What is good qualitative research?

Methods @ Manchester

Professor Catherine Cassell

22 November 2012

Aims

- To provide an overview of some of the key criteria through which we assess the quality of qualitative research

- To consider the implications of these criteria for your research.

Plan

1. The complexities of qualitative research

2. Quality as the application of criteria

3. Types of criteria:

   1. Positivist criteria
   2. Universal criteria for qualitative research
   3. Methodological criteria for qualitative research
   4. Epistemological criteria for qualitative research

4. The criteriology debate

5. Building quality into our qualitative research

6. Conclusions: What does this mean for me?

- Think about a piece of research that you read recently that impressed you and made you think 'Wow'!

- What was it about that piece of research that impressed you?

The complexities of qualitative research

- A wide variety of methods

- Used in a range of different philosophical positions

- Problematic notion of the qualitative / quantitative distinction

- All mean that defining quality is problematic and contested.

Quality as the application of criteria

- Within the social sciences we typically apply criteria that come from positivist approaches

- Different criteria are appropriate to different methodological and epistemological approaches

Positivist criteria

- Internal validity: does what are interpreted as the "causes" produce the "effects" in a given piece of research? This therefore refers to the researcher's ability to rule out alternative explanations

- External validity: can the findings be generalized beyond those respondents participating in the research?

  – Population validity: the extent to which it is possible to generalize to a wider population

  – Ecological validity: the extent to which it is possible to generalize from the actual social context where the research has taken place to other social contexts

- Construct validity: In operationalizing concepts does the instrument measure what it is supposed to measure.

- Reliability: refers to the consistency of the research, for example is it possible for another researcher to (i) replicate the research design with equivalent populations; (ii) find the same results.

Types of qualitative criteria (Symon and Cassell, 2012)

- Universal (e.g. Guba and Lincoln, 1985, 1994; Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis and Dillon (2003)

- Contingent

  - By method (e.g. Hammersley, 1989; 1990; 1992)

  - By discipline (e.g. Hirschheim & Klein, 1999)

  - By epistemology (e.g. Johnson et al, 2006)

Some alternative universal criteria (Lincoln and Guba, 1985)

- Replace internal validity with *credibility* (authentic representations);

- Replace external validity with *transferability* (extent of applicability);

- Replace reliability with *dependability* (minimization of researcher idiosyncrasies);

- Replace objectivity with *confirmability* (researcher self-criticism).

Some alternative universal criteria for data analysis (Morse, 1994)

- *Comprehension* (learning about a setting);

- *Synthesizing* (identifying patterns in the data);

- *Theorizing* (explanations that fit the data);

- *Recontextualizing* (abstracting emergent theory to new setting and relating it to established knowledge).

Some other universal guiding principles

- *Contributory* in advancing wider knowledge or understanding about policy, practice, theory or a particular field

- *Defensible in design* by providing a research strategy that can address the evaluative question posed

- *Rigorous in conduct* through the systematic and transparent collection, analysis and interpretation of qualitative data

- *Credible in claim* through offering well-founded and plausible arguments about the significance of the evidence generated.

from Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis and Dillon (2003)

General publication criteria: an example Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology

- Relevance to Journal

- Clarity of Expression

- Economy of Exposition

- Methodological Adequacy

- Data Analysis

- Theoretical Importance

- Relevance to Practice

- Consideration of Research Context

- Contribution to Knowledge

- Breadth of Interest

Contingent by method: Hammersley's notion of internal reflexivity for ethnography(1989; 1990; 1992)

Researcher's critical scrutinization of the impact of their field role (s) upon research settings and findings so as to reduce sources of contamination thereby enhancing *ecological validity (i.e. naturalism).* For example:

- avoid over rapport with organization members;

- treat setting as anthropologically strange;

- retain balance between insider and outsider;

- retain social and intellectual distance to preserve analytical space.

