

EXPLORING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH:

Exploring Qualitative Research Rigour and Credibility

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Because writing is such an important feature of creating a paper, I will begin this article with some thoughts related to writing, in particular my own writing. I had not given writing much thought until I read Pelias (2011), specifically when I read it the second time. I loved his style of writing and wished I could be like that but alas, that is a long way into the future, if ever.

I was intrigued with the idea of writing functioning as both a realization and a record Pelias (2011), finding the language that crystallizes thoughts and sentiments, and the “writing into” a subject (p 660). These are all new thoughts to me and interesting to explore. The concept of realizations emerging whether as “is-ness” or “perhaps-ness” claims, unfolding as a continuum from the personal to public, and the personal and public realizations informing the writers about themselves as individuals was interesting and taught me a lot about myself. I now have a better understanding about my writing style, which leans toward being a narrative writer, and I also realize that my stories often carry a sense of social responsibility and the need to further social justice (p. 661).

The compositional strategies of evocativeness, reflexivity and embodiment left me really wondering where I fit. I do strongly believe in the idea that research should matter to everyday lives, and I want to discover and communicate new ways of being. I feel my work most often comes forward as emancipatory pedagogy, ethically charged and calling for action. According to Pelias (2011) this type of writer strives to move beyond description, to become critically engaged, and to create utopian spaces. They are cultural workers, laboring on behalf of social justice (p 665). I believe I am striving toward being that kind of writer. I loved the evaluative position of being flat or engaging with writing, there have been enormous learning in this article and I can only wish to always try to produce engaging material.

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In keeping with the suggestions related to writing from Wolcott (2001), I will continue with my story about qualitative research with the events as I learned them. I have now reached the point of exploring analysis, interpretation and reporting of qualitative research and trying to understand the importance of the rigour, credibility and the challenges that are involved. I will continue my journey and will explore transcribing, analysis and interpretation of data, including the rigour and credibility required in all areas.

Transcribing Data

The challenge of qualitative analysis lies in making sense of massive amounts of data and since there are no formulas, tests or rules for determining significance, reliability and validity Patton (2002) suggests that you do your very best with your full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of the study (p 433). In my research I will have a lot of data to transcribe and from experience that transcribing is a time consuming part of analysis. I also appreciate that the importance of accuracy and contextualizing the data can't be overstated. Despite transcription being used in basic research in a variety of disciplines, Lapadat (2000) posited that there has been relative little attention given to the theoretical issues and methodological implications of the place and process of transcription. In her conceptual look at the place of transcription in qualitative inquiry she focused on purpose, paradigm and quality (p. 204). Her view is that one complete, exhaustive system that suits all purposes is not achievable and the need to use different transcription strategies for the data depends on the research purpose. She suggests that the researcher makes transcription decisions depending on purpose, theoretical stance, and analytic intent (p. 206). For my purpose I will be using a critical theory and will include all contextual information such as laughs, coughs, pauses, inaudible segments, because this provides a richer description of the data and a truer reflection of

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what was said. One concern related to a verbatim transcribed document is the reaction of the participant when they are given the transcribed document to review for accuracy and clarity. I have had shock reactions from participants in previous researches and explained that in verbatim transcribed documents oral language may appear unprofessional and repetitive that is normal. I did not think about participant reactions until that time, and now know it is important that the participant be advised that it is normal and not a reflection on their literacy or intelligence.

Although it is important to transcribe with accuracy Lapadat (2000) reminds us that the transcripts are not the data, the audiotapes are the data, and a careful researcher ought to go back to the tapes repeatedly to re-listen, rather than relying only on the transcripts (p. 208). The information on the data tapes is unique and cannot be captured in the exact same way again so it is critical that the tapes are protected and in a safe place. Clarity of purpose is also seen as important, thus the transcription process must be rigorous and meanings that are not apparent in the taped record because it is too fleeting, holistic, and complex can be grasped as the researcher listens and re-listens (p. 214). The benefits of transcribing your own data were discussed and although there are many ways to train and check on hired transcribers I would prefer to do my own transcribing because it is another way to know your data and provides greater assurance of accuracy. I would certainly have someone else review my transcripts against the audio tapes to make sure I did not miss anything. The importance of a clear and thorough write up was emphasized by Lapadat (2000) when she specified that when researchers contextualize and negotiate method as a means of interpretive seeing, there is no shortcut to explicit description. The importance of accuracy and clarity was also identified by Patton (2002) when he said “what people actually say and the descriptions of events observed remain the essence of qualitative

