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# Managing Quality in Qualitative Research: A Focus on Process and Transparency

In: Managing Quality in Qualitative Research

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# Managing Quality in Qualitative Research: A Focus on Process and Transparency

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## Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter, you should see

- the different ways of how to deal with the issue of quality from a research process approach;
- the importance of reflecting, on which methods or approaches to use;
- the relevance of defining claims of quality during the process of research by involving all members of the research team; and
- that the quality issue in qualitative research is to a large extent a problem of making research transparent.

In the preceding chapters of this book, I have addressed the issue of quality from different angles: by defining and applying criteria, by using strategies of managing or increasing diversity in the research process, and with reference to ethical issues. Common to these approaches to quality is that they pick up a certain point in the research process-like using methods for analyzing data or in assessing the quality of the relations to the field under study-for answering the questions of quality. In what follows, I will take a perspective that is more oriented to the research process as a whole. It starts from the 'why' of using specific methods, then it will continue with the 'how' of agreeing about quality issues before ending with 'how far' we can make such a process transparent to the consumers of our research.

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## Indication of methods and designs

Why do we use a specific method of qualitative research for studying a specific issue? Is it always the appropriateness of methods to issues that drives us in our decision for one method and against other ones? Is this relation of appropriateness so clearly defined that it makes decisions easy, clear and obvious? Or do many of our colleagues not simply do what they always did: do they not just simply continue with methods they used before when they start a new project? Perhaps a look at the life record of qualitative researchers and the methods they used over the years will show a limited variation in the application of methods in many cases. These questions bring us to a way of how to make the decision for a specific method and/or a specific

research design more explicit. In methodology discussions mainly in textbooks, research methods are mostly focused on as side-by-side issues for describing their features, advantages and problems. A comparative perspective, which would give the reader a rationale for deciding when to use this method or design and when not to use it, is seldom taken.

Here, we face a similar problem as therapists or physicians, who have to decide which of the methods or interventions they have learned and are at hand they should use in a specific case of intervention. In these contexts, this problem is discussed as the ‘indication’ of treatments. In medicine or psychotherapy, practitioners check the appropriateness of a certain treatment for specific problems and groups of people. The result of this check is whether or not a specific treatment is indicated (i.e. appropriate) for a specific problem in a concrete case. If we transfer this to qualitative research, the relevant questions are, when are which qualitative methods appropriate-to which issue? to which research question? to which group of people (population) or fields to be studied? and so on. When are quantitative methods or a combination of both indicated? How to make this decision and the indication transparent to readers and other consumers of the research? (see Table 10.1).

**Table 10.1 Indication of qualitative research methods**

Psychotherapy and medicine		Qualitative research	
Which disease, symptoms, diagnosis, population	<b>indicate</b>	Which treatment or therapy ?	Which issue, population, research question, knowledge of issue and population
			<b>indicate</b>
			Which method or methods?

- 1 When is which method appropriate and indicated?
- 2 How to make a rational decision for or against certain methods?
- 3 How to make this decision and the indication transparent to readers and other consumers of the research?

Indication in qualitative research means basically three things, if we look at it from the angle of quality in the research process: (1) To select the appropriate method by taking into account to whom or what it shall be applied. (2) To document this selection process and the decisions taken in it and why they were taken. (3) And finally, to make this process transparent to the reader or consumer of the research. The core of this is how to select a qualitative research method. Table 10.2 provides a number of orienting questions, most of them developed elsewhere (Flick, 2006a, p. 386), where they are unfolded in more detail.

**Table 10.2 Guiding questions for selecting a qualitative research method**


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1	What do I know about the issue of my study or how detailed is my knowledge already?
2	How developed is the theoretical or empirical knowledge in the literature about the issue?
3	Is my interest in more generally exploring the field and the issue of my study?
4	What is the theoretical background of my study and which methods fit this background?
5	What do I want to get close to in my study: personal experiences of (a group) of certain people or social processes in the making? Or am I more interested in reconstructing the underlying structures of my issue?
6	Do I start with a very focused research question right away or do I start from a rather unfocused approach in order to develop the more focused questions underway in the process of my project?
7	Which aggregate do I want to study: personal experiences, interactions or situations or bigger entities like organizations or discourse?
8	Is it more the single case (e.g. of a personal illness experience or of a certain institution) I am interested in or the comparison of various cases?
9	Which resources (time, money, (wo)/manpower, skills, etc) are available for my study?
10	What are the characteristics of the field I want to study and of the people in it? What can you request of them and what not?
11	What is the claim of generalization of my study?
12	What are the ethical issues to take into account that are affected by selecting a specific method?

