Quality in qualitative research – what ‘standards’ can we use?

ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods Seminar Series

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The Social Research Centre
Outline

- *How do we know if qualitative research is done well? What should we be checking?*

- Development of ‘frameworks’ for qualitative research - the story so far
  - Existing debates, criteria, frameworks and standards
  - Application in a ‘commercial’ social research world

- Translating to practice – developing a workable, paradigm-neutral framework of ‘guiding principles’ for good qualitative research
  - Design – team, method, sampling, recruitment …
  - Fieldwork – risk, ethics, data collection tools, language and culture …
  - Analysis – approach, handling data, reliability of coding …
  - Reporting – transparency, usefulness, robustness, reflexivity …
The Social Research Centre

- Based in Melbourne, established 2002, owned by ANU Enterprise (2014)
- Dedicated to high quality quantitative and qualitative social research and evaluation
- Over 50 permanent staff, plus 125 seat CATI call centre
- Clients predominantly commonwealth and state/territory government and its agencies, universities and not-for-profit sector
  - sole contractor, consortium, sub-contractor, partnerships etc
- Qualitative Unit established 6 years ago to provide specialist services to clients (from design to fieldwork, analysis and reporting)
Qualitative research at the SRC

- Small unit (4 dedicated researchers) works both independently and alongside quantitative researchers
- Between 10-15 projects at any one time (3 months to 2 years), eg
  - NDIS qualitative evaluation (longitudinal, IDIs)
  - Community attitudes to environmental issues (survey plus FGs)
  - Providers of the new jobactive employment services (16 case studies)
  - Job seekers’ experiences of jobactive (20 FGs plus survey)
  - ELEC (Aboriginal families’ participation in pre-school, 10 communities)
  - Social cohesion in 10 LGAs (50 FGs)
  - PIR of Anti-bullying provisions (Fair Work Commission) (c.70+ IDIs)
  - Parole decisions (survey and IDIs reviewing ‘mock’ parole cases)
- Cognitive testing of survey instruments also sits in the Unit
Some of our ‘quality’ challenges

- Small team – limited access to additional resources
- Time-sensitive, unpredictable workflow
- Budgetary parameters, revenue and margin-conscious
- Often working with vulnerable groups, on sensitive topics and in disadvantaged communities
- Sampling (access to populations, small samples etc)
- Reliance on 3rd parties (sampling, recruitment, transcription etc)
- Need for transparency and accountability
- External scrutiny (clients, SME advisers, academic partners, competitors etc)

Can raise questions such as......
....How....

- do we do a ‘good job’ and still deliver on time and within budget?
- do we ensure that our approach is transparent?
- do we ensure we have a ‘fit for purpose’ design?
- do we ensure we are compliant (ethics, privacy, risk, data protection etc)
- confident can we be in the findings?
- Etc etc

Ultimate desire to deliver a high quality ‘product’ to our clients, to use resources efficiently, to accurately capture and represent the respondent voice, and to answer the research questions posed
Some varied responses…..

I’m never convinced that we need a standard or a framework. Why? A standard stifles innovation and polices research. Moreover the different epistemologies, ways of collecting data, and forms of analysis, for example, mean that these differences need to respected. For example, … the criteria applied to a critical discourse analytic study would be very different to that of a narrative analysis, grounded theory study, or thematic analysis etc. I prefer to think of criteria as list like. Our job then is to be aware of the diverse criteria and different qualitative approaches so that we can do great work and keep standards high (UK academic/qualitative specialist)

We readily acknowledge that the belief that there is no paradigm capable of encompassing all of qualitative research has merit in its own right, but in our view, that belief has nothing to do with how well the methods that are used to generate qualitative data and findings are conceptualised, implemented and evaluated (US researcher)

Here [Australia], lots is about numbers and squeezing everything into a very tight framework, whilst the time impact of ethics regulations – and the general tardiness of some people and organisations, especially when it comes to recruitment – is largely ignored (Australia practitioner)

Despite the diversity of views on the feasibility or desirability of criteria, we feel there is a fair degree of support for the idea of providing guidelines for assessing the quality of qualitative evaluations, as long as these are not rigidly procedural and take account of key features of qualitative research (UK practitioner)

There are many good reasons why 70 years of debate about anthropology, ethnography and the development of qualitative research methodology has not yet produced such agreement [on standards] (UK academic)
‘Frameworks’ for assessing the quality of qualitative research...
Examples of ‘guiding principles’

- Naturalistic criteria (Lincoln and Guba, 1980s)
- Principles of qualitative research, and appraisal questions (Spencer et al, 2003)
- Universal and contingent criteria (Symon and Cassell, 2004)
- Quality framework for qualitative research (Meyrick, 2006)
- Total Quality Framework for qualitative research (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015)
Assessing the ‘trustworthiness’