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inquiry” (p 457). Once the transcribing is complete, the next task is analysis, coding and interpretation.

Analysis, Coding and Data Interpretation

Although some analysis and possibly coding can be happening during the data collection and transcribing that is only the beginning. Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings and the challenge of qualitative analysis lies in making sense of a massive amount of data (Patton, 2002). There are a number of guidelines for analyzing qualitative data and applying guidelines require judgement and creativity. Because each qualitative study is unique, thus the analytical approach will be unique (Patton 2002 p 433). In a search to find a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns or themes within data, I explored the Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis article which provided a step-by-step guide. This article addressed the active role of the researcher in identifying patterns/themes and selecting which is of interest and reporting on them. The article also discussed what counts as a theme and suggested that a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set (Braun & Clarke 2006 p 82). I am considering using an inductive approach for my analysis because this process for coding the data is not trying to fit it into a pre-existing theory or concept. Although I will have specific questions to ask participants Braun & Clarke (2006) suggest that with the inductive method the themes identified may bear little relation to the specific questions asked of the participants (p. 83). The concern about coding to research questions is that the analysis would not provide the rich description and would limit the information gained. As a researcher one cannot totally free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological stance, but can be aware and of this, and look beyond for other patterns or themes that will enhance the overall analysis.

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Braun & Clarke (2006) discussed two approaches around which themes are to be identified; the semantic or explicit level and the latent or interpretative levels. They propose that a thematic analysis at the latent level goes beyond the semantic content of the data, and starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualizations – and ideologies – that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data (p. 84). It is suggested that thematic analysis involves searching across a data set to find repeated patterns and that the questions be considered before and during a thematic analysis. I do like Braun & Clarke (2006) step-by-step process guide and description of the process (p. 86). It provides a guideline and clear reasoning for each step. Braun & Clarke (2006) also identify potential pitfalls to avoid and what makes thematic analysis. According to them one of the criticisms of qualitative research from those outside of the field is the perception that ‘anything goes’ (p. 95). Although qualitative research cannot be subjected to the same criteria as quantitative approaches, it does provide methods of analysis that should be applied rigorously to the data (p. 95). I think a checklist is important for all qualitative research not just for thematic analysis and helps ensure you have covered all bases. According to Braun & Clarke (2006) the following checklist provides important points to consider:

1. The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for ‘accuracy’.
2. Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.
3. Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach) but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.
4. All relevant extracts for all each theme have been collated.
5. Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.

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6. Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.
7. Data have been analysed – interpreted, made sense of – rather than just paraphrased or described.
8. Analysis and data match each other – the extracts illustrate analytic claims.
9. Analysis tells a convincing and well-organized story about the data and topic.
10. A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.
11. Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly.
12. The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated.
13. There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done – ie, described method and reported analysis are consistent.
14. The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.
15. The researcher is positioned as active in the research process; themes do not just emerge. (p. 96)

I put attached the total checklist because I feel it is a good checklist to have beside your computer when writing up your research; it can apply to any method of analysis and will help ensure you have covered all features. Patton (2002) also provides options for organizing and reporting qualitative data, he suggests that purpose guides analysis. As an example he looks at various types of research approaches and for scholarly qualitative research he suggests the published literature on the topic being studied helps bring focus to a particular study and that the analytic focus derives in part from what one has learned that will make a contribution to the

