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Assumptions of Qualitative Research Methods

By C. Walters

Introduction

Many characteristics make up the collective term of qualitative research, Methods used specify a certain framework in which researchers operate, Within this framework, there are two major assumptions in which I believe take precedence, Inductive reasoning and topic specificity are the two characteristics that I believe define qualitative research,

Inductive reasoning is the epitome of qualitative research design. Researchers seek information out of the data that is gathered; they do not proceed to a project looking for specific findings, Maxwell (1996) states that qualitative research allows researchers to examine explanations and data - not to prove a self-fulfilling prophecy, Inductive reasoning looks for meaning from within the subjects, Researchers have historically attempted to objectify the subjective state of the their subjects, Instead, using an inductive approach, they can genuinely learn from their subjects. They are empathetic and reflective. Their job is to learn how their subjects think (Biklen & Bogdan, 1998).

Methodology can change from the data collected, As a researcher learns about the setting, subjects, and other data through direct examination, methodical plans evolve, A detailed set of procedures is usually not formed prior to the data collection, After a study is completed, then a full set of procedures can be described (Biklen & Bogdan, 1998), The dynamic nature of the research precludes any formal step-by-step process, Biklen & Bogdan insist that theory is modified during the research process to fit all new facts and that the research question can also be redefined or narrowed, As the analysis becomes more encompassing with new cases, the developing theory usually becomes more refined.

When examining validity issues of the inductive reasoning model, there are two major threats that Maxwell (1996) highlights. The first is researcher bias, This involves the researcher either consciously or unconsciously focusing on data that supports the researcher's existing beliefs / expectations, Maxwell (1996) explains how to control for this bias, Researchers should report potential biases and relate how personal values may factor into the data collection and analysis, Validity in qualitative research is the result of integrity rather than indifference.

The second threat to validity is the influence of the researcher on the setting or the individual studied, This problem is known as "reactivity", The goal of a qualitative study is not to try to eliminate this, but to understand it and use it productively. In order to do so, it is important to understand how the researcher is influencing what the subject is saying, and how this affects the inferences that can be drawn from the findings (Maxwell, 1996).

Many readings include techniques to help control for validity, Guba and Lincoln (1986) include several strategies that may make a study more credible, Using prolonged engagement with your subject or setting, persistent observation, triangulation of data, peer debriefing, and member checks are all ways to help control for credibility, Prolonged engagement and persistent observation are time well spent with your subject /setting, The authors speak of lengthy and intensive contact in order to obtain data that is true and authentic, Triangulation of data involves the use of different sources, methods, or investigators to achieve the same results, Having a disinterested peer to examine research methods in order to rule out emotional bias and to test research design is the purpose of peer debriefing, Member checks are a way to regulate the information that is gathered, asking participates to react to the information given by them keeps the researcher in check with the purpose of the study, The authors continue to state the degree of transferability to

other studies depends on the thick descriptive data researchers give. Readers should be able to judge the degree of fit or similarity based on the data that is given in the qualitative report. Last, for dependability and confirmability, the authors suggest an external audit by someone who is competent and disinterested. This would reflect a suspension of subjectivity.

Glesne (1999) states the credibility of the findings and interpretations depends on the careful attention to establishing trustworthiness. She also reiterates the point of being alert to your own biases and subjectivity. A caution is made to keep your subjectiveness in check throughout the data collection process. Although a researcher may not be able to control for subjectivity, you may monitor it. When doing so, you learn more about your own values, attitudes, beliefs, and interests. The process will also increase your awareness of the ways that subjectivity might distort your findings (Glesne, 1999).

Being topic specific is the other central facet of qualitative research meaning the object of research is studied in its own right and its own importance. Often findings of qualitative studies are not generalizable to other populations. In fact, Guba and Lincoln (1986) state that human behavior is time and context-bound. Researchers should abandon the assumption that enduring, context-free truth statements, or generalizations, should be sought.

Other qualitative researchers state they are interested in universal statements about social processes rather than statements of commonality. They concern themselves with whether or not other settings and subjects could be helped, not whether the conclusions can be replicated. This approach to generalizability is labeled the grounded theory approach by researchers (Biklen & Bogdan, 1998).

Validity that looks at generalization in qualitative research includes issues that need to be examined. In qualitative work, the study sample is usually small and unique. I term it topic specific. Maxwell (1996) points out two types of generalizations: internal and external. Internal generalization refers to the generalizability of a conclusion within a setting or group. The conclusions a researcher draws depend on the internal generalizability to the case. External generalizability is usually not a critical issue for researchers because the outcomes are "topic specific". Maxwell (1996) continues to state that generalizability is based on the development of a theory that can be extended to other cases. This is a most important statement. Researchers are not looking for results that can be replicated, but for theories and practices that may be used elsewhere.

Glesne (1999) highlights ways to control for validity in the interpretive process. Asking for the assistance of others is an invaluable tool to support your findings. People may be colleagues, friends, or even the subjects of your research. Often, researchers will give a rough draft of work gathered to the participants to check for changes or understanding. I feel this is an excellent way to control for validity. Researchers need to know if the information they have gleaned is correct and interpreted in the exact manner in which it was intended. By sharing working drafts, both the researcher and participant may grow in their interpretations of the concepts that are studied (Glesne, 1999).

From the positivist's point of view, the respondent pool in qualitative research is too limited for generalizations. However, the case may lead to a greater understanding of similar cases. Researchers hope for a chance to uncover a concept that may have not been found yet (Glesne, 1999). By concentrating on the ways to control validity as discussed earlier, researchers can ensure quality work with accurate results.

There are many aspects to the field of qualitative research. Various aspects of this method of research can be explored and validated. The two most important ones to me were the concepts of inductive reasoning and research being topic specific. When examining all of the characteristics that typify qualitative research, these two stand out for me, when investigating the validity of each concept, researchers must be careful to avoid any biases. Careful planning and constant vigilance will ensure that results that are obtained are complete and authentic representations.

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Craig H. Walters is a beginning researcher who is currently completing his doctoral degree in Educational Leadership in a joint program offered by Columbis State University / Valdosta State University. Craig is a licensed, accredited speech pathologist employed by the Sumter County School System. His current research interests are in the biographical method of qualitative research.