Box 3.3 Lincoln and Guba’s ‘naturalistic’ criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Scientific term</th>
<th>Naturalistic term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Truth value</td>
<td>Internal validity</td>
<td>Credibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicability</td>
<td>External validity or generalisability</td>
<td>Transferability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Dependability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutrality</td>
<td>Objectivity</td>
<td>Confirmability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Adapted from Guba and Lincoln (1981) and Lincoln and Guba (1985).*
Principles of (qualitative) research

- Well founded, plausible arguments
- Systematic & transparent collection, analysis & interpretation
- Advances knowledge and understanding
- Addresses evaluation questions posed

Credible in claim
Contributory in knowledge
Rigorous in conduct
Defensible in design

Source: Adapted from Spencer et al, 2003
18 appraisal questions (Spencer et al, 2003)

- Designed to help UK policy makers make sense of commissioned (qualitative) evaluations of government policies – a framework to assess quality

- What should we be asking of qualitative evaluations? ‘Quality Indicators’, eg
  - Was the research design appropriate? Is it defensible?
  - Are the data reliable?
  - Was there adequate documentation of research?
  - How credible are the findings? Are they supported by the data?
  - Can the findings be generalized – scope for drawing wider inference?
  - Sample design, sample inclusion/exclusion defended?
  - How well was the data collection carried out?
Universal and contingent criteria (Symon and Cassell, 2004)

- **Universal criteria**
  - Worthy topic
  - Rich rigour
  - Sincerity (reflexivity, honesty, transparency)
  - Credibility (trustworthy and morally actionable)
  - Resonance (meaningful)
  - Significant contribution (developing knowledge and understanding)
  - Ethical
  - Meaningful coherence (interconnecting design, data collection and analysis)

- **Contingent criteria**
  - By method (differs for observation, focus groups, discourse analysis, visual techniques, case study research)
  - By discipline (Eg, anthropology, sociology, criminology)
  - By epistemology (Positivist, neo-empiricist, critical, post-modern……)
Judging quality and rigour in health research  (Meyrick, 2006)

Figure 1. Quality framework for qualitative research.
## Total Quality Framework (TQF) approach for Qualitative Research (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CREDIBILITY</th>
<th>ANALYZABILITY</th>
<th>TRANSPARENCY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completeness and Accuracy of the Data</td>
<td>Completeness and Accuracy of the Analysis and Interpretations</td>
<td>Completeness and Disclosure in the Final Documentation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### DATA COLLECTION

- Completeness and Accuracy of the Data

### ANALYSIS

- Completeness and Accuracy of the Analysis and Interpretations

### REPORTING

- Completeness and Disclosure in the Final Documentation

### USEFULNESS

- Ability to do Something with the Outcomes
Main common themes:

- Credible
- Transparent
- Systematic and coherent
Quality Framework for Qualitative Research

Considerations for high quality qualitative research and evaluation

**Design**
- Research team and expertise
- Choice of method(s)
- Developing instrumentation
  - Sample size and composition
  - Respondent recruitment
  - Ethics and ethical conduct

**Fieldwork**
- Managing risk
- Informed consent
  - Data collection tools
- Saturation of themes
- Language, culture and literacy

**Analysis**
- Theoretical framework
- Handling data
  - Analysis approach
- Inter-coder reliability

**Reporting**
- Transparency, defensibility, validity
- Usefulness, relevance
- Reflexivity, neutrality, objectivity
Design issues

- Research team and expertise
- Choice of appropriate method(s) and tools
- Developing instrumentation
- Sample size and composition
- Respondent recruitment method
- Ethics and ethical conduct
Research team and expertise

Provision of assurances that the researchers conduct the research thoroughly and professionally:

➤ Do they have the skills, expertise and experience?
➤ Do they have the ‘right’ characteristics?
➤ Researcher bias - no hidden agendas, not ‘close’ to the topic/respondents

Inter-researcher reliability

➤ Has this been considered? Budgeted for?
➤ Particularly important for cross-disciplinary/consortium evaluations (but often overlooked)

Managing fieldwork

➤ Managing diaries, timelines, safety issues, logistics
Choice of methods and tools

So often driven by budget and timelines…. 

Appropriate to the task in hand – ‘fit for purpose’

- How is/was this determined – pragmatism? feasibility? cost? consideration of topic/subject?
- Relative merits of selected approach
- Will it answer the research questions (are the research questions clear?)

Rehearsing what might be missed using this method

- Gold standard vs trade-offs and compromises

Design of instrumentation/questions/themes

- Starting from knowledge base (rather than basis of nothing known), asking the right questions

Consideration of:

- Partnership, co-production, co-design, participatory, user-engagement, inclusive, emancipatory…..
- If this is required, needs to be realistic, achievable, empowering (affordable??)
Sample design and approach

Need to be able to provide justification of sample design...

