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How to Address Research Quality

In: Managing Quality in Qualitative Research

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How to Address Research Quality

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Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter, you should

- see the relevance of the issue of quality for the further development and establishment of qualitative research;
 - have an impression of the angles and levels at which this issue becomes relevant; and
 - have an overview of the following chapters and of how they address the issue.
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The relevance of quality issues in qualitative research

Qualitative research has come of age. The growing number of textbooks, journals, other publications and the extension of research practice across several disciplines demonstrate this. Perhaps another indicator for this development or a need resulting from it is the current relevance of the question of how to evaluate qualitative research, the plans, the methods and the results obtained with them. The phase of development in which researchers simply trust their methods according to what Glaser suggests: 'Trust grounded theory, it works, just do it, use it and publish!' (1998, p. 254), seems to be over. Instead of such (maybe somewhat naïve) optimism, we now find many articles devoted to criteria, to checklists, to standards, to quality, to rigour and evaluation of qualitative research.

In contrast to earlier stages in the development of qualitative research, questions about the quality of qualitative research are no longer raised mainly to demonstrate (from outside) that there is a lack of scientific quality in qualitative research. Rather this question is increasingly raised from the inside with a 'how to' perspective: how to assess or evaluate what we are doing, how to demonstrate quality in qualitative research in an active and self-confident way. How to manage the issue of quality in the qualitative research process has become a topic of major relevance for the further development of qualitative research as a whole. Today it is less the acceptance of qualitative research as such (compared to quantitative research, for example) but the acceptance of specific procedures and results in a single piece of research (for reasons of funding or of publication, for example) that is at stake. Thus, the focus of the discussion about quality of qualitative

research has-not completely, but mainly-shifted from fundamental, epistemological and philosophical levels to more concrete and practical levels of research.

Internal needs and external challenges

Nevertheless, discussions about the quality of qualitative research are located at the crossroads of internal needs and external challenges. The internal needs arise from the development and proliferation of qualitative research as a field. We find more and more alternatives of how to do qualitative research, a growing variety of methodological alternatives and epistemological and conceptual programs. Qualitative research can no longer be associated with one or two specific methods. Rather, we find different research programs with different backgrounds, intentions and strategies of how to do research. Although we can identify common features of qualitative research across the different programs (see Flick, 2006a, chaps 2 and 6, or Flick et al., 2004a, for suggestions), we can see these programs in an internal competition. Thus, we can address issues of quality of qualitative research inside the single research program: What is good grounded theory research (see Gibbs, 2007)? What makes it distinct from bad examples? We can also address these issues inside qualitative research from a comparative perspective: What makes a specific grounded theory study a good example of qualitative research? What makes it more appropriate than a discourse analysis (see Rapley, 2007) about the same topic? In both cases, the issue of quality is raised from inside qualitative research and inside qualitative research practice, and thus internally.

External challenges to qualitative research linked with these issues become relevant, once qualitative research becomes competitive with other approaches of research. This is the case when qualitative research wants to enter fields traditionally dominated by other forms of research. When qualitative researchers in psychology, for example, want to publish their research in peer-reviewed journals, which were traditionally experimentally oriented, the need to demonstrate that the single piece of research is a good example becomes a challenge. Or when, for example, medical sociologists want to publish a study using qualitative methods in a medical journal, where not only other disciplines but also the ideals of natural science are dominant, the quality issue becomes even more relevant.

Another field of competition is funding of research in areas in which traditionally experimental or quantitative researchers are dominant. Here again, issues of quality are raised from outside to assess the single grant application, to compare it with grant applications from other backgrounds, or simply to have good arguments to reject proposals.

And finally, teaching and curriculum planning has become a field where qualitative research is in competition with other approaches for resources: what is the part of qualitative research in the curriculum for psychologists or sociologists, and what is the relation to more quantitative or experimental approaches?