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literature in a field of inquiry (p. 434). I like the way Patton (2002) provides insight into the particular type of research being conducted and how he systematically introduces and discusses each phase. He explains how with the fluid and emergent nature of naturalistic inquiry analysis begins with the fieldwork but he also cautions that too much focus on analysis while fieldwork is still going on can interfere with the openness of naturalistic inquiry, which is its strength (p. 436). I like the notion of thick, rich descriptions providing the foundation for qualitative analysis and reporting and its capacity to open up a world to the reader with the detailed description of the people and places. Patton (2002) cautioned about careful separation of description from interpretation which made me realize they were two very separate processes, with the description laying the groundwork and the interpretation answering the questions. Braun & Clarke (2006) and Patton (2002) discuss the importance of doing all or some of the interview transcriptions yourself. Patton (2002) suggests that typing and organizing handwritten field notes offer another opportunity to immerse you in the data in the transition between fieldwork and full analysis (p. 441). I am also aware of the importance of protecting the data both from loss and from others and will make sure I make a backup copy and keep the master in a safe place. I will also keep my data in a locked filing cabinet to protect the participants whom I promised confidentiality. Patton (2002) suggests having several copies; one copy for writing on and one or more for cutting and pasting. Having carefully collected and transcribed your data the process of interpretation begins with an inductive analysis looking for patterns, themes or categories and developing a coding scheme.

Although there is software like NVivo that is very helpful in the process of conducting inductive analysis Patton (2002) describes a very clear traditional process for coding data, finding patterns, labeling themes and developing category systems (p.463-466). The rigour of

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building and developing the foundational descriptive phase, classifying and coding creates the framework for interpretation. As Patton (2002) suggests, interpretation, by definition, involves going beyond the descriptive data and means attaching significance to what was found, making sense of findings, offering explanation, driving conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, considering meanings, and otherwise imposing order on an unruly but surely patterned world (p. 480).

When discussing promoting social justice, Ellingson (2011) suggest that:

Researchers cannot remain uninvolved – to refuse to advocate or to assist is to reinforce existing power relations, not to remain impartial. When we speak out, we move beyond the important work of knowledge creation and theory building to apply our scholarly resources to benefit people more directly. The more varied our methodological toolbox, the more opportunities we have to creatively address social inequalities and work for positive change. (p. 606).

I do like the idea of writing from a multimedia perspective to provide creativity and finding ways to give voice to those whose voices and messages in the stories I collected. Ellingson (2011) when discussing producing research that meets the specific needs and interests of diverse audience suggests adopting varied presentational norms that span the qualitative continuum in order to access particular outlets to be well within the boundaries of ethically sound practice (p. 606).

Credibility is one of the most important aspects of qualitative inquiry and Patton (2002) reminds us that there are three distinct inquiry elements 1) rigorous methods 2) credibility of the researcher and 3) philosophical belief in the value of qualitative inquiry (p. 552-553). This is

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one area that worries me - as a researcher can I live up to the rigour? as a new researcher how do I develop credibility? I do know I have a strong belief in qualitative inquiry. Triangulation is an area that I need to learn more about and at the moment I think the use of different data collection methods and triangulation of different sources and using analysts to review finding would be the methods I would use. For me the basic question for will is how can I make sure my qualitative inquiry meets all of the criteria of worthiness?

Conclusion

Patton (2002) says those engaged in qualitative inquiry as a form of critical analysis aimed at social and political change eschew any pretense of open-mindedness or objectivity; they take an activist stance (p. 548). He goes on to say the “critical” nature of critical theory flows from a commitment to go beyond just studying society for the sake of increased understanding. Critical theorists set out to use research to critique society, raise consciousness, and change the balance of power in favor of those less powerful. Being very interested in critical theory and having a concern for those who are emancipated I hope I can have an open mind and be open to all ideas. I know I do have a problem taking off the advocate hat and putting on the research hat but I am trying very hard to become a credible researcher. I have learned a lot this semester about qualitative inquiry but still feel there is so much more to learn. As a want be critical theorist with a genuine interest in qualitative inquiry I can only say I am willing to learn and will use all the rigour I need to become a future credible researcher.

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