The University of Manchester
Manchester
Business School

What is good qualitative research?

Methods @ Manchester

Professor Catherine Cassell

May 13th 2010

The University of Manchester
Manchester
Business School

MANCHESTER 1824

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. Alternative sets of criteria
4. The criteriology debate
5. A ‘contingent criteriology’
6. Generalised criteria for publication
7. Quality as ongoing practice
8. 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.

Examples of alternative criteria for qualitative research

- Lincoln and Guba (1985; 1985) trustworthiness and authenticity criteria
- Morse (1994) Data analysis criteria
- Hammersley criteria for ethnography
- Guiding principles: Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis and Dillon (2003).

Some alternative 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 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

Hammersley's notion of internal reflexivity (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.

Some other 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)

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.

The University of Manchester
Manchester
Business School

MANCHESTER 1824

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

The University of Manchester
Manchester
Business School

MANCHESTER 1824

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.’

Towards a contingent criteriology (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

Assessing Positivist Research

- Are the results internally valid? (is the data collection and analysis sufficiently rigorous?)
- Is construct validity demonstrated? (are the phenomena of interest adequately operationalised? i.e. are the researchers measuring what they say they are measuring?)
- Are the results reliable? (Is the process described in sufficient detail to be replicable? Has there been a reliability check computed such as inter-rater reliability coefficients?)
- Are the results generalisable? (Is the sampling sufficiently random/extensive and the analysis sufficiently rigorous for results to also pertain to other samples?)

The University of Manchester
Manchester
Business School

MANCHESTER 1824

Assessing Neo-empiricist/ Interpretivist Research

- Are the findings synthesised? (patterns in the data identified)
- Are the findings dependable? (free from researcher bias, effects of bias minimised or otherwise accounted for)
- Are the findings credible? (was the research process appropriate? Is evidence provided that this is an authentic representation of what happened e.g. audit trail?)
- Are the findings confirmable? (alternative explanations considered and negative cases analysed)
- Are the findings ecologically valid? (do they speak to real life events and contexts?)
- Are the findings transferable? (has extent of their applicability elsewhere been considered and is this feasible? Have the findings been related to established theory?)

The University of Manchester
Manchester
Business School

MANCHESTER 1824

Assessing Critical Theory Research

- Has the researcher engaged in reflexive consideration of own position? (are their beliefs and commitments clear?)
- Have hegemonic regimes of truth been identified? (have established truth claims been unsettled and challenged?)
- Are the readers and the participants encouraged to see the world in new ways?
- Does the research lead to possibilities for change? (are there actions identified to bring about valued change?)
- Have participants in the research confirmed the credibility of the analysis?
- Has researcher considered how this context may speak to other contexts? (are similarities and differences between this

Assessing Postmodern Research

- Does the author claim a postmodern approach while seemingly not understanding or pursuing it?
- Have assumptions and commitments been deconstructed? (has socially constructed nature of concepts and phenomena been analysed? e.g. have boundaries been challenged? Are accepted/assumed concepts problematised? Are persuasive strategies revealed?)
- Is analysis and argument subjectively credible? (to the reader)
- Has author reflexively considered own narrative and elements of its production? (e.g. how does the paper 'work' as a convincing narrative?)

The University of Manchester
Manchester
Business School

MANCHESTER 1824

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

Research practices

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) .

The University of Manchester
Manchester
Business School

MANCHESTER 1824

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!