Contingent by epistemology (see Johnson, Buehring, Cassell and Symon, IJMR, 2006)

Different criteria for different kinds of qualitative research based on different epistemological commitments:

- Positivist

- Neo-empiricist

- Critical

- Postmodern

Epistemology	Assessment criteria	Example questions to ask
Positivism	•Internal validity •External validity •Construct validity •Reliability	Is the process described in sufficient detail to be replicable? Is the sampling sufficiently random/extensive and the analysis sufficiently rigorous for results to also pertain to other samples?
Neo-empiricism (Interpretivism)	Internally reflexive audit trail demonstrating •Credibility •Dependability •Confirmability •Ecological validity •Transferability/ logical inference	Is evidence provided that this is an authentic representation of what happened? Have alternative explanations been considered & negative cases analysed?
Critical Theory	•Accommodation •Catalytic validity •Epistemically reflexive dialogue •Discursive democracy	Has the researcher engaged in reflexive consideration of their own position? Have hegemonic regimes of truth been identified, unsettled & challenged? Does the research lead to possibilities for change?
Postmodernism	•Giving voice to previously silenced textual domains •Unsettling of the hegemonic •Articulation of incommensurable plurality of discourses etc •De-centring the author through multivocality	Have assumptions & commitments been deconstructed? Is analysis & argument subjectively credible? Has the author reflexively considered own narrative & elements of its production?

But things are not that straightforward ……

The 'criteriology' debate. This debate:

- Is something that qualitative writers have strong views about (e.g.: Garrat and Hodkinson, 1998; Smith, 1990)

- Complicates the notion of the existence of consensual criteria for good qualitative research.

The difficulties in developing assessment criteria

- All criteria for judging research quality contain a set of assumptions about what good research is. This is a highly contestable domain and informed by different philosophical assumptions

- Difficult to regulate an area where the guiding philosophy is one of enhancing creativity and exploration (Seale, 1999)

- Checklists of criteria could potentially lead to the over-formalization of qualitative research and the development of new knowledge.

Why are assessment criteria important?

- We exist in a world where research is peer reviewed – look at the debate about how to define impact in the forthcoming REF

- We need to train our students how to do 'good' qualitative research

  BUT THIS IS AN AREA OF HEATED DEBATE

- "Power and politics are part of the process of judgement and always have been" (Smith and Hodkinson, 2005)

- Seale (1999) argues that 'interpretivist criteriologists' have produced a set of bewildering criteria.

Alteheide and Johnson (1994)

Present a review of interpretivist positions on validity. Include the following:

- Successor validity

- Catalytic validity

- Interrogated validity

- Transgressive validity

- Simulacra/ ironic validity

- Situated validity

- Voluptuous validity

Farewell to criteriology Schwandt (1996)

'We must learn to live with uncertainty, with the absence of final vindications, without the hope of solutions in the form of epistemological guarantees. Contingency, fallibilism, dialogue, and deliberation mark our way of being in the world.'

Building quality into our qualitative research

Three different types of skilled research practices which are dynamic and involve some critical appraisal of the research process.

- Reflection: Similar to the use of a mirror: What happened and what will you do differently next time?

- Reflexivity: "the critical appraisal of the researcher's taken for granted assumptions about their research and their own role within it" (Cassell et. al. 2009)

- Phronesis: Being "street smart" (Zackariasson et. al, 2006: 421) .

Quality as ongoing reflection and reflexivity

- To what extent is your epistemological perspective reflected in your writings?

- Is your writing coherent and understandable? Does it make a good story?

- How convincing are you in presenting your ideas?

- Who are you presenting it to? How will you engage your audience with your ideas?

Reflecting on the process of conducting your research

- What is your relationship with your research participants?

- What is the impact of your methods of data collection?

- What are you learning?

- How might you do it differently next time?

- What are the implications for what you find out*?*

Reflecting on the outcomes of your research

- What are the 'gems' to come out? Are there one or two points in your research that stand out as something significant/important?

- What is the 'wow' factor of your research? Does your research make someone else sit up and take notice?

- So what? Is your research of interest to anyone else apart from you?

Conclusions: What does this mean for us?

- Think about the criteria you are using to assess your own research

- Tell the reviewer / examiner what they are and why they are appropriate

- Seek to deliver on those criteria

- There are many different ways of assessing the quality of research

- A key part of that is to reflect and monitor your own learning through the research process

- Go out and enjoy!