

Qualitative Research: A Discussion of Frequently Articulated Qualms (FAQs)

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Common issues related to conducting and reviewing qualitative research are examined. Questions of sample size, reliability, validity, generalizability and quality, along with the primary aim of qualitative approaches are addressed relative to the philosophical foundations and epistemological assumptions of qualitative inquiry.

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Qualitative research has enjoyed growing popularity over the past three decades, indicating that its contribution has become increasingly valued. Yet in 15 years of conducting qualitative research and teaching qualitative methodology to graduate students, I have found that several fundamental issues tend to surface with regularity. These issues can be distilled down to roughly a half a dozen “qualms” (here used to refer to a degree of uncertainty or reservation), including: the aim of qualitative approaches to research, the size of the sample, what reliability, validity and generalizability mean within qualitative inquiry, and how quality can be assessed. For those who have such qualms, I offer a few key points to consider if you are asked to review a qualitative manuscript. If you are someone who has faced such qualms in seeking to publish your research, you can probably draw from experience and add to what I propose here.

1. *What, exactly, is the aim of qualitative research?* Most qualitative researchers will agree that the primary goal of qualitative research is to *understand* rather than to generalize or predict (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Hultgren, 1989). A qualitative perspective is required when a phenomenon needs exploration, or further insight. Yet, a qualitative approach should not be relegated to preliminary study status, or positioned as a prelude to the “real study” (i.e., quantitative) that will come later. Qualitative inquiry assumes that understanding, in and of itself, is enough, and that there is value in knowing the *why* behind the phenomenon of interest.

2. *Why is the sample size so small?* Because the aim is not necessarily to predict or to generalize in a qualitative study, sample size is more about saturation than representation. That is, have enough interviews been conducted, observations been made, perspectives been sought, such that a thorough understanding of the phenomenon can be developed? Saturation means that key issues,

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common experiences, and primary points are surfacing repeatedly, and no new information is being uncovered by the data (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). A focus on saturation rather than representation does not mean that the sample population does not reflect the objectives of the research (Mason, 1996). Instead one might ask, *Is the sample, and especially the characteristics of the sample, appropriate given the objectives described by the author(s)? Do the author(s) explain why and how they arrived at the sample?*

3. *What about reliability and validity?* Linking objectives to relevant existing literature is the key to establishing the goals of a qualitative study (McCracken, 1988). Approaches to data collection should be grounded in what is known about the phenomenon, yet also allow for new knowledge to emerge. Questions asked of participants, observations made, or interactions recorded between researcher and participant should logically refer to the objectives and the key issues identified within the literature. In terms of analyzing the data, some qualitative studies use frameworks such as “inter-rater reliability” scores, or numeric values that somehow indicate agreement between people as to what the data say. A more naturalistic approach is to ask the participants to provide an assessment of the “correctness” of the interpretation—commonly referred to as “participant confirmation” or “member checks.” Ultimately, reliability can be assessed by asking, *Do the authors systematically allow the findings to emerge from the data? Does the research do what the author(s) say it does?* (Kvale, 2009).

Validity is a term that many qualitative researchers will not use when discussing qualitative analysis. Instead, it is common to see discussion of the credibility or trustworthiness of the interpretation. Regardless of terminology, research that is worthy of publication should be valid. However, in qualitative research, validity is not measured numerically, and so other kinds of assessment are needed. One might ask, *Is there internal consistency throughout the study, from purpose to conclusions?* (Kvale, 2009). That is, *Was the data collection guided by the objectives, and are these objectives clearly reflected in the interpretation? And, Is the process explained such that the steps in the research design can be clearly traced?*

4. *How can the findings be applied more broadly (i.e., generalized)?* Alongside reliability and validity, generalizability is the third component of what some refer to as the “holy trinity” of the scientific method, and is often the desired outcome of “good” research design. Considering my earlier point that qualitative research is not about generalization, does it necessarily follow that qualitative inquiry is not based on good research design? No. Although qualitative studies are not typically carried out to apply findings generally, this does not mean that they cannot be of broader theoretical value (Silverman, 2006). Grounded theory, or theory that is grounded in the data, is one means of discovering the universal in the particular (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Moreover, conceptual frameworks that pull from existing theoretical constructs are often developed to guide data analysis and interpretation. Findings from qualitative research can therefore augment existing theory as well as prompt insight that helps in the creation of new theory.

5. *How can the quality of the research be assessed?* Well done qualitative research is research that is rigorous, ethical, and can stand up to the scrutiny of others (especially reviewers). Questions that can be considered include, *Is the research carefully constructed and thoroughly executed? If the research involves human participants, are they represented in a fair and just manner? Do the author(s) acknowledge their own particular role in the research process?* The potential for bias exists in all

research regardless of methodology used, but this potential is arguably more obvious in qualitative research. However, in qualitative research, bias is not seen as a problem *per se*. Subjectivity is required for understanding and is therefore critical for a credible interpretation (van Manen, 1990).

The number of publications about qualitative research has grown exponentially in the last three decades, and a few of these publications are included in the references below. However, it is important to note that a little information may not be all that helpful. Qualitative research is fundamentally different from quantitative research, and at the same time, most qualitative studies are quite different from one another. Publications that focus primarily on differences are valuable, but it is important to avoid those that define all qualitative research as simply "not quantitative." Regardless of methodological approach, the ultimate goal of research is not difference, it is *discovery*.

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