiences, history, challenges, and changes associated with background check policy at Georgia Tech.

#### *NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software*

As suggested by my dissertation committee, for this study I utilized NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS) as a supplementary tool for organizing my data. According to Patricia Bazeley (2007), there are several principal ways in which NVivo supports analysis of qualitative data; however, my use of the software aligned mainly with Bazeley's assertion that NVivo "manages data" in general in that the software serves as a central repository for all information collected. According to Bazeley, NVivo "manages ideas," providing "rapid access to conceptual and theoretical knowledge.... as well as the data which supports it, while at the same time retaining ready access to the context from which those data have come." Simply being able to view and recall my data, notes, references, etc. all in one place (and at the same time if needed) allowed me to focus more on coding and thinking about my data rather than organizing (& re-organizing) it. This was valuable to my research because I also utilized paper and pencil coding in conjunction with the Nvivo data organizing features. Finally, it is important to note that NVivo and the tools described by Bazeley are "method free insofar as the software does not prescribe a method, but rather it supports a wide range of methodological approaches" (p. 2-3). This highlights NVivo's flexibility in that researchers are not locked into using any (or all) the system's features in order for it to serve as a viable tool.

Bazeley reminds us that there are debates surrounding the use of software for qualitative data analysis. First, there are those who believe that using computers will over mechanize the analysis process. Those who support this notion fear that the computer, "like Frankenstein's monster, might take over the process and alienate researchers from their data" and further "produce output without making obvious all the steps in the process" (p. 9-10). Also, Bazeley refers to what she calls a "homogenization of qualitative approaches to analysis" which is a tendency of researchers "to imply there is just one general approach to the analysis of qualitative data." However, qualitative research is not a single method in and of itself, and there are "marked differences in qualitative approaches which stem from differences in foundational philosophies and understandings of the nature of social reality." It is up to researchers, not software programs, to incorporate their choices of perspective and conceptual framework regarding coding technique, "and what

questions to ask of the data.” Unfortunately, qualitative data analysis software “has been talked about as if it supported just one qualitative methodology, or worse, that it created a new method, which is not the case at all” (p. 10-11).

Concerns have been raised related to a researcher’s “closeness and distance” from his/her data, and early critiques have suggested that users of software data analysis lose a closeness to their data “through segmentation of text and loss of context, and thereby risk alienation from their data.” In contrast, some argue that the combination of using several electronic devices (tape recorders, software, etc.) can lead a researcher toward “too much closeness, and some users become caught in ‘the coding trap’, bogged down in their data, and unable to see the larger picture.” Bazeley argues that researchers can, and should, benefit through achieving both closeness and distance, “and an ability to switch between the two... closeness for familiarity and appreciation for subtle differences, but distance for abstraction and synthesis” (p. 8). Being conscious of these potential pitfalls associated with utilizing qualitative data analysis software, I used a hybrid approach to my data analysis technique. I use the term “hybrid” because while I used NVivo a great deal in organizing my data, I also employed a more traditional paper and pencil coding system that helped me retain a comfortable level of closeness to my data.

### *The Mechanics of My Coding*

Johnny Saldaña (2009) defines a code in qualitative inquiry as “most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data.” The intentions of coding are similar to an assigned title which “represents and captures a book, film, or poem’s primary content and essence.” There are many forms of data receptive to the coding process including interview transcripts, participant observation field notes, journals, documents, literature, email correspondences, etc. It is important to understand that coding is “not a precise science,” rather it is “primarily an interpretive act” meant to be “the transitional process between data collection and more extensive data analysis” (p. 3-4). For example, my coding process involved using descriptive and evaluative coding which helped lead me to grouping of important categories within my data. I made notes along the margins of my paper documents and interview transcripts of these categories which helped to capture emerging themes or concepts. Saldaña demonstrates this process, which I used as a guideline in my analysis technique, using what he calls a streamline codes-to-theory model for qualitative inquiry (p. 12).

### *Descriptive and Evaluative Coding*

Coding is cyclic in nature, sometimes requiring multiple cycles using different coding methods in order to develop potential themes. Saldaña offers dozens of coding options for qualitative researchers. I considered all of them and determined that descriptive and evaluative coding provided the most utility for my study. However, I used this approach as a guideline and not a strict rule. During my data analysis, I



employed characteristics of other coding methods, especially since the nature of coding (and qualitative research in general) is flexible and should remain adaptive. During my coding process, I also continually asked myself (in alignment with Saldaña, “as you’re applying the coding method(s) to the data, are you making new discoveries, insights, and connections about your participants, their processes, or the phenomenon under investigation” (p. 51)?

Saldaña recommends descriptive coding specifically for studies involving document analysis as these types of studies often begin with general questions. Descriptive coding as a preliminary data analysis tool is a viable approach in addressing these types of questions. More specifically, descriptive coding “summarizes in a word or short phrase, most often as a noun, the basic topic of a passage of data.” Descriptive coding “leads primarily to a categorized inventory, tabular account, summary, or index of the data’s content.” Using my conceptual framework as a starting point, this first cycle coding method provided essential groundwork for additional cycles of coding, further analysis, and deeper interpretation because “description is the foundation for qualitative inquiry” (p. 70-72).