In all these fields, the ability of qualitative research to demonstrate that there are criteria, strategies and approaches to distinguish good from bad research and to enhance and reassure the quality of qualitative

research is an external challenge. The better qualitative researchers are able to present solutions to this problem, the more successful will they be in establishing themselves in these fields against competitors. As we will see later in this book, the issue of quality in qualitative research is not only a technical problem but also refers to the quality of results and insights from the research, or the study (what's new in it?).

Four levels of asking the question of quality

Following from what has been said so far, the question of quality in (qualitative) research can be asked at four different levels and by four different groups of actors.

The researcher's interests in knowing about how good or bad their own research is

Novices to research in particular will have an interest in judging how far they can trust their results and whether they applied their methods in a correct way-and more generally how good their own research is. How can I find out whether the interview I did is a good interview (see Kvale, 2007)? How can I find out how far I can trust my findings from this or from my other interviews? And finally, what conclusions can I draw from them in a well-founded way? How can I be sure that insights from these interviews represent what the interviewee thinks or experienced? If I work with other researchers, how can we be sure that each of us proceeds in a similar way, so that the interviews and results are comparable at the level of the interviewees and not only at the level of the differences in the interviewers' behaviour? In this context, quality criteria or strategies to assess and improve the quality of research will be seen as helpful to reassure oneself and to prepare for the evaluation and critique by others (doctoral committees, for example). But also questions of originality and novelty might puzzle the researchers concerning their study.

Funding institutions' interest in evaluating what should be or has been granted

The issue of evaluation becomes relevant in the process of funding research at two points. First of all, a proposal has to be evaluated for its consistency and adequacy for what is to be studied and for the quality of the results that can be expected. Second, at the end of the funding, the research or the report has to be evaluated for which of the promises have been kept, how well the research was planned and carried out according to the plan, and in general what came out of the whole study. Here again, comparability becomes a relevant issue: how is the single (qualitative) proposal comparable with other qualitative proposals and how can it be compared with proposals coming from other disciplines such as natural or technology sciences? Review processes often pass several levels of committees before a final decision is taken and are mostly based on reviews from several scientists. Qualitative research, with its flexibility and openness in how the research is planned and practised, is often less compatible with such review processes than standardized or

experimental research, where the planning is mostly done at the outset of the process.

These are reasons why considerable input to the internal discussion about how to assess the quality of qualitative research has recently come from funding institutions like the ESRC in the UK, the National Institutes of Health in the US or the German Research Council. Their input was to ask researchers from different qualitative traditions to set up lists of criteria and checklists allowing them to make judgements and decisions more rational and transparent (see Chapter 2). The results from such activities have led to a renewed intensification of the academic discussion about quality issues, as many researchers do not see their special approach or qualitative research in general represented in such (check-)lists.

Journal editors' interest in deciding what to publish and what not

A similar trend can be observed in the context of publishing qualitative research. The more the number of peer-reviewed journal articles becomes a general indicator for the scientific quality and merits of single researchers, research groups, institutes, faculties and even universities, the more qualitative research has to be submitted and peer reviewed also. Here again, we see the problem of how to make this process rational and transparent for those who submit a paper or are asked for reviews of qualitative papers. Again, we find attempts to set up checklists to evaluate the research that is reported and at the same time to evaluate the way in which the research is reported and made transparent. Here, the quality issue is in some way doubled. Consideration of rigour and criteria in the research is seen as essential if the research is to be published. The research in its presentation has to be linked back to existing literature, for example-which is a criterion at the level of presentation.

Readers' interest in orientation of which research to rely on and which not

This brings us to the fourth level, at which the quality issue becomes relevant. If you read an article about a study with interesting findings, you might like to know how far these findings are based on what was studied and what allows you to trust what you read. This is the more general description of the relevance of the quality issue on the side of the user of qualitative research. In standardized research, reliability, validity and significance tests also have the function of allowing a rather simple and fast credibility check about the study and its results. This will not be transferable to qualitative research (see Chapter 2), but criteria or checklists might be the way to answer the question of credibility. In any case, it would be helpful for the reception of qualitative research if a comparable 'instrument' were available and generally accepted here.