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Arguments that a specific method should be used in qualitative research as the right and only method are no longer adequate given the proliferation of the area. However, we should plan our research methodologically and base it on principles and reflection. Sticking to fixed and well-defined paradigms runs the risk of obstructing the way to the issue under study rather than opening new and appropriate ways to it. Decisions for theory and method in qualitative research should be taken and reflected in a knowledge-based way. Table 10.3 presents some rules of thumb for making decisions along the research process and some key questions to reflect what has been decided and applied in the ongoing research process.

To think about the question of indication of qualitative research methods and approaches is the first step to

basing the answers to the question of the quality of qualitative research on the research process. It is the first step in ensuring and enhancing the quality of qualitative research, which should be followed by strategies to enhance the quality of quality research such as those discussed in the earlier chapters. It should also be the entrance to a process of defining, clarifying and making explicit what is understood as quality-not in general at the level of the textbook this time, but for the concrete ongoing research project and for those who are involved in it as researchers.

**Table 10.3 Rules of thumb and key questions for reflecting research steps and methods**

- 1 Decide and reflect carefully whether qualitative or quantitative research.  
Why qualitative research?  
Which reasons do you have for the one or the other?  
What are your expectations for the (qualitative) research that you plan?
- 2 Reflect on the theoretical background of your knowledge interest.  
What is the impact of your setting on the research?  
How open and how closed is your access to what you want to study?
- 3 Plan your study carefully, but allow for reconsidering the steps and modifying according to the state of the study.  
What are the resources available for the study?  
How realistic are the aims of your research in relation to the available resources?  
What are necessary and appropriate shortcuts?
- 4 Plan your sampling carefully!  
What are your cases?  
What do they stand for?
- 5 Think about whom in the field you should contact and inform about your research. Reflect about the relation to establish to field subjects.  
What can you learn about your research field and issues from the way you get into the field or are rejected?
- 6 Think about why you chose the special method of collecting data.  
Was it a decision for a favourite method (the one you or your colleagues have always used) for habitual reasons?  
What could or would alternative methods provide?  
What are the impacts of the methods you use on your data and your knowledge?
- 7 Plan carefully how to document your data and research experiences.  
How exactly should you write your notes?  
What do you need as information to document systematically?  
What are the influences of the documentation on your research and on your field subjects?  
What are the impacts of the documentation on your methods of collection and analysis?
- 8 Think about the aims of your data analysis.  
Was it a decision for a favourite method (the one you or your colleagues have always used) for habitual reasons?  
What could or would alternative methods provide?  
What are the impacts of the methods you use on your data and your knowledge?

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## Quality management in qualitative research

In Chapter 2, it was mentioned that standards of qualitative research should be reconstructed from the research practice (see Bohnsack, 2005). Going one step further, the concept of quality management in qualitative research is more anchored in the research practice itself. Quality management has been discussed for some time in the context of industrial production or services or in the health system. This approach can be transferred to qualitative research for advancing the discussion about quality in qualitative research. First links exist in the concept of auditing, which is discussed in both areas. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest a process of auditing for assessing the reliability of qualitative data, which is oriented on accounting in financial contexts. An auditing trail includes:

- the raw data, their collection and recording;
- data reduction and results of syntheses by summarizing, theoretical notes, memos, etc., summaries, short descriptions of cases, etc.;
- reconstruction of data and results of syntheses according to the structure of developed and used categories (themes, definitions, relationships), findings (interpretations and inferences) and the reports produced with their integration of concepts and links to the existing literature;
- process notes, i.e. methodological notes and decisions concerning the production of trustworthiness and credibility of findings;
- materials concerning intentions and dispositions like the concepts of research, personal notes and expectations of the participants;
- information about the development of the instruments including the pilot version and preliminary plans (see Lincoln and Guba, 1985, pp. 320–7, 382–4).

