# Chapter 8
# From Qualitative Research to a Journal Article

**Abstract** There is a world view and art to writing qualitative research that can be misconstrued, particularly by those inexperienced with qualitative research methods. The chapter identifies common "missteps" in writing the qualitative research report. Chapter 8 walks the reader through each important writing task associated with qualitative research, from the title and abstract to each section of the manuscript. The chapter also includes guidelines and checklists that writers can use to assess each component of a manuscript and generate publishable qualitative research articles.

A group of doctoral students is enrolled in the first of three research courses that focus on qualitative methods. One student comments, "When I read some examples of published qualitative studies, I noticed some things. The people were referred to as participants rather than subjects. I also saw examples of the participants' verbatim comments in several places in these articles." These two observations help to explain how the qualitative researcher/author's style departs from that of the quantitative researcher/author's approach. Quantitative research has its origins in agricultural experiments. For example, a few acres of land are divided into plots and a single variable is manipulated to see which conditions (e.g., different seeds, plants, or fertilizers) result in the best crop yield. The conditions here are relatively easy to control and one can say with some confidence what caused the observed effects. Qualitative research, on the other hand, has its roots in sociological study of human beings. The researcher (literally) lives with the population under study, makes no attempt to manipulate variables, and takes copious observational notes that include the actual words of individuals under study. Qualitative study is naturalistic and the researcher generally is more of a participant/observer. Then, because the focus is on human beings rather than plants, there is much more unpredictability. A statement that captures the crux of qualitative research is widely attributed to Albert E. Einstein, "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted."

Scholars seeking to write and publish qualitative research rely far less on numbers to respond to questions and rely instead on words and images. They are all about capturing the lived experience of their participants. As a result, writing qualitative research typically requires some mastery of narrative discourse because the story is told through words. Rather than striving for generalizability across situations and dismissing the "outliers", qualitative researchers revel in the particular and are



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fascinated by the unusual. Rather than asserting that the data speak for themselves and using statistical analysis to guide interpretation, writers of qualitative research invite multiple perspectives on the data they present, acknowledging that their point of view is but one of many possible interpretations. This does not mean, however, that "anything goes". Qualitative researchers look for patterns, supported by their data, just as quantitative researchers use statistical formulas to bolster their arguments. One type of research is not "easier" than the other; rather, both rely on rigor of different types and both are used to answer specific research questions.

A good example that is applicable in many fields is attrition amongst college students pursuing a degree and/or certification or who are novices in a profession. Quantitative researchers would tend to get a little bit of data from a large number of people; for instance, a national survey of attrition among nurses during their first 5 years of employment. Conversely, qualitative researchers' claims to authority would tend to rest on depth than breadth; they might conduct interviews with a small number of professionals who left the profession in hopes of understanding the influences on a decision to exit the profession. The nature of the research questions determines whether qualitative or quantitative approaches are the best fit.

Numerous academic disciplines, especially the social sciences—use qualitative research as a mode of inquiry. Since qualitative researchers use different methodologies and writing styles, it is difficult to describe how to write a research study. Qualitative research is composed of many approaches that are used for data collection, analysis and writing the report. What makes a good qualitative research report?

**Online Tool** The National Science Foundation offers and helpful overview of the most commonly used qualitative data collection methods posted at: http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/1997/nsf97153/.

There is no "one size fits all" answer because qualitative research is not a single practice; it involves a wide range of philosophies, research purposes, intended audiences, methodologies, data sources, and reporting styles (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This chapter guides you through the process of writing a qualitative research report. Its goal is to motivate both novice and experienced researchers to systematically write a qualitative research report that is of publishable quality.

**Online Tool** To get a sense of the different "world view" of qualitative and quantitative research, watch as two avatars debate the strengths of each paradigm https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddx9PshVWXI.