The problem: how to assess the quality of qualitative research

So far, I have outlined the relevance of taking up the quality issue in the discussion of qualitative research. In what follows, I will focus more on what the general problems of establishing instruments of quality assurance

in qualitative research are like. These problems might be the reason why-unlike quantitative research-a general canon of criteria has so far not been established and accepted in qualitative research.

Research evaluation based on standardization?

In quantitative and experimental research, we find a close link between evaluation of research and the standardization of research situations. In order to increase the internal and external validity of research and results, interfering conditions are controlled. If the interrelation of two variables is to be tested, the exclusion of interfering variables is a way to guarantee the internal validity of the interrelation that was measured. The exclusion of interfering variables can best be achieved by standardizing the research situation so that no uncontrolled influences may interfere. That is why psychological research ended up mainly in the experimental laboratory, where the chances of having such a control are high. External validity means the generalization of results from the research situation (and case) to other situations and cases. Again, excluding interfering variables, for example biases in sampling, warrants this. Therefore, random sampling is applied in quantitative research, because it allows for excluding any biases in the sample. Similar examples could be given for the case of reliability (see also Chapter 2). What these examples show is that in quantitative and experimental research, criteria like validity and reliability are conceptualized in ways that rely heavily on standardization of the research situation. If these criteria and these conceptualizations are applied to qualitative research, they are confronted with research situations that profit greatly from not being standardized, from not being located in laboratories and from not being characterized by a similar degree of control.

What does this mean for our context? If research evaluation is strongly linked to standardization of research situations and practices, traditional ways of evaluating research are difficult to use in qualitative research, although the main intention of research evaluation may still be relevant. If we take the everyday meaning of the words, qualitative researchers too are interested to know whether (their) results are 'valid' and whether they can 'rely' on them. But that interest does not necessarily mean that they adopt the procedures and conditions of the ways validity and reliability are checked in standardized research. As it seems, there is a need to ask such questions but also a need to develop adequate ways of answering them. This is the first dimension of the problem-a need to ask similar questions but also a need to develop appropriate ways of answering them. But what has been said so far makes it rather unlikely that qualitative research will fit into the concept of general criteria for all sorts of empirical (social) research or general solutions to the quality issue for all sciences. Rather there will be a need for a specific solution for dealing with quality in qualitative research.

One size fits all?

So how about criteria and strategies for qualitative research in general? Here we find two alternatives in the literature. There is a general discussion about quality criteria or checklists for evaluating qualitative research in general (e.g. Elliot et al., 1999) and there are interventions like that of Reicher (2000) arguing against such

generalist approaches and for approach-specific criteria, standards and guidelines. Barbour (2001, p. 1115) speaks of the 'lure of "one size fits all" solutions' in this context. The core of this problem is that the term 'qualitative research' is a kind of umbrella term. Under this umbrella, approaches assemble or are packed that have very different theoretical backgrounds, methodological principles, research issues and aims. What they have in common is sometimes no more than that they are 'not quantitative' in one way or the other.

A general discussion about what good qualitative research is and is not sometimes misses the differences in the approach and aims of different sorts of qualitative research. If we do a grounded theory study using interviews and interested in the contents of everyday knowledge in a specific field, the aim will be to develop a substantial theory from it. In a conversation analysis (see Rapley, 2007) of counselling interaction, the approach is much more focused on the formal principles of this interaction format and the goal is to develop a formal model of such interaction compared to other forms of talk. In both examples, the theoretical backgrounds are as different as the empirical focus and as the overall aim of the studies. Is it possible then to evaluate these two examples with the same criteria once it comes to funding or publication, or do we need different criteria for each, taking the special features of both into account-without becoming completely relativistic in our judgements about good and bad research?