Here, a process perspective is already taken, which includes all relevant steps of the research process that have led to the data and their interpretation. In the context of quality management, 'an audit is understood as a systematic, independent examination of an activity and its results, by which the existence and appropriate application of specified demands are evaluated and documented' (Kamiske and Brauer, 1995, p. 5). In particular, the 'procedural audit' is interesting for qualitative research. It should guarantee that 'the pre-defined demands are fulfilled and are useful for the respective application.... Priority is always given to an enduring remedy of causes of mistakes, not only a simple detection of mistakes' (Kamiske and Brauer, 1995, p. 8). Such specifications of quality are not conducted abstractly, for example, for certain methods per se, but with regards to the client orientation (pp. 95–6) and the co-workers' orientation (pp. 110–11).

On the first point, the question that results is who the clients of qualitative research actually are. Quality management distinguishes internal and external clients. Whereas the latter are the consumers of the product, the former are those who are involved in its production in a broader sense (e.g. employees in other departments). For qualitative research, this distinction may be translated as follows. External clients are those outside the project for whom its results are produced (overseers, reviewers, etc., as external clients). Internal



clients then are those for and with whom one attempts to obtain the result (interviewees, institutions under study, etc.). Concepts like 'member checks' or communicative validation (see Chapter 2) explicitly take this orientation into account. Designing the research process and proceeding in a way that gives enough room to those who are studied, realizes this orientation implicitly. For an evaluation, both aspects may be analyzed explicitly: how far did the study proceed in a way that it answered its research question (orientation on external clients) and did it give enough room to the perspectives of those who were involved as interviewees, for example (orientation on internal clients)? The co-worker orientation wants to take into account that 'quality arises from applying suitable techniques but on the basis of a corresponding mentality' (Kamiske and Brauer, 1995, p. 110). Transferred to qualitative research, this underlines that not only the application of methods essentially determines its quality, but also the attitude with which the research is conducted. Another point of departure here is the 'to give responsibility [for quality] to the co-workers by introducing self-assessments instead of outside control' (Kamiske and Brauer, 1995, p. 111). Quality in the qualitative research process can be realized, as elsewhere, if it is produced and assessed together with the researchers involved. First, they define together what should be and what is understood as quality in this context. Quality management then includes 'activities ... defining the quality policy, the goals and the responsibilities and realizing these by means of quality planning, quality steering, quality assessment/quality management and quality improvement' (ISO 9004, quoted in Kamiske and Brauer, 1995, p. 149).

Quality in the qualitative research process can only be realized when it is produced and assessed with all researchers involved in the project in a shared activity. First, they should define what they understand as quality in the context of the current project. For this, we can use the following guideline of quality management in qualitative research:

- Develop a definition of which goals should be reached in the project and of which standards should be maintained. This definition should be as clear as possible. All researchers in the project should be integrated in developing this definition.
- Define how to realize these goals and standards, and more generally the quality to be obtained. Therefore, develop a consensus about how to apply the selected methods. For example, joint interview training and its analysis can become preconditions for quality in the research process.
- Develop a clear definition of the responsibilities for obtaining quality in the research process for each researcher.
- Establish as much transparency of the judgement and the assessment of quality in the process as possible.
- Therefore establish research diaries and protocols of the research process and the decisions taken in it.

In contrast to other ways of assessing the quality of qualitative research, in quality management all members of the research team will discuss and define what they understand as quality in their project, which quality goals follow from this definition and how to reach these goals in detail. In this concept, the idea is given up that research quality should be defined generally, in an abstract way and from the outside. This idea is given

up in favour of a joint clarification of the concept of quality and of how to make it work (for more details, see also Flick, 2006a, chap. 29).

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## Quality of qualitative research as a result of a decision process

As the preceding chapters should have made clear, quality in qualitative research is more than just defining criteria or standards and – simply – meeting or fulfilling them. According to what has been said so far, quality is the result of a series of decisions starting from the formulation of a research question, continuing with finding and using the appropriate methods for working on answering this question. It has a lot to do with-or can be advanced a lot by using-strategies for managing diversity and for extending the knowledge potential in the project and in the data. Quality is linked with ethical issues in several ways and is closely connected with the transparency produced in the research and for the reader or consumers of the result. For a long time, much of qualitative research was driven by an idea about the one and only way to do qualitative research. This idea was for a long time dominant in qualitative research and fed by the attitude of criticism against other forms of research. If we abandon such an idea of qualitative research, a project consists of a series of decisions about how to proceed, about which alternatives to reject, and so on. These decisions should be driven by the overall guideline of (qualitative) research: that methods and procedures should be appropriate to what and to who is studied and should be useful for answering the research question in a way that is methodologically and ethically sound. Quality then is something that should be made explicit in how it is defined, should be managed in the steps of such a decision process and produced step by step. If we want to take quality in qualitative research out of the realm of the vague and mysterious, of the abstract and fundamental, a necessary part of it is to communicate what is understood as quality and how it was produced in the process.