## Understanding Qualitative Research

To illustrate the characteristics of qualitative research, consider this hypothetical study of patients diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). This disease is more commonly referred to as "Lou Gehrig's Disease" after the famous baseball player who was debilitated by the condition. It occurs when specific nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord that control voluntary movement gradually degenerate. The loss of these motor neurons causes muscles to weaken and waste away. Early symptoms include loss of motor control in hands and arms, tripping and falling, persistent fatigue, and twitching/cramping. There is no cure. Ultimately, paralysis sets in and the patient can no longer speak, swallow or breathe (Source: MedicineNet.com). A quantitative researcher would study patients from a "counting" perspective—how many people have the condition, how long they survive, if particular populations seem more susceptible, and what treatments can alleviate their suffering. While this is very important information, the "lived experience" of ALS would be of most interest to qualitative researchers, who would raise questions such as the following:

- How do participants describe changes in their physical condition and the resultant limitations since they were first diagnosed with Lou Gerhig's Disease? How do they make sense out of living and coping with the debilitating trajectory of the disease?
- How do people afflicted with ALS construct a definition of the disease? What metaphors and symbols do they use in these descriptions?
- What perceptions do they have of interactions with family members and friends related to their condition?
- How do they describe the medical personnel, medical treatments, and health care agencies and policies they have encountered?
- What are the emotional responses and consequences of the disease for patients? How has ALS shaped their concepts of self?
- How do ALS patients make sense out of their affliction?
- How do they talk about their terminal illness and prepare for their impending death?

As this example illustrates, description and interpretation of lived experience are the primary goals of qualitative research. Qualitative and quantitative research differ in at least five essential ways:

1. Philosophical outlook and underlying assumptions
2. Ways in which research time is invested
3. Strategies for gathering and analyzing data
4. Nature of the contributions to knowledge
5. Voice in which findings are communicated.

Table 8.1 compares/contrasts the researcher's role in qualitative and quantitative research.

**Table 8.1** The researcher's role in qualitative and quantitative research

| | Qualitative | Quantitative |
|---|---|---|
| Philosophy | Aligned with phenomenology; regards individual variation as the focal point of research | Aligned with logical positivism (the scientific method); seeks to delineate procedures that other researchers can replicate |
| Mode of thought | Depends on inductive/metaphorical thinking; regards all research as interpretive | Depends on deductive/linear thinking; relies upon the data to "speak for themselves" |
| Approach | Emphasizes depth over breadth (e.g., case study, in-depth interviews, etc.) | Favors breadth over depth (e.g., surveys, large scale assessments, etc.) |
| Researcher's stance | Seeks to engage in dialogue with others or even to function as an advocate for underrepresented or oppressed groups | Seeks to speak with the voice of authority and remain at a distance from the subjects |
| Perspective on findings | Invites multiple perspectives and expects varying interpretations of study findings | Asserts own interpretation as the most reasonable or accurate, given the control exercised over the variables |
| Analysis | Uses writing skills and the narrative mode to synthesize observational data and artifacts | Uses statistical formulas and computation to analyze numerical data |
| Claims to truth | Bases claims to truth on the verisimilitude of data that have been gathered from different sources to reinforce credibility | Bases claims to truth on the scientific method and mathematical precision |
| Contributions | Illuminates thinking by shedding light on the particular in great detail | Informs through carefully controlled procedures designed to justify the generalizations from a sample to a larger population |

Qualitative research is empirical and is conducted in a natural setting. Researchers gather data on the phenomenon they are studying. Qualitative researchers become stationed in the participants' natural environment for a lengthy period of time to examine the phenomenon and different circumstances that affect it. Whereas the rigor of quantitative research relies on statistical precision, qualitative research depends on the depth and duration. Qualitative researchers organize the data to support their ideas, hypotheses, and actual definitions. Qualitative researchers investigate qualities or entities to understand them in a specific setting. Their research is grounded on the concept of contextual understanding. Qualitative researchers believe that the individuals' specific physical, historical, materials, and social surroundings influence the way they think and act, which are interpreted by drawing on their larger contexts (Smith, 1987).

Qualitative research uses an inductive and interpretive (Van Maanen 1988) approach to describe an account of the individuals' insights of reality through their dialogue, which is used to develop part of the texts. Qualitative researchers use observations to investigate human behavior in depth and study the participants' explanations for their behavior, including descriptions of particular ways that individuals experience and understand a phenomenon. The description focuses on who said what to whom as well as the what, where, when, why, and how of a specific situation. It records in detail situations that occur during the period of study, which allows qualitative researchers to explain the individuals' practices. Qualitative study assumes that there is not one, universal truth but may truths—depending upon the perceptions of the people in the process. It documents these multiple perspectives through meticulous descriptions of authentic events in real-life situations that shed light on the individuals' social processes, interactions, and meanings. If, for example, you wanted to conduct a qualitative study to explore the reasons that doctoral candidates give for remaining at the "all-but-dissertation" stage, you would interview them to get their perspectives rather than send out a survey.

