

Ethical Challenges in Qualitative Research

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Abstract : Qualitative research is one of the most used researches by many academic disciplines in modern times. Instead of simply looking for the what aspect of research, it speaks about the why and how of research. Qualitative research is sometimes referred to as interpretive research because the main task of qualitative research is data analysis and interpretation. However, the interpretation may be incorrect or biased which in turn affects the findings of research. Qualitative research engages in a method the aim of which is text or knowledge production. No statistical technique is employed or numerical output is produced out of such research. The researcher is instrumental in evaluating and interpreting his observation. Hence, his personal characteristics, preconceptions, theoretical framework that he framed or epistemological commitments he possessed is very likely to influence his analysis and interpretation of qualitative data. The researcher may have to be involved in a series of interactions with his respondents which may again be challenging for both. This paper is an effort to focus on the ethical challenges faced by a researcher while planning and carrying out qualitative studies. An extensive review of related literature has been carried out for the purpose and some guidelines are suggested on their lights so as to overcome such ethical challenges successfully.

Key words: Qualitative Research, Observation, In-depth interview, Focused group, Ethical issues

Introduction

Qualitative research is one of the most used research methodologies used by modern researchers. Unlike quantitative research that deals with the 'what' aspect of research, qualitative research deals with the 'how' and 'why' aspects of research. However in the course of this research, the researcher is confronted with many ethical challenges. As the researcher is doing qualitative research, he is supposed to conduct the study with utmost importance to excellence in quality. This chapter will serve as a useful tool to educational researchers to take judicious decisions in the process of carrying out qualitative research.

The objectives of this paper include the following:

1. To find out the ethical issues implicated in the course of doing qualitative research.
2. To explain the ethical issues involved in analyzing and reporting qualitative research.
3. To describe the common issues involved in evaluating the quality of qualitative research.

The term qualitative research is often used interchangeably with the words such as ethnography, naturalistic inquiry, subjective and post positivistic research (Borg and Gall, 1989). Qualitative research generally includes descriptive studies. More specifically it includes ethnographies and case studies. Sampling is often purposive than random. The methodology of qualitative research usually includes interview and observation. However, case studies, survey and historical research as well as document analysis are other widely used methodologies in qualitative research. The design of qualitative research emerges as the research progress along with the researcher persistently refining and reshaping his methods and research questions.

Characteristics of qualitative research

1. It is conducted in natural setting.
2. Manipulation of variables or environment is almost absent.
3. It highly involves rich descriptions of human behaviors and opinions.
4. The researcher becomes a part of the study by intimately interacting with the respondents.
5. Unlike quantitative research which studies the 'what' aspect of research, the focal point of qualitative research is on 'how' and 'why' aspect of investigation.
6. Unlike quantitative research, the findings of a qualitative study may not be generalized in similar other contexts.

Qualitative research considerably requires more time to design, gather and analyze data. The reporting procedure is also more time taking than quantitative studies. However, the fear of applying statistical techniques in analyzing and interpreting data, many researchers tries to

carry out qualitative research. Though at time these research works are conducted very poorly, we still put them in the category of qualitative research. It may not be that all qualities of a good research will be present to call the study qualitative. But some qualities must be present in the study to consider it qualitative.

Issues in qualitative method

Qualitative research is also known as interpretive research. Here the researcher serves as the 'research instrument' and the respondents as the 'instruments of choice' (Cassell, 2005; Turato, 2005; Rubin and Rubin, 2005). The researcher has to evaluate and interpret what he observes. Hence the potential of the researcher is of utmost importance in this research. An incorrect and biased interpretation may lead to a controversial result. Absence of any statistical analysis or numerical outcome also increases the responsibility of the researcher. The researcher remains as a part of the study starting from defining the research problem to design the research, or taking and making transcription of the interview to analyze, verify and report the observation.

Qualitative research involves methods like Observation, In-depth interviews and Focused group discussions. Observation method again includes structured and participant observation. When gathering data through structured observation, the problems may be-

- Who are the participants of research?
- What are the risks involved in it?
- In what way you will reduce the risks?
- Who requires to give informed consent?

The same data when intended to collect through participant observation, may lead to different sets of issues such as

- Who are the participants of the study?
- What are the researcher's obligations to offer an informed consent to them?
- What information would the researcher require to provide and when?
- What risks are likely to be there with the participants?
- How would the researcher minimize the risks?