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## Transparency, documentation and writing

In this context, transparency becomes relevant in several ways for enhancing the quality of qualitative research. Transparency means in general to make the research process, in its steps and in the decisions that influenced how data and results were produced, understandable to readers in the broadest sense. Transparency means to document how the research question was developed in the first step and how it perhaps was changed in the course of the project. It should also be documented why which persons, groups, cases, situations, and so on, were selected as empirical material-what the rationale of the sampling was and how the researchers made it work. Following what was said before, the documentation and the report about the project and the research should provide insights into why specific methods were selected, perhaps which alternatives were discussed and why they were rejected-in short, how the question of indication was handled and answered. Information about the claims for quality in the project, how they were set up, who was involved in defining them and finally how they were realized are another issue of documentation-in short, how the quality management in the project was planned and realized.

Following what was said in Chapter 3, it seems necessary to address the question of diversity in the

documentation and to make transparent how deviant cases and perspectives of third parties like members or audiences were treated and integrated in the progress of the research. Seen in this way, transparency starts from a detailed documentation of the research process, its steps and the decisions taken in it. This documentation should find its way into the report about the research and about how results were produced. In the best examples it should not only make transparent what was done and why, but also allow the reader to obtain an idea of how different the results would have been if the researchers had taken a different decision at some specific point. Then it comes close to the function that Lüders sees for the report about the research:

The research report with its presentation of and reflection on the methodological proceedings, with all its narratives about access to and the activities in the field, with its documentation of various materials, with its transcribed observations and conversations, interpretations and theoretical inferences is the only basis for answering the question of the quality of the investigation. (Lüders, 1995, p. 325)

Reichertz (1992) goes one step beyond a text-centred treatment of credibility. He makes it clear that this form of persuasion concerning credibility is produced not only in the text but also in the interaction of author, text and reader:

The decisive point, however, is the attitude which is expressed in the text, with which the ethnographer turns toward his own interpretations and those of his colleagues in order to relate them to each other according to the needs of the individual case. It is not the way of accounting claimed for in the writing which is relevant for the reader, but the attitude of accounting which is shown in the text, which of course always has to use semiotic means, and these are means which are sensitive to cheating. (1992, p. 346)

Thus, to do qualitative research in a way that meets high standards and expectation is one thing. To address the issue of quality in the research process-by meeting standards, by using strategies, and so on,-is a second thing. But this will only become visible as quality in qualitative research, if the researchers manage to transfer their aims and claims, their strategies and standards and how they worked with them to the readers of their research. In this way, writing about research is the third and maybe most important part of qualitative research if we want to assess the goodness of research or if we want to allow readers to assess it. Writing then becomes not only a technical problem, but also an issue of reflexivity-but in a different sense from what has been discussed so vehemently as the crisis of representation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) in the last few years. Writing about research and the procedures used in it (see Flick, 2006a, chap 30) becomes an important instrument for conveying what was done in the project, how it was done and how well it was done.

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## Key points

- Quality in qualitative research is produced (or fails) through the whole process of research.
- Clarifying the issue of indication of methods and designs is a crucial step in establishing quality in the research.
- The advantage of a quality management approach to qualitative research is that it starts from developing a shared understanding of quality and quality aims for the current project in which all researchers should be involved.
- It also understands quality as something to be developed, maintained and produced throughout the whole project.
- Transparency is based on documentation and the crucial step in transferring to the readers or consumers what was done for promoting quality and how it was done and the results to which it led.
- Writing about the research is a precondition for making research processes and procedures transparent to readers or consumers.

## Further reading

In these texts, the building blocks of writing, quality management, indication and process quality are unfolded in more detail:

**Becker, H.S.(1986)** *Writing for Social Scientists*.Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**Flick, U.(2006a)** *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (3rd edn). London: Sage, part 7.

**Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E.G.(1985)** *Naturalistic Inquiry*.London: Sage.

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