Traditionally, qualitative methods generate information only on the specific cases that are investigated. Unlike quantitative research, the goal of qualitative research is not to generalize from a representative sample to the larger population using statistical formula. Instead, qualitative research describes the particular in considerable detail and invites others to decide the implications of the study for their situations. Qualitative researchers prize depth over breadth: they study individuals, social groups, or specific contexts as ways to illuminate the phenomenon under study. The role of the qualitative researcher frequently is referred to as "participant observer" because the researcher is immersed in a context to attain the "emic" or insider's perspective from key informants. Qualitative research aims for less distance between the researcher and the researched; in fact, they use the word "participants" rather than "subjects" to convey the idea that research is conducted with (rather than on) people in the study.

**Activity 8.1: Qualitative Research Questions**

The questions that qualitative researchers ask differ are intended to describe. Rudestam and Newton (2014) identify five basic types of questions:

1. Chronology: How does the process develop over time?
2. Critical incident: What are the noteworthy events in the process?
3. Key influences: What appears to facilitate (or hinder) the process for these participants?
4. People: Who are the key participants in the process and what are their roles?
5. Outcomes: What are the outcomes for these participants in this setting?

Draft some qualitative research questions for a study you would like to conduct.

## Qualitative Research Methodologies

Qualitative research uses many methods of inquiry that have an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its field of study. The purpose of the qualitative researchers' study helps them to select from a range of qualitative research methodologies (e.g., narrative research, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, case study) and data sources (e.g., interviews, questionnaires, documents, photographs, observations) to understand and describe social phenomena. There are several different research approaches, or research designs, that qualitative researchers use. Creswell (2013a, b) provides the following examples:

- *Narrative* has ethnographic characteristics that focus on storytelling where a story is described, analyzed, and interpreted.
- *Phenomenology* has a description of a phenomena based on the way informants construct meaning without using theories.
- *Ethnographic research* is a practical study of a specific culture and their understandings of their cultural framework.
- *Grounded theory* is an inductive research methodology that is based on the observations of several data sources including quantitative data, review of records, interviews, observations, and surveys.
- *Historical research* describes past and present-day events based on a current framework to consider probable solutions to contemporary issues and problems such as: Where have we come from, where are we, who are we now, and where are we going?

Qualitative researchers also have their personal styles and writing techniques. For instance, a narrative study describes an individual's life, an ethnography depicts an individual or group's cultural behavior, and a case study has an in-depth description of a case or cases (Creswell 2013a, b). The major tasks for qualitative researchers include analyzing and coding the data, using related research to interpret the meaning, and generating themes to write a scholarly publication.

**Online Tool** The University of Missouri-St. Louis offers a chart that provides an overview of qualitative research methods http://www.umsl.edu/~lindquists/qualdsgn.html.

## Writing the Qualitative Research Report

Each qualitative research design has a repertoire of research methodologies and requires a different style of reporting, so writing a scholarly qualitative research article to be published in a reputable journal becomes challenging. Although there are fewer hard rules in writing the research report in qualitative research, the manuscript must follow the journal's guidelines.

**Table 8.2** Outline of the qualitative research process

| Stage of process | Caveat |
|---|---|
| *Conceptualizing and planning the study* | |
| Identify the research problem | At the beginning, the topic of the study is far-reaching but with time it becomes more focused |
| Write a literature review | The literature review directs the researcher to the prominent issues related to the research problem |
| Identify, choose and get permission to enter research sites | Sites are identified and selected based on the extent to which they provide researchers with information to address the research problem |
| Design the study | At the beginning the design tends to be very open in the expectation that it will be narrowed as the study develops. Temporary goals and purposes are typically established, but as the study progresses, they will be reviewed and revised |
| Attend to ethical issues | Ethical issues need to be considered, because qualitative researchers usually have a personal relationship with the participants |
| *Conducting the study* | |
| Collect data | Interviews, artifacts, observations, and conversations are used to collect data |
| Analyze data | Sometimes data are collected and analyzed at the same time |
| Disseminate outcomes | Research outcomes are disseminated through publications or presentations |

The sections below provide some instructions on writing a publishable qualitative study. Based on the restrictions found in journals, specific practices are described with examples to clarify the procedures. Note that some of the examples that follow are fictitious, so it is inappropriate to cite "real" references. Therefore, in some of the examples the indicator (ref) or (refs) is used to indicate that appropriate references would be cited there. Where names of authors have been used, they are also fictitious. The subheadings in this paper (such as illustrated thus: *Literature Review*) are used to indicate headings that might be used in the research report.

