ENHANCEMENT OF QUALITY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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Abstract

This paper first seeks to characterize qualitative research on human experience and behaviour and then reviews an emerging canon of good practice and ways of assessing the validity of interpretations based on qualitative data. It takes the perspective of the consumer the readers and reviewers of qualitative research and assumes that research should be believable and useful to parties beyond those who participated in doing it. It focuses on criteria by which the quality and rigor of reported qualitative investigations may be evaluated. The topics and methods of qualitative research are at least as varied as those of traditional non-qualitative research.

***Keywords**: Qualitative research, Qualitative methods, Analyses, Interpretations*

Introduction

Qualitative research is a type of social science research that collects and works with non-numerical data and that seeks to interpret meaning from these data that help us understand social life through the study of targeted populations or places. The topics and methods of qualitative research are at least as varied as those of traditional non-qualitative research. This review seeks common features rather than differences. It is intended as a description of what qualitative researchers are thinking and doing, not as a position piece or a proposal for a new approach. The researcher has tried to describe common characteristics and practices in ways that are accurate and plausible, recognizing that some researchers may find them objectionable.

Defining Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a form of scientific inquiry that spans different disciplines, fields, and subject matter and comprises many varied approaches. Qualitative methods can be used to understand complex social processes, to capture essential aspects of a phenomenon from the perspective of study participants, and to uncover beliefs, values, and motivations that underlie individual health behaviours. Such research can also illuminate aspects of organizational context and healthcare delivery that influence organizational performance and quality of care. Qualitative studies are often exploratory in nature and seek to generate novel insights using inductive (starting with observations and developing hypotheses) rather than deductive (starting with extant hypotheses and testing them with observations) approaches.

Qualitative research can be distinguished from quantitative research in several ways. First, whereas quantitative research counts occurrences (eg, estimates prevalence, frequency, magnitude, incidence), qualitative research describes the complexity, breadth, or range of occurrences or phenomena. Second, whereas quantitative research seeks to statistically test hypotheses, qualitative research seeks to generate hypotheses about a phenomenon, its precursors, and its consequences. Third, quantitative research is performed in randomized or nonrandomized experimental and natural settings and generates numeric data through standardized processes and instruments with predetermined response categories. Qualitative research occurs in natural (rather than experimental) settings and produces text-based data through open-ended discussions and observations.

The following features seem to researcher to distinguish current qualitative research from received-view research on human experience.

Linguistic Results

In qualitative research, the results tend to be expressed in words rather than primarily in numbers. Dialogues, narratives, and the like are presented without being coded or rated, reduced to a reaction time or a percentage correct or otherwise quantified. Analyses, therefore, must accommodate characterizations that do not boil down to something being greater than or less than something else.

Quantifying the researcher's experience-characterizing his / her mood as 3 on a 10-point scale of depression or his/her position as "agree moderately" with some statement of political values - usually yields are a very limited representation of the experience the researcher actually have. Numbers offer precision in scientific communication and efficiency of aggregation and manipulation (e.g., standard indexes of central tendency and dispersion, statistical procedures), but their characterization of a person's experiences is usually far more impoverished than are his or her words.

Empathy as an Observation Strategy

Qualitative research often uses empathy with participants as an observation strategy. Investigators use their (imperfect) understanding of participants' reports of inner experiences (thoughts, feelings, beliefs, perceptions, intentions) as data and may make inferences about participants' experiences based on observed behaviour and circumstances.

By using empathy as an additional channel of information, qualitative research encompasses the study of meanings, including the purposes and significance that people attach to what they do. It explicitly incorporates information that has often been taken for granted or treated as epiphenomenal or irrelevant in received-view research. Investigators need not assume that their empathic understanding of participants is always veridical; accurate empathy is undoubtedly even more difficult and problematic than accurate perception. But neither must investigators reject their empathic understanding on account of its being less certain than their direct perception.

Contextual Interpretation

In qualitative research, events tend to be understood and reported in their context, insofar as this can be discerned and described by the investigator. Context includes investigators' and participant cultural and personal histories, as well as the immediate setting of the observations.

In everyday discourse, most verbal expressions are indexical they point to specific objects and events, and their original sense and reference can be understood only by examining the context and occasion of their use. Further, the meaning of people's experience and actions is cumulative; in any interview or conversation "an exchange contains the meanings of what has already been said". Conversely, an observation or statement may have many meanings, depending on the context in which it is cast.

Human experience is no less real than objects or observable behaviour. Because experience is fleeting and insubstantial and variable across cultures and circumstances, however, any account of experience will be particularly bound by context. The concept of replication changes meaning when the experiences and behaviour of individuals are considered as dependent upon context.

Polydimensionality Experience

Variation in meaning and human experience is not restricted to just a few dimensions. Each term in a description can be considered as a different dimension. Qualitative research, using language, draws on a vast lexicon of dimensions to represent its observations.

The usual received -view strategy is to project experience onto a few dimensions and to study those, abstracted from context. As an extreme example, Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957) showed that the connotative meaning of all words could be described on just three dimensions (evaluation, potency, activity). Such dimensions account for reliable variation on particular rating

tasks, but they overlook most of the richness of language and of experience, and they can deceive us by pretending the psychological world is much simpler than it is.

Characterizing father as positive, powerful, and active may be accurate, but this conveys little of what the word means when used by a particular individual. Psychological effects may not stay confined to the dimensions that investigators have chosen to examine. Consequently, research that is limited to small numbers of dimensions may not detect major effects of a psychological manipulation or intervention that any human observer would recognize.