Bernad (1988), pointed out that participant observation may be marked with fear and excitement at the initial contact period followed by a type of shock in the next stage as the researcher comes to know about the culture in more detail.

Suggestions:

- No matter what the research methods, the participants should be informed that they are a part of the research problem.
- Show honesty in giving information about your identity or your research project.
- Reveal the purpose of your data collection honestly.
- In case of any conflict, come to an agreeable solution protecting the interest of the participants as well as that of your research method.
- Avoid personal identifiers in your field notes or interview transcripts.
- Keep the collected data in a protected place.
- Share the data only with those people who are a part of your research programme.
- Regularly supervise your group to ensure that research ethics is followed during the whole course of activity.
- As the researcher serves as the instrument of research, he should very cautiously develop the abilities to serve as appropriate human instruments with good interpersonal skill.

Studies involving interview as a data collecting tool use multitude of tools to analyze their data (Van den Berg *et al.*, 2003). These tools range from narrative methods (Mishler, 1986), discourse analysis (Gee, 2011; Wilig, 2014), to conversation analysis (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 2005). In-depth interview is a method which may lead to involve the following issues:

- What are your obligations to the participants in terms of minimizing their anxiety related issues during the course of interview?
- Should you put an end to the interviews and modify your consent form?
- What are your concerns about such interview?

Besides this, in the data collection procedure, the researcher attempts to have an access to the thoughts and feelings of the participants. This is not an easy job, as it requires asking people to give information about things or events that may be very personal to them. Thus, after the data being collected, it is the most important responsibility of the researcher to preserve and protect the data. Mechanisms for such protection must be evidently expressed to participants and it must also seek approval of a relevant board working for reviewing research ethics before conducting the actual research. Novice researchers in the field of qualitative research may ask

for guidance from an experienced qualitative researcher before working on the project (Sulton and Austin,2015)..

Similarly in a focus group discussion you may have to answer questions such as:

- What probable risks are likely to occur to women participants as a result of taking part in your project?
- How could you assist in reducing those risks?
- As a part of program, what are your obligations about focus group discussions in general and for this one in particular?

Suggestions:

- Plan well advance and provide adequate referrals to participants.
- Make the participants understand the benefits of such participation.
- Make them also understand the risks they may face as a result of being a part of your research.
- Make every effort to protect confidentiality of the participants at the time of reporting.
- If the research involves highly sensitive issues and the respondents are children or vulnerable individuals, they should have access to an advocate during the data gathering process.
- The role of the researcher as a visitor, stranger, initiator or any other and that of the financing body (if any) should be clarified to the participants.

Issues in analysing and reporting:

In qualitative research, the researcher has to collect data form multifaceted interviews or narratives to collect data and produce a description of the same. So, qualitative research that deals with sensitive issues may pose potential emotional risks to both the researcher and participants. Again, in the course of interview, respondents may disclose various information which are very much relevant to their personal life. In case of ethnic studies, the researcher has to spend considerable time with the participants and becomes a part of the culture (Sanjari *et al.*, 2014). The long presence of the researcher in the field may influence the behaviour of his respondents. This may be a barrier in getting actual data from the group. Spradley's (1980), suggested that the site and surroundings of research should be chosen in a way so as to derive the best answer to research questions.

Suggestions:

- Clear protocols for dealing with distress should be available there so that it can be referred whenever required.
- Qualitative research dealing with sensitive topics may include peer support programme consisting of experts to facilitate the process.
- Researchers should refrain themselves from disclosing private information which is not related to the study.
- A post- interview comment sheet should be maintained to assist the researcher to take note of the feeling of the interviewee.
- The researcher should continuously update his skill of investigation and find novel techniques to carry out research.

Issues in data analysis and report writing:

Data gathered through qualitative research are considered as rough materials that serve as the basis of analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Though such data includes photos, objects, video tapes of behaviour etc., human words or behaviour very often serve as the data that is to be analyzed by the researcher. One has to analyze the data continually throughout the process of data collection. Miles and Huberman (1994), have reported three types of data analysis procedure. They are data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification.

Data reduction: In qualitative research, the researcher is packed with large amount of raw data. Goetz and Le Compete (1984), state that the researcher has to aggregate, compare, contrast and order data. He has also to speculate the meaning of data in the process of data analysis. This speculation may guide the researcher to make new observations, carry out new interviews or find new patterns for data review. All such complications require categorization of collected data to identify similar cases and patterns.