Most qualitative research studies have a flexible design. Clissett (2008) and Polit and Beck (2014) suggest an outline of the qualitative research, along with caveats about each stage (see Table 8.2).

In writing the qualitative research report, it is important to consider five features: (1) emergent design, (2) literature review, (3) sampling strategies, (4) data collection, and (5) data analysis (Clissett, 2008).

## *Emergent Design*

The design of a qualitative study needs to be flexible; hence the term "emergent design" is used to describe it. Researchers begin by developing ideas on ways to collect the data and make revisions as their study progresses. The flexible design includes selecting participants and sampling strategies. Participants are selected and

recruited based on the knowledge they can contribute to the study, which can be amended as the study progresses. Qualitative researchers are usually often guided by the criterion of data saturation. In other words; data collection terminates when little that is new emerges from the data.

## *Writing the Introduction*

The introduction establishes the scene and puts the research in context. Researchers declare the particular research topic of focus for their study and describe findings in related published studies. They explain the significance of their study and state the research questions, which might be very general. For example, "How do teachers assess their practices?" The research questions guide researchers in developing the manuscript. Researchers use the research questions to describe the purpose of the study. They could state that the purpose of the study was to address the research questions. For example, a research question might be, How do teachers respond when they are required to implement a new curriculum? At the end of the manuscript, researchers need to be able to determine to what extent the purpose of the study was reached and the research questions were answered. Therefore, it is important that the research questions are clearly stated. Major components of the research question can be used as headings or subheadings within the manuscript.

## *Writing the Review of the Literature*

Research questions guide researchers to lead their thinking about their research. The review of the literature provides an understanding of major concepts, theoretical framework, and research bases for the study. A rationale is established with a brief description about the approach that was used to conceptualize the study. Findings from both qualitative and/or quantitative studies are presented. The way the findings of the study relate to those in prior research and how this study can add to prior knowledge is discussed. Previous research is carefully selected and reported in an integrated manner. The report explains who conducted the research and when. What were the procedures and results? An example of such reporting might be as follows:

> *In a small scale study of 15 teachers who went to teach in the public school after working at a Montessori School for 10 years, Brown (ref) completed two rounds of interviews to identify the factors that those teachers used to deal with pressures associated with their new teaching position. He found that most teachers depended on family or close friends for support. Additional strategies that they reported using to cope with pressures included breathing exercises, physical activities and recording significant events in a diary. A small number reported that they had considerable difficulty managing their job-related stress. There were no age or sex differences.*

Most related studies should be described in this way. Others can be grouped together. For example, if a number of studies have been carried out using similar methods, with similar outcomes, these can be reported as follows:

> *A number of studies used the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction* (*MBSR*), *which was developed by* Kabat-Zinn (1990), *to show that it is a particularly helpful intervention to reduce stress for primary school teachers* (*multiple refs*).

## *Reporting on Sampling Strategies*

In qualitative studies, the sample usually depends on the key informants' accessibility and willingness to participate in the research project. Purposeful sampling (rather than random sampling) is used to recruit volunteers with experiences related to the phenomenon under study (e.g., homeless military veterans, school superintendents fired from their jobs, emeritus faculty members who continue to publish after retirement, undocumented immigrants from Mexico). Researchers begin by enlisting participants from the target group. They then ask these participants to recommend other members of that group to add to the total number of key informants. The sample grows in size as the study gets rolling, hence this is referred to as "snowball sampling." There is no argument made that this is a representative sample because the goal is to study individuals rather than to generalize from a sample to a population, as in quantitative research. Sometimes qualitative researchers go to a research site (such as a school) that has all the participants that they need. Therefore, in the sample section, researchers need to describe the number and type of participants in their study.

**Example:** *Fifteen teachers agreed to participate in the study. Snowball sampling was used to identify participants by asking each teacher who was interviewed to identify another teacher who had knowledge about the situation. While there is no definitive rule about the number of participants recommended for this type of qualitative study*, *several researchers have recommended between six and 30 informants*, *depending on the depth and duration of the interviews and observations* (*refs*.). *Some qualitative researchers have conducted single-subject studies in this field* (*refs*); *therefore*, *the researcher assumed that 15 teachers would provide sufficient varied and detailed accounts for the purposes of this study*.