Another distinction to be taken into account is between qualitative research with mainly academic interests (say a dissertation project) and more specific fields like qualitative evaluation (see Flick, 2006b). For example, major inputs to the quality discussion came from Patton (2002) and there are quite a few examples of guidelines for good qualitative evaluation available (see Chapter 2). As well as asking whether methods and approaches from qualitative research in general can be applied to evaluation, we can also ask whether such quality indicators can be transferred one-to-one from evaluation to areas of qualitative research more (or exclusively) interested in discovery or description without evaluation. So the interesting question will be, how to develop approaches to quality in qualitative research that give an orientation across the different fields and approaches and are sensitive to the particulars of the different research traditions.

Criteria appropriate to qualitative research or research appropriate to criteria?

Barbour (2001, p. 1115) mentions another issue relevant in this context. She reports that '... several researchers have informed me that they must comply with various procedures (such as respondent validation, multiple coding, etc.) in order to satisfy the requirements of specific journals where they hope to publish their work'. Although she doubts how far such claims are accurate or exaggerated, a specific problem of the trend to criteria and guidelines is mentioned here. They could develop a life of their own and they could be used strategically instead of functionally. If certain methods are no longer applied because they are most appropriate to the issue under study but because they make it more likely than other methods to achieve publication in a specific journal, something has gone wrong. If specific strategies or quality criteria are not applied because they are appropriate to what is research or how it is done, but because they make the

way into specific journals or towards funding easier, the tail (criteria, checklists) starts to wag the dog (the research), as Barbour puts it. She discusses several examples of research strategies or techniques that have become popular for fitting checklists, journal and funding expectations (respondent validation, multiple coding, triangulation, purposive sampling and grounded theory). Here, we could add the use of programs like ATLAS.ti (see also Gibbs, 2007), which are often mentioned in articles about qualitative research as some kind of method for analyzing the data instead of being seen as a technical device to support an analytic method (like theoretical coding: Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Here I sometimes suspect the idea is that technology use makes qualitative research trustworthy and that the use (and mention) of such technology is more strategic than appropriate.

How to assess the quality of research in a sensitive and appropriate way

Here, we encounter dilemmas between the needs of the sensitiveness for the particular strengths and features of qualitative research and the needs and interests of actors outside the community in the pure sense-which means commissioners, readers, consumers and publishers of qualitative research. In this book we will focus on several ways of defining, approaching and promoting the quality of qualitative research. These will be located between the formulation and application of criteria, reflections about standards and the formulation and application of strategies. It is important in this context that each of the alternatives-criteria, standards or strategies-is used not only with an eye on scientific claims and interests but that they do justice to what is under assessment-qualitative research-and even more to the people, participants and institutions that are ready to take part in a research. At this crossroads, we find ourselves confronted with the links between quality and ethical issues in qualitative research.

Ethics and quality of qualitative research

The relation between ethics and quality in qualitative research can be discussed from three angles. From the first, quality is seen as a precondition for ethically sound research. Here we may state that it is unethical to do qualitative research that has not reflected about how to ensure the quality of the research and without being sure that this piece of research will be a good example in the end. Good research is more ethically legitimate as it is worth people investing their time for taking part in it and revealing their own situation or giving an insight into their privacy. If the research is not of high quality in the end, it is unethical to make people take part or reveal their privacy. Ensuring and promoting quality of research becomes a precondition of ethical research in this version.

The second angle sees the reflection of ethical issues (data protection, avoiding harm to participants, respecting perspectives and privacies, and the like) as a quality feature of (qualitative) research. So this sort of ethical reflection becomes a necessary step in the research process (similar to, for example, developing a good set of questions or handling deviant cases, and so on) and should be taken into account when assessing

the quality of qualitative research.