Writing up field notes every day is an integral aspect of qualitative research (Maharaj, 2016). If not recorded quickly, then observations may be forgotten later. Therefore, each small observation should be recorded immediately after leaving the research site. Even researchers suggest that the recorded data should be analysed daily to find out patterns and relationships and make modifications in the data collection procedure accordingly. Written transcripts of audio or video tapes should also be prepared thoughtfully on a regular basis.

Data coding: In the process of data analysis, the researcher has to categorize the data which is usually called data coding. In qualitative research, coding can be used to calculate frequencies or to develop quantitative data (Goetz and Le Compte, 1984). It enables the researcher to label, store and retrieve data according to their codes (Strauss, 1987). Pre assigned codes are used to collect and/or analyse data. Coding may be done from similar researches conducted earlier or from pilot studies conducted by the researcher himself. However, in both the cases, it needs continuous addition or refinement of the codes as the study progresses. Most of the qualitative researchers suggest that coding should be analysed very cautiously so that the ‘big picture’ is not lost while counting.

Data management: This may involve physically organizing data, organizing data using computers and data display. Physically organizing large amount of raw data collected in this research requires examining, sorting and re-examining of data. Various methods are involved in qualitative research to organize, retrieve and analyse data. Simple use of note books and papers may be used for the purpose. The use of computer and various software is now increasing to retrieve, codify, analyse and manage qualitative data. Displaying data makes the meaning of data easier. Data can be displayed by the use of tables, charts, drawings, diagrams, matrices etc. These are sometimes regarded as critical and underutilized means of data display (Miles and Huberman (1994).

Report writing

In writing a qualitative report, researchers have the choice of selecting their own style of writing. It may be in the form of a narrative or that of a case study. There is no accepted convention for writing a qualitative research report (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). Researchers emphasize the use of ‘thick description’ and moderate use of verbatim quotations (the exact words of the participants) to describe the real situation and subject. In spite of the variations in writing, qualitative research constitutes a theme and includes an introduction, the core material and a conclusion (Wolcott, 1990).

Issues in evaluating qualitative studies

The method of evaluating qualitative research also varies depending upon the nature of investigation. There is no conventional consensus about the norms and standards on which a research should be judged (Rolfe). There is lack of transparency in the data analysis procedure

and findings. Being the researcher's personal opinion, it is also subject to the researcher's personal bias (Sandelowski, 2004). Therefore, qualitative studies should be well-designed and the objectives, methods and procedures of the study should be meticulously adjudicated to nullify research bias (Pathak, Jena and Kalra, 2013).

Adler and Adler (1994), pointed out that data gathered through participant or non-participant observation suffer from subjectivity and biasness of the researcher. This raises a question against the reliability and validity of research. To increase the validity, the authors suggested cross checking of data and patterns by multiple observers or teams. Intense observation conducted over a long period of time is suggested by Borg and Gall (1989). Along with verbal exchange, the researcher should also observe and analyze subtle cues. To increase reliability, the authors suggested repeated systematic conduction of observations in varying conditions i.e. varying space and time. Verification of reliability can be done by the emergence of similar results. Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Erlandson et al. (1993), have pointed out prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, purposive sampling, referential adequacy and thick description as some of the techniques for ensuring the quality of qualitative research.

The meaning of validity as described in qualitative research is quite different from quantitative research. *Validity*, or whether the research adheres to the best standards of qualitative science, is described in terms of rigour, credibility, trustworthiness, and believability (Russell and Gregory, 2003).

Further, qualitative research is used to gain insights into people's feelings and thoughts. This may provide the foundation for a prospective stand-alone qualitative study or may help researchers to work out survey instruments to employ in a quantitative study. A mixed method involving different types of research in the same study can also be adopted (Sulton and Austin, 2015).

The above suggestions are just like the mount of an iceberg seeing which the researcher can develop some expertise to analyse and interpret his data methodologically or to report his work purposefully. However, he needs to go through other relevant literature extensively to do his research more successfully. The statement of Savenye and Robinson (1996), seems very much noteworthy here: Just as one cannot learn to conduct research by reading one book, a researcher who determines to conduct research to be labelled qualitative, will need to go through sources beyond this paper to decide his or her own assumptions on which to base the work.

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