

Insight for Writing a Qualitative Research Paper

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The purpose of this essay is to describe how to prepare a qualitative research paper. The essay discusses the crucial components for preparing a qualitative paper. The topics that are addressed are: sample size, sampling procedure, data collection procedure, reliability and trustworthiness, data quality, and integrity of qualitative findings.

Keywords: *methodology; qualitative inquiry; reliability; research design*

Qualitative research helps researchers address issues in a specific context in their research disciplines. There are a number of research approaches which are included under the umbrella of qualitative methods. The social science disciplines have different conventions on best practices in qualitative research. This essay describes the structure of a qualitative research manuscript which is suitable for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. Although the essay refers to qualitative research, similar principles can be applied for quantitative research and for mixed methods which employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a better understanding of research problems than either approach by itself (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

Qualitative research is used for addressing “how” questions rather than “how many,” for understanding real life from the perspective of those being studied, and for examining and articulating processes. Just as quantitative research encompasses many ways to collect data (e.g., survey and laboratory studies) and to analyze data (e.g., structural equation modeling, multiple regression, and factor analyses), so does qualitative research. For example, an individual may choose to collect data using a case or an ethnographic method. However, when analyzing the data, the individual can continue to use case or ethnographic methods or even employ grounded theory. Moreover, qualitative research can be inductive or deductive, and sometimes, it is a combination of both inductive and deductive.

Common reasons for rejecting qualitative research papers include: (i) unclear statement of research question, (ii) unclear structure of the paper, (iii) inconsistency among theories, methods and data analysis, and (iv) inconsistency

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Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal, Vol. 43, No. 1, July 2014 94–97

DOI: 10.1111/fcsr.12084

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in presenting or using the main concepts. The use of poor methodology is another reason to reject a qualitative manuscript. Other reasons could be the researcher's inability to present a convincing defense of the size of the dataset, inability to contextualize the dataset, sample selection bias, poor data collection, inappropriate explanation of methods and analysis, and inappropriate conclusions. To help authors and reviewers, I will present suggestions for preparing or reviewing a qualitative research manuscript for a peer-reviewed journal. These points are drawn from my experience as an author, reviewer, and associate editor.

FITNESS OF PURPOSE IN A SITUATIONAL CONTEXT

When preparing a qualitative research paper, it is important to start with the question, "Are the methods of the research appropriate to the nature of the questions being asked. For example, does the researcher want to understand social processes or social structures? Are the settings, groups, or individuals being examined of a type which cannot be preselected?" In reviewing several qualitative papers, I found that each one mentioned the following, although not necessarily in the same order: (i) to discuss why this research is needed; (ii) to be clear on whether the intent is to build new theory or to elaborate on an existing theory; and (iii) to explain the reason for choosing this particular context and unit of analysis. The researcher needs to explain what is motivating the study and why the methods are appropriate. For inductive studies, articulating the motivation implies that the researcher needs to review the literature to illustrate a gap in prior research and explain why it is important to fill this gap.

METHODOLOGY

All papers must include a methods section that specifies the sample recruitment strategy, sample size, data collection, and data analysis procedure. Authors of qualitative papers should discuss whether they are sampling people, events, or cases and why they are being sampled. In terms of sample size, significance of findings, and generalizability of findings, there is no formally agreed-upon "significance level." There is no specific number of interviews or observations that should be conducted in a qualitative research. How many is enough depends on the question a researcher seeks to answer. Therefore, it is essential for authors to provide a justification for the sample size and its limitation. Researchers should remember that the aim of a qualitative study is not always to predict or to generalize study findings. In a qualitative study, more attention should be given to the quality of the dataset instead of the size of the sample.

PRINCIPLES OF SELECTION

The unit(s) of research may be one or a combination of people, events, institutions, samples of natural behavior, conversations, written and visual material, and so on. The selection of these units should be theoretically justified (e.g., it should be clear how respondents were selected). There should be a clear

rationale for the source of the data (e.g., participants, settings, or documents). Consideration should be given to whether the source of data is unusual in some important way. Limitations of the data such as nonresponse and refusal to take part should be discussed.

CLARITY OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

There should be a discussion of the access process: (i) how data were collected and recorded, (ii) who collected the data, (iii) when the data were collected, and (iv) how the study was explained to participants. Other researchers should be able to replicate the study using the research process described in the text. An explanation of approval from the Institutional Review Board should be stated in the methods section. The procedure for securing informed consent should be provided as well as discussing any ethical concerns that arose during the research.

DATA ANALYSIS

Researchers should describe: (i) how the analysis was conducted, (ii) how themes, concepts, and categories were generated from the data, and (iii) whether analysis was computer assisted (and, if so, how). Assurance of analytic rigor such as steps taken to guard against selectivity in the use of data, triangulation, interrater reliability, expert checking, and trustworthiness should be explained. The researcher's position should be stated (e.g. have they examined their own role, possible bias, and influence on the research). When analyzing the data, some qualitative studies use intercoder reliability scores that indicate the agreement between coders on the interpretation of data. It is common for researchers to discuss the credibility or trustworthiness of the data interpretation.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The research should be "contextualized" by: (i) providing relevant information about the settings and participants, (ii) integrating the phenomena under study into their social context, and (iii) identifying and discussing any particular or unique influences. Quotations, field notes, and other data should be identified in a way which enables the readers to judge the range of evidence being used. Some authors fail to provide the following: (i) distinctions between the data and their interpretation, (ii) the iteration between data and explanations of the data (theory generation), (iii) sufficient original evidence to satisfy the reader of the relationship between the evidence and the conclusions (validity), and (iv) adequate consideration of cases or evidence which might refute the conclusions.

Presenting data is critical for assessing whether successful theorizing is plausible. The data may be in the form of "power quotes" and "proof quotes." Power quotes are the most compelling bits of data that researchers have. Power quotes illustrate the points that increase the credibility of research findings. Ideally, authors are able to provide multiple quotes for each point or argument they are making so that they have proof of what they are saying. Authors

should not expect a quotation to speak for itself. Authors should think about telling their story in an integrative and holistic way.

It is important for authors and reviewers to be aware of different approaches within qualitative research. I will include some references for preparing and reviewing qualitative research (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Krippendorff, 2004; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Maxwell, 2005; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007; Richards, 2005; Silverman, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Wolcott, 2001).

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