And there is a third angle: doing research according to quality standards may affect ethical issues. Making someone recount the whole story of his or her life may be important from a methodological point of view for understanding how a specific illness became part of such a life and how people deal with that illness. The longer and the more detailed such a narrative is developed by the participant in the study-and the more space and support he or she is given in doing so by the research-the better will be the quality of the data that are produced in this way (see Gibbs, 2007). But if the illness is leading to a high vulnerability and exhaustion on the side of the patients, it can be too strong a challenge for them to reflect, recount and reconsider their lives as a whole and in (too much) detail. In such a case, there is a conflict between methodological standards (or quality expectations) and ethical concerns about the confrontation of the participants with certain aspects of their lives. The same can also be the case for approaches such as member checks (see Chapters 2 and 3) or communicative validation (see also Kvale, 2007), which confront participants in a study with what they said (or what the researcher found in analyzing such statements). Both approaches are strategies for increasing quality in qualitative research but can also be an ethical problem in research with vulnerable people.

Structure of the book

It should have become clear that the issue of quality in qualitative research is raised at different levels with different intentions and consequences. In the remainder of this book, we will address the different approaches to answer the questions linked to the quality issue in qualitative research.

We will deal with the main strategies for managing, that is, ensuring and improving the quality of qualitative research. In the first chapters of the book, we will discuss standards, criteria and strategies for addressing and assessing the quality of qualitative research. In the following chapter, the problem of how to assess the quality of qualitative research and these three alternatives will be unfolded in more detail (Chapter 2). Approaches in the literature to apply validity, reliability and objectivity to qualitative research will be reviewed as well as attempts to set up standards, guidelines and checklists. The approach of strategies for managing quality is addressed for the first time in the next chapter, when we turn to strategies for managing diversity in qualitative research (Chapter 3).

In the second part of the book, the focus will be on triangulation as a strategy for promoting quality in qualitative research. This will lead us through several steps. After discussing the different concepts of triangulation that have been developed over the years (Chapter 4), the use of methodological triangulation in qualitative research in order to enhance its quality is discussed using several examples (Chapter 5). This is outlined in more detail for the field of ethnography (see Angrosino, 2007), again using examples from several areas (Chapter 6). Qualitative researchers are often confronted with the idea that one way of promoting and assuring quality in their research is to combine it with quantitative research. This has become a topic more recently again in the context of mixed methods research. In Chapter 7, the power and the limits of such combinations in the context of quality promotion will be discussed. The final step in this part addresses

practical issues of how to plan and run a study using triangulation with the aim of quality promotion (Chapter 8).

In the final part, strategies of managing transparency, quality and ethics in qualitative research will be the issues. First, we will focus on the relations of quality, creativity and ethics as different ways to ask similar questions (Chapter 9) and approach ethical issues in qualitative research from different angles. In the final chapter (Chapter 10), we will address quality in qualitative research from the angles of the research process and with a focus on the transparency of this process for consumers of a research project (readers, commissioners, students, etc.). Here, the clarification of the indication of qualitative research or of specific variants of it will be discussed in the context of quality management.

Key points

- The issue of quality in qualitative research is located at the crossroads of internal needs and external challenges.
- It has become a crucial issue with the progressive establishment of qualitative research and in the competition with other forms of research and with other disciplines for funding and publication and influence.
- The formulation of criteria is only one solution to the problem.

Further reading

In these texts, quality issues for qualitative research are outlined and summarized in some detail with more or less focus on one area (like evaluation) but with relevance for qualitative research as a whole:

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

Gibbs, G.(2007) *Analyzing Qualitative Data* (Book 6 of *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*).London: Sage.

Kvale, S.(2007) *Doing Interviews* (Book 2 of *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*).London: Sage.

Patton, M.Q.(2002) *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (3rd edn). London: Sage, chap. 9.

Rapley, T.(2007) *Doing Conversation, Discourse and Document Analysis* (Book 7 of *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*).London: Sage. 10

Seale, C.(1999) *The Quality of Qualitative Research*.London: Sage.

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