## *Explaining Data Collection*

Researchers differ in the way they collect data. Some researchers, such as the authors of this book, believe qualitative data should be collected based on a *theoretical framework*. Other qualitative researchers argue that theory will impose a structure on the data too early and instead rely entirely on "thick description" about how

the data were collected, analyzed, and findings interpreted. When scholars believe that qualitative research requires theoretical framework they use it to guide the pursuit of their research questions (Phillips, 1986). Either way, qualitative researchers need to describe in detail how they collected the data, including the research methodologies and data sources.

If you do not use quantitative data collection techniques such as frequency counts, test scores, or Likert scales, what methods would you use? The tools of the qualitative researcher rely on words and images much more than numbers. In general, these tools are observational field notes, conversations, in-depth interviews, and document and artifact analysis. The in-depth interview is usually used. It can be a semi-structured interview where the researchers use a short list of questions as a guide during the interview but more questions are added based on the participants' responses. Qualitative researchers listen to the participants and ask them to expand or clarify relevant issues. Seidman (2012), for example, has developed a three interview strategy. The first interview develops history/background, the second focuses on details of current experience, and the third reflects on meaning. Most qualitative researchers use interview and observation methods to collect data. They systematically observe and record the participants' words and actions as well as describe the context. However, researchers use a variety of data collection techniques to construct a detailed account of a single or multiple case. How these techniques were used need to be described. For example, a doctoral student sought to study the leadership styles of female university presidents. She "shadowed" several of them for a few days, analyzed public documents from their respective universities, interviewed them, and asked them to write about their most and least successful decision or initiative during their tenure as president.

**Activity 8.2: Qualitative Data Collection**

Think about a qualitative study that you would like to conduct. Given that the main types of data collection are observations, interviews, and artifacts, what types of data would you want to collect? Make a list. Then draft an explanation of your data collection strategies.

The examples above can be adjusted to use with other data collection approaches. Qualitative studies are more convincing when researchers use multiple approaches to collect data. They become the sources of their validity. Using a combination of interviews, observations, documents, and/or artifacts enriches the quality of qualitative research because this results in triangulation, defined as evidence from multiple sources to increase validity.

## *Describing the Data Analysis*

Analyzing qualitative data can be perplexing. There are no worldwide guidelines to analyze, interpret, and summarize data. Researchers usually group narrative texts into a logical structure. The data analysis goes beyond description and become

interpretive by examining what the participants said or did to understand and interpret their meaning, attitudes, and values.

Qualitative researchers vary in the way they report their data analyses. An extensive amount of literature on how to analyze qualitative data and examples is available in texts such as *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (Saldaña, 2013), *Qualitative data analysis*: *A methods sourcebook* (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013), and *Analysis and interpretation of ethnographic data*: *A mixed methods approach* (*Ethnographer*'*s Toolkit*) (LeCompte & Schensul, 2012). Regardless of how researchers write the analysis section, the process needs to be reported to readers in a way that identifies—and justifies—the methods selected. These methods need to (a) be related to the purpose of the study and (b) describe specific strategies (member checks, triangulation, etc.). Burnard (2004) provides the following example:

> *All of the interview transcripts were read by the researcher and coded in the style of a grounded theory approach to data analysis* (*refs*). *Eight category headings were generated from the data and under these all of the data were accounted for. Two independent researchers were asked to verify the seeming accuracy of the category system and*, *after discussion with them*, *minor modifications were made to it. In the grounded theory literature*, *a good category system is said to have* '*emerged*' *from the data* (*refs*). *Other commentators have noted that*, *in the end*, *it is always the researcher who finds and generates that system* (*refs*). (Burnard, 2004, p. 178)

In a 5-month study, Saracho (2004) identified the roles that teachers assume in young children's literacy-related play experiences, she analyzed her systematic observations and videotapes of the teachers' actions and interactions to identify the teachers' roles. The following is part of her description.