- Convenience sampling – who’s available (opt-in, around at the time, speaking English etc)
- Theoretical sampling – iterative process to test theory, pick sample, analyse data
- Purposive .... used mostly, based on deliberate section, often a priori characteristics (disability, gender, age, location etc)
- Heterogeneity - a diverse population will need a larger sample
- Nesting – eg exploring alcohol use, or exploring alcohol use and gender differences?

... and sample size

- coverage of interest groups (not proportionate to population)
- saturation of themes, not statistical significance
Recruitment of respondents

- Clarity about the source of the sample – why recruiting them, where details from etc

- If using external respondent recruitment agency/panel
  - Appropriate accreditation/privacy/standards in place
  - Adhere to specified recruitment criteria

- Refusals and ‘no-shows’
  - Who and why?
  - What effect might this have?

- Incentives - purpose (and possible impact of)?
  - As inducement? To cover costs? To pay for time? Format?
Fieldwork

Managing risk
Informed consent
Data collection
Risk, ethics and good practice

- Conducting ethically sound research
  - Good research is more ethically legitimate
  - Gaining ethical approval
  - Collecting only necessary data

- Protecting participants from harm
  - Consideration of minimising distress
  - Privacy and data protection principles – must have a privacy policy in place for respondents
  - Respecting perspectives (eg in focus groups?)
  - Disclosure of ‘at risk’ policy

- Adhere to professional standards
Gaining informed consent

What are the processes of doing this?

- Under 14s require both parental and child consent
- Over 14s require both if topic is sensitive
- Adults acting ‘in loco parentis’?
- Verbal consent if appropriate?

Informed consent:

- needs to cover participation, recording/observing, voluntary nature, understanding of topic/involvement, withdrawal
- For longitudinal research, need to gain consent at each wave
Data collection

- Location of fieldwork, and implications of
  - Neutral, safe locations, accessibility etc

- Presence of a third party
  - Observer, client, other family member etc – can all change dynamic

- Record whenever possible
  - Transparency, allows for accurate record of conversation
  - Minimises risk of selection bias
  - Allows reflection/review/refinement of approach

- Researcher as ‘instrument’ – appropriate qualitative techniques

- Tailoring of approaches for some groups
  - Because of language, culture, style, age, literacy, disability, vulnerability

- Incorporating additional techniques?
  - Most Significant Change/story telling
  - Visual tools – pictures, lego, play dough, drawing, storyboards
Analysis and reporting

Handing data (recording, storing, sharing, transcribing, labelling)

Analysis approach/techniques

Reporting

Record keeping/audit trail of decisions/findings

Reflexivity and neutrality
Analysing qualitative data
Handing qualitative data

- Approach to managing data, anonymising/protecting privacy
  - Secure file exchange system/portal (password insufficient)

- Provide transcription conventions/guidelines
  - Use of external expert transcribers where possible

- Choice of analysis tools/techniques
  - Clear, transparent process from data to findings
  - Is there an audit trail of A→B where A=data and B=findings?
  - Can these steps be retraced and replicated?
Analysis approach/technique

- Inductive approach (generally, not always)
- Clear account of process from data collection to analysis
  - How did systems of classification/coding structures emerge? Who was involved in this?
- Triangulation
  - How do findings sit with other data sources? Can we explain differences? Can we validate back with respondents? Should we?
- Causality (not coincidence), attribution (direct/indirect), counterfactual (would this have happened anyway?)
  - Have these been fully considered in the analysis
  - Can we really substantiate the claims through the evidence
  - Have alternative arguments been presented?
  - Eliminating possible causes of outcomes/narrowing down (eg general elimination methodology)
- Tools to help manage this process
NVivo – coverage of nodes (themes) in each transcript

Sources compared by number of nodes coding
NVivo – comparison of number of items coded, by node (theme)
<table>
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<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
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<td>Source</td>
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<td>Source Size</td>
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Reporting

- Was there a theoretical starting point or a hypothesis for the research?
  - Was this noted/explained?

- Presenting data (use of quotes)
  - Do the findings sound plausible?
  - Are quotes used appropriately labelled?

- Documentation/detail
  - Sampling/recruitment methods described?
  - Discussion guides/interview schedules included?

- Has the report been written objectively?
Implementation?

Still remains the missing piece of the jigsaw – how can we ensure that qualitative findings are translated and implemented appropriately and correctly?????
Key points to take away?

- Credibility, transparency and systematicity need to run throughout the process, from design to reporting.
- Analysis is only as good as the data – data is only as good as the ‘tool’ (the researcher).
- Easy to overlook practicalities, but their influence on quality can be profound.
- Whatever principles, standards, guidance or frameworks are used, creativity and flexibility in qualitative practice remains at the core.
Thank you

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