Nonlinear Causality

Qualitative research accommodates nonlinear causality. Nonlinear systems, in which elements feed back to influence their own subsequent behaviour, often behave unpredictably, or chaotically. Even though a system is completely deterministic, it may be impossible to predict its detailed behaviour more than a few steps in advance, due to sensitive dependence on initial conditions. Trivial differences in starting points can lead to enormous differences in outcomes because of feedback processes. A standard example is the weather, which cannot be predicted more than a few days in advance because the relevant variables (e.g., temperature, pressure, moisture, wind) continually feed back to influence themselves and each other.

Empowerment as a Research Goal

Many qualitative commentators have advocated empowerment or emancipation or enhancement of participants as a legitimate or even a central purpose of research. The imposition of an interpretation on participants' experiences can be seen as a political as well as a scientific act, and it inevitably has implications for the power relationships among the research's producers, consumers, and participants. In this view, all research is political, so that ethical issues are inseparable from scientific ones. Taking this perspective directs attention to (a) constructing interpretations that further participants' interests rather than maintaining vested interests, and (b) involving participants in the construction of the interpretations.

Tentativeness of Interpretation in Qualitative Research

In Theories and interpretations that accept linguistic, emphatically derived data, the limitations of context, shifting dimensions, technically chaotic causal relationships, and goals that include empowerment of participants entail a much more tentative view of scientific knowledge than the one we are used to. Qualitative interpretations do not require universal quantifiers and scope modifiers. Investigators do formulate general interpretations and theories, but they do not claim that their formulations hold in all cases or that they can specify definitively when the formulations will or will not hold. They express varying degrees of confidence regarding their formulations' consistency and scope, but they are not surprised by exceptions.

Alternative Forms of Discourse

The epistemological shift supports a rhetorical one. Qualitative research in psychology has moved beyond the traditional restriction to didactic discourse into hermeneutic and narrative forms. The alternatives retain a commitment to validity (at least in the sense described later) and to clear communication, but they abandon the received-view goal of producing lawlike generalizations.

Good Practice in Qualitative Research

How does one design, conduct, and report high-quality qualitative research? What procedures and criteria can one use to evaluate research that is linguistic, empathic, contextual, polydimensional, nonlinear, and emancipatory? What do reliability and validity look like in reports of qualitative research?

Broadly, both reliability and validity concern trustworthiness. Reliability refers to the trustworthiness of observations or data; validity refers to the trustworthiness of interpretations or conclusions. Although qualitative studies typically do not draw a sharp boundary between observation and interpretation, it is useful to distinguish procedural trustworthiness (contributing to the reader's understanding of the observations) from criteria for judging the trustworthiness of interpretations.

Disclosure of Orientation

First, good practice recommends disclosure by the investigator of his or her expectations for the study, preconceptions, values, and orientation, including any theoretical commitments (collectively, forestructure). Despite inevitable limitations (e.g., investigators' limited insight or inability to articulate relevant preconceptions), these disclosures can help readers infer the observations' meaning to the investigator, and they indicate a starting point for gauging how the study changes the theory.

Explication of Social and Cultural Context

An investigation's social and cultural context entails many assumptions that channel the interpretations. Good practice demands efforts toward making implicit cultural assumptions explicit, by stating shared viewpoints and relevant values as well as the circumstances under which data were gathered.

Description of Internal Processes of Investigation

Like the initial expectations, the investigator's internal processes while conducting the investigation and developing the interpretation-his or her "progressive subjectivity" are part of the investigation's context. How did the investigation affect the researcher? Were particular parts difficult? Was the researcher surprised? Did the data make the researcher change his / her mind? The investigator's responses to such questions illuminate the context of the substantive interpretations and may represent an important source of information in their own right.

Ask "What," Not "Why"

Good practice enjoins qualitative researchers to ask participants questions that they can answer. These may not always include the questions that motivated the inquiry. Although participants' interpretations may (some would say must) be taken into account, these do not substitute for the investigator's interpretations.

Validity of Interpretations of Qualitative Data

Validity concerns whether an interpretation is internally consistent, useful, robust, generalizable, or fruitful. In received-view research, methodologists have distinguished a variety of types, such as statistical conclusion validity, internal validity, external validity, face validity, concurrent validty, predictive validity, criterion-related validity, and construct validity. Qualitative research's epistemological shift of focus, from the truth of statements to understanding by people, entails a shift in criteria for evaluating interpretations.

Dealing with Investigators' Biases

Like all research, qualitative research is biased. The foregoing validity criteria are vulnerable to distortion by investigators', participants', and readers' expectations and values. For example, coherence and uncovering could reflect selective perception, selective reporting, or self-fulfilling prophecies. Consensus could reflect conformity pressures or established researchers selectively training new observers to see what the theory says they should see.

Conclusion

Qualitative investigations of human experience typically report linguistic rather than exclusively numeric results, use empathy with participants as an observation strategy, interpret observations contextually and polydimensionally, accommodate nonlinear (technically chaotic) causal processes, and may seek to empower participants. Their interpretations are often tentative rather than lawlike statements, amenable to expression in narrative and hermeneutic forms rather than exclusively in didactic discourse. By revealing rather than avoiding the investigator's orientation and personal involvement in the research and by evaluating interpretations according to their impact on readers, investigators, and participants, qualitative research shifts the goal of quality control from the objective truth of statements to understanding by people.

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