> *To categorize the roles of the teachers in a literacy-play environment*, *episodes were identified and transcribed from a series of videotapes. Precise transcriptions were made of the teachers*' *and children*'*s actions and interactions. The roles of the teacher were selected from all the documented episodes. A methodical process that conformed to a defined set of criteria was employed in determining and eliminating the categories* (Saracho, 1984). *Specifically*, Saracho's (1984, 1988a, 1988b) *procedure of analysis was used to categorize and delineate the roles of the teacher where the transcriptions are read*, *reread*, *and divided into sections that depict discrete units of literacy-related play behavior. Such units were categorized based on the pertinent role of the teacher that was defined. Frequency counts of behaviors in connection to each role were calculated*. (Saracho, 2004, pp. 201–202)

Qualitative researchers need to identify and describe how they analyzed the data in relation to their research questions and purpose of the study. The descriptions need to provide sufficient detail on what they did, including member checks, triangulation, and any other methods that were used.

**Activity 8.3: Qualitative Research's Demands on the Writer**

A quantitative study of college students' library use would tend to rely on numbers (e.g., tabulating circulation figures) while a qualitative study would rely on words (e.g., observations of and interviews with library patrons). Qualitative research questions focus more on how; in this case, the actual ways that students use the library. How might the writing demands for each task differ? Make a two-column chart that compares/contrasts the skills that are most necessary for writing quantitative and qualitative research.

## *Writing About Findings*

Some researchers report only their findings, while others simultaneously report their findings and support them with findings from previous studies. The examples from Burnard (2004) in Table 8.3 illustrate the difference between these two types of reporting for a study on learning to cope.

Some researchers prefer to identify themes or categories from the data. They believe this is an integrative strategy in analyzing the data. Since qualitative analysis usually requires some cutting and pasting, there is a continuous possibility that when the data are reduced to manageable chunks, they may be reported without enough context to provide an accurate meaning. Skillful reporting of qualitative findings involves more than selecting a few pithy quotations and interpreting their meaning. The data excerpts need to be related to the interpretations. For example, in a study on the roles that teachers of young children assume in the classroom,

**Table 8.3** Ways of reporting qualitative findings

| Report only on findings | Including previous studies in findings |
|---|---|
| A number of respondents found that they learned to cope by talking about their stress to mentors, clinical practitioners and educators. In particular, they found it useful to read widely on the topic as a way of attempting to understand what was happening to them. One suggested that: | A number of respondents found that they learned to cope by talking about their stress to mentors, clinical practitioners and educators. In particular, they found it useful to read widely on the topic as a way of attempting to understand what was happening to them. This echoes the findings of Daniels (Ref) who found that 'educational therapy' in which students were helped to find as much information about stress as they could, made a difference to their coping with it. One respondent suggested that: |
| *I think it takes the sting out of it really. Once you have some idea of what stress is about and what causes it, you can start to deal with it. The worst thing was, like, not knowing what was happening to me. I learned quite a bit from a computer search I did in the School* | *I think it takes the sting out of it really. Once you have some idea of what stress is about and what causes it, you can start to deal with it. The worst thing was, like, not knowing what was happening to me. I learned quite a bit from a computer search I did in the School* |
| Another respondent noted that simply understanding stress did not necessarily help you to cope with it | Another respondent noted that simply understanding stress did not necessarily help you to cope with it. The respondent seems to indicate the gap that many psychological researchers have noted between cognitive understand and changed behavior (see, for example, refs) |
| *I know the theories about stress but somehow, in the end, it's you. You have to cope somehow. It's where the theory breaks down a bit. Knowing the theory doesn't always help you to cope* | *I know the theories about stress but somehow, in the end, it's you. You have to cope somehow. It's where the theory breaks down a bit. Knowing the theory doesn't always help you to cope* (p. 179) |

Saracho (1984) used the data to identify categories and descriptions of the teachers' roles in early childhood education. She identified, described, and supported with previous research the roles of decision-maker, organizer of instruction, diagnostician, curriculum designer, manager of learning, and counselor/advisor. Studies that are used to support the findings need to be clear and relevant. Researchers need to provide sufficient evidence to show that the previous published studies support the findings.

Qualitative studies are sometimes criticized for being anecdotal and individually interpreted. To address this concern about researcher bias, findings need to meet two of Guba and Lincoln's (1989) trustworthiness criteria: Credibility and confirmability. *Credibility* refers to the degree to which the findings correspond to the participants' personal interpretations. *Confirmability* refers to the degree to which the data support the findings and conclusions (Clissett, 2008). Therefore, it is important that qualitative researchers provide enough information about the participants (e.g., participants' expressions and beliefs) to support their findings and make them "come alive to the reader" (Drisko, 2005, p. 592).