Evaluation coding, as Saldaña describes it, is another valuable analysis method, because although my study’s focus is on a specific Georgia Tech policy, typically a higher education policy is associated with or connected in some way to a program or administrative function within the institution. My study of Policy 8.1 implicitly included an evaluative investigation of Georgia Tech’s Office of Human Resources Pre-Employment Background Check Program. Evaluation coding is “appropriate for policy, critical, action, organizational, and (of course) evaluation studies,” and this type of data “can derive from individual interviews, focus groups, participant observation, surveys, and documents” (p. 98 & 100). The benefits of this approach were directly aligned with one of the main purposes of my study which was to create a documented vicarious experience for higher education policy-makers and HR professionals to use as an analogous situation in order to formulate more informed decisions regarding the use or non-use of same or similar policy. According to Michael Patton (2002), as referenced by Saldaña, program evaluation is “the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and the outcomes of programs” in order to “make judgments about the program, improve the program effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future programming” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 97). Program evaluation can include analysis of the policies, organizations, and personnel associated with the program.

### *Analytic Memo Writing*

Coding, as described earlier, is primarily an interpretive act meant to be the transitional process between data collection and more extensive data analysis. Coding lays the groundwork for uncovering patterns and developing themes toward greater understanding of data. Several researchers have discussed the importance of this transitional process. Carol Grbich claims that “thematic analysis” is a common qualitative research technique and it is usually employed at or near the end of the data collection process. It is a process

that involves “segmentation, categorization, and re-linking of aspects of the database prior to the final write up” (Grbich, 2007, p. 16). According to Lydia DeSantis and Doris Ugarriza (2000), a theme is “an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent (patterned) experienced and its variant manifestations.” Used in this manner, a theme “captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole” (p. 362). Finally, according to Max Van Manen,

themes are interpretive, insightful discoveries, written attempts to get at the notions of data to make sense of them and give them shape. Overall, a theme is the form of capturing the phenomenon one tries to understand, but the collective set of researcher-generated themes is not intended for systematic analysis; themes are the fasteners, foci, or threads around which the phenomenological description is facilitated. (Van Manen, 1990, p. 87)

I used analytic memo writing to search for patterns and themes, as described above, in order to help gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and challenges associated with background check policy at Georgia Tech. These memos served as bridges designed to move my codes toward more analytic thought about my data. According to Saldaña, the purpose of analytic memo writing is to record and reflect on the coding process and choice of codes; “how the process of inquiry is taking shape; and the emergent patterns, categories and subcategories, themes and concepts in your data.” Examples of acceptable content for analytic memos include “future directions, unanswered questions, frustrations with the analysis, insightful connections, and anything about the researched and the researcher” (p. 32-33). Finally, I found utility in Kathy Charmaz’s advice in that

memos catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue. Through conversing with yourself while memo writing, new ideas and insights arise during the act of writing. Putting things down on paper makes the work concrete, manageable, and exciting. Once you have written a memo, you can use it now or store it for later retrieval. In short, memo writing provides a space to become actively engaged in your materials, to develop your ideas, and to fine-tune your subsequent data-gathering. (Charmaz, 2006, p. 72).

### Summary

In summary, this article (the third of a short series of works) articulates the hybrid data analysis approach I utilized in my study of background check policy within higher education. This article focused on the research development, design, and overall approach I utilized in addressing my overall research question: What were the most important events and policy modifications, over approximately the past ten years, that influenced and challenged the Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech) administration to consider, adopt, and revise a formal background check policy? Using NVivo software to organize my data as well as a paper and pencil method of analysis, in alignment with Saldaña's streamline codes-to-theory model for qualitative inquiry, I employed descriptive and evaluative coding of all obtainable documents (which included my interview transcripts) associated with the Georgia Tech background check policy and program. As my coding progressed, I categorized codes that shared similarities, threading them into groups that logically and intuitively fit together. Working with these categories/groups, I searched for emerging patterns and themes through analytic memo writing. In order to ensure a comprehensive approach I utilized a four-dimensional conceptual framework in addressing my research question. This allowed me to structure a re-creation of the experiences and challenges that influenced related constituents of the Georgia Tech background check policy and program to consider, adopt, modify, and improve a formal background check policy.

In the first article of this short series, *Evolution of Background Check Policy at Georgia Tech* (Owen, 2012), I provide a full report of the technical dimension of my conceptual framework for this study. This dimension formed the main crux of my research and through interviews and document analysis consisted of exploring: (1) The experiences of key constituents associated with Policy 8.1; (2) The evolutionary changes of Policy 8.1 from its original release in June of 2005 through its three major revisions spanning from 2006-2010; and (3) Program statistics and financial data of Georgia Tech's Office of Human Resources Background Check Program. As a follow-up, my second article, *A Four Dimensional Study of Background Check Policy in Higher Education* (Owen, 2012), provides a comprehensive report of the remaining three (normative, structural, and constitutive) dimensions of my conceptual framework.

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