**Online Tool** Harvard University's Foundations of Qualitative Research in Education website provides print and video guidelines on writing qualitative research questions, conducting literature reviews, and writing research proposals. http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=qualitative.

## *Writing the Discussion and Conclusion*

The substance of the discussion depends on how the findings were presented. If in the section on findings, researchers support their findings with previous published research, the discussion section may be deleted. However, if only the findings were presented, then the discussion should present the findings and support them with those of previous published studies. The discussion section focuses on explaining the findings and their interpretations. Researchers report the findings in a complete and accurate manner. Qualitative researchers need to avoid speculating about the meaning of their findings or interpreting the participants' meaning without support from the data (Burnard, 2004).

Most published qualitative research articles have a concluding section to (a) relate the findings to the previous studies, (b) formulate innovative conclusions, (c) reaffirm the limitations of the study, and (d) provide recommendations or implications based on the findings of the study. Since all studies have limitations, qualitative researchers need to provide a statement (or restatement) of the limitations of the present study to caution other qualitative researchers who might consider replicating the study and provide recommendations for practice, policy, or future research (Drisko, 2005). For more about writing this section, see Lather (2013).

**Activity 8.4: Triangulation in Qualitative Research**

Usually, qualitative researchers use multiple data sources (a process called triangulation) or another person to code data to address threats to validity. In the qualitative study you've imagined, identify some mechanisms for increasing credibility and confirmability.

In the conclusion section, researchers summarize their findings and make practical recommendations based on their findings and interpretations. They may evaluate their study, share the limitations, and address the questions that were not answered. All conclusions need to be based on the data that were collected and appropriate original data that were described to support interpretations and the possibility that the findings of the study can be transferred to other contexts or settings. Qualitative researchers need to justify this transferability. The conclusions section of a qualitative research report also makes recommendations for future research.

**Online Tool** For an example of a qualitative study, watch "Sample Qualitative Research Outline" PowerPoint posted on YouTube by Rey Ty (2008) www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfjD-hj91Qc.

## *Writing the Abstract*

The abstract is the last step in writing the manuscript. It summarizes the complete study in one paragraph. Although the length of the abstract usually ranges between 200 and 300 words, its content should briefly include the following elements:

- A well-defined statement of the purpose of the study, research questions, and significance of the study.
- A description of the sample and sampling techniques that were used.
- Data collection methods including what data were collected, from where, from whom, and by whom
- Data analysis strategies including analytic techniques, definitions of concepts, categories, and themes
- Findings based on the research questions and interpretations.

Abstracts are well organized and well written to provide complete information about the study.

## Evaluating Qualitative Studies

Qualitative studies examine intricate phenomena. Well-designed and well-written studies can contribute to knowledge of the field and guide future research. Most journals provide guidelines that specify a structure to make sure that the published research is of high quality. McWilliam (2000) provides a summary of key indicators that helps to evaluate the quality of the research. Use the checklist in Table 8.4 to assess the quality of a qualitative research report.

A framework can be developed to assess any type of qualitative design. Tong, Sainsbury, and Craig (2007) developed a 32-item checklist called "Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative studies (COREQ) is a 32-item checklist that qualitative researchers use as a guide in their work. Table 8.5 is a checklist based on the COREQ.

The criteria included in the checklist can help researchers to report important aspects of the research team, study methods, context of the study, findings, analysis and interpretations.

**Activity 8.5: Self-Evaluation of a Qualitative Research Report**

Using Table 8.5 as a guide, write answers to each question for a published manuscript or one that you have written or are developing. Create a list of strengths and weaknesses and make a plan for addressing the flaws.

**Table 8.4** Indicators of quality in qualitative research reports: a checklist

| Yes | No | Does the qualitative report describe |
|---|---|---|
| | | The theoretical background? |
| | | How the research questions were derived? |
| | | How the participants were selected? |
| | | The participants' roles? |
| | | How the data were recorded? |
| | | The depth and duration of data collection? |
| | | How the data were reduced? |
| | | The steps for arriving at findings or themes? |
| | | How often and thoroughly the original data were consulted during analysis? |
| | | How participants or others contributed to verifying information? |
| | | The level of information (e.g., transcripts, summaries, manuscripts) used in member checks? |
| | | The relationship of the findings to theory and other studies? |

**Table 8.5** Checklist to evaluate qualitative studies

| Item | Evaluation questions |
|---|---|
| **Area 1: Research group** | |
| *Personal qualities* | |
| 1. Interviewer/organizer | Who conducted the interview or organized focus groups? |
| 2. Qualifications | What were the researchers' areas of expertise? (Knowledge of the subject area, methodologies, etc.) |
| 3. Preparation and experience | What are the researchers' preparation and experience? |
| *Association with participants* | |
| 4. Establishing relationships | When was a relationship with the participants established? |
| 5. Communication with participants | Were the participants informed about the researchers' personal goals, purpose, assumptions, and reasons, interests in, and method of conducting the study? |
| **Area 2: Research design** | |
| *Theoretical framework* | |
| 6. Methods and theory | What research methodology was used? Grounded theory, discourse analysis, ethnography, phenomenology, content analysis? |
| | What theory was used to support the study? |
| *Participants' description* | |
| 7. Selection | What process was used to select the participants? Purposive, convenience, consecutive, snowball? |
| 8. Recruitment | What process was used to recruit participants? Personal contact, telephone, mail, email? |
| 9. Selection criteria | What are the essential qualities for selecting participants? |
| 10. Rejection and declined | How many contacts declined to participate or dropped out? Reasons? How many volunteers were rejected? Reasons? |
| 11. Sample size | How many participants were used in the study? |
| *Background* | |
| 12. Location for collecting data | Where were the data collected? Home, school, workplace, community? |
| 13. Spectators | Who was present during data collection other than the participants and researchers? |
| 14. Description of participants | What are the major characteristics of the participants? Were demographic data included? |
| *Data collection* | |
| 15. Interview schedule | What were the questions or prompts for the interviews? Were they opened or closed? How long were the interviews? Were they pilot tested? |
| 16. Quantity of interviews | How many interviews were conducted? |
| 17. Technology | What type of technology was used to collect data? Audio or video recording? |
| 18. Recording of field notes | When were field notes recorded? During and/or after interviews or focus groups? |

(continued)

**Table 8.5** (continued)

| Item | Evaluation questions |
|---|---|
| 19. Data saturation | How was the level of data saturation achieved? (e.g., no need for new data, new themes, or new coding to be able to replicate the study) |
| 20. Sharing transcriptions | Were transcriptions shared with participants for comments and/or revision? |
| **Area 3: Analyses and final report** | |
| *Data analyses* | |
| 21. Data coders | Were coders trained? Were coders used to determine validity and reliability? If so, how many were used? |
| 22. Description the coding system | Was there a description of what data were coded and how data were coded? |
| 23. Identification of themes | Were the process of determining themes and generating codes from the data described? |
| 24. Software | If software was used to code the data, was it described? |
| 25. Member checks | Were data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions tested with the participants to obtain feedback? |
| *Final report* | |
| 26. Quotes | Were quotes from participant used to support the themes/findings? How were quotes used and identified? |
| 27. Correspondence of data and findings | Did the data presented matched the findings? |
| 28. Presentation of key themes | Were the key themes distinctly presented in the findings? |
| 29. Presentation of secondary themes | Were different situations or minor themes described? |

Adapted from Tong, Sainsbury, and Craig (2007)

## Conclusion

Two respected and widely published researchers—one quantitative and one qualitative–were chatting together while they waited for the Research Committee of their professional organization to convene. The quantitative researcher said, admiringly, "I don't know how you figure out what to write. Me, I just get my SPSS print out and 'write around' it. The work that you do interests me because, although I can use a national data base to generate information, it still won't tell me much about individual experience." The qualitative researcher said, "Your work is important because it documents general directions in the field. In my view, we need both—the general and the particular—to make well-informed decisions." As this candid exchange suggests, quantitative and qualitative each has a role to play and each merits respect when it is carefully planned, conducted, and presented in a manuscript.

Rigorous qualitative research is an empirical type of inquiry. Nevertheless, skepticism from some researchers persists. A common misconception is that qualitative research is less intellectually challenging because it does not use higher mathematics. However, the challenge in qualitative research is to invest long periods of time in

gathering data, to derive the essence from a large and diverse collection of data sources, to think abstractly in order to generate themes, and to write eloquently about interpretations. In any qualitative research that you conduct, strive to address the questions that quantitative research cannot answer adequately. Honor the traditions in qualitative inquiry by publishing work that is rigorous and serves to advance the quality of the paradigm (LaRossa, 2012).