INTERPRETING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

WHAT DO I KNOW AND HOW DO I KNOW IT?

OVERVIEW

• What is qualitative research?
• Why do qualitative research?
• Choosing your methodology
• Available tools in qualitative research
• Methods and data analysis
• A reflexive approach
• Reporting
• Data authenticity and quality control
WHAT IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

1. Qualitative research involves a variety of different approaches chosen according to the specific task at hand.
2. It asks what is the purpose of the research – what are the problems that you want to understand?
3. Incorporates a range of methodological frameworks e.g. ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, naturalistic inquiry, narrative, discourse
4. Offers a range of methods e.g. interviews, focus groups, participant observation, content analysis, diaries, field notes, case studies.

WHY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

1. Can add valuable questions and perspectives to quantitative studies
2. Qualitative pilot studies can inform the development of quality quantitative questions
3. Specific research problems may be best suited to a qualitative approach
4. Qualitative methods may involve research subjects in defining the topic of investigation
WHY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

1. Uses diverse data collection tools - interviews, transcripts, field observations, existing documents etc
2. Social phenomena are complex and need complex theories to assist our understanding
3. Asks participants to make sense of their own lives – to tell their own story
4. Informs policy development and practice

QUALITATIVE TOOLS ARE OFTEN COMBINED

1. Interviews – group and individual
2. Focus groups – up to 10 people
3. Participant Observation
4. Participant Action Research
5. Document/visual content analysis
6. Reflective journal or diary (researcher or participant)
QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW METHODS

1. Structured interviews
2. Semi-structured interviews – mixture of structured, open-ended and exploratory
3. In-depth one on one – most flexible and widely used in qualitative research – additional questions emerge through “talk”.
4. Quality of data is wholly dependent upon the skill of the interviewer and willingness of the participant

THE DATA

• Since my husband passed away two years ago, my whole life has changed not for the better. I have also found I have difficulty coming to terms with his illness and death. Over the years I have enjoyed good health and now find that minor ills seem to be major (woman aged 78, WHA Longitudinal study of widowhood)
DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS

• Often undertaken at the same time as data collection and findings inform new questions (e.g. a grounded theory approach)

• Immersion in data – read and read and read

• Includes different types/tools of analysis e.g. using different theoretical frameworks

• Includes visual display of data – diagram, chart, map, matrix

DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS

• Reflexive and open minded

• Descriptive, analytical and interpretative

• Checking with participants about accuracy of the research data
EXAMPLES OF ANALYTIC TECHNIQUES FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

1. Content analysis
2. Iterative/Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
3. Discourse Analysis
4. Narrative analysis

THE ROLE OF SUBJECTIVITY AND REFLEXIVITY

• Subjectivity can be a crucial resource in the interpretative process – not an impediment to finding the objective ‘truth’
• Acknowledges the position of the researcher
• Asks about power relationships between the researcher and research participants
SCIENCE AT WORK – REFLECTING?

WHAT IS REFLEXIVITY?

• An understanding that the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interest that these locations confer upon them.

• That we are conscious of ideology, culture, and politics of those we study and those we select as our audience.

• Underlying principles are that we researchers are part of the social world, and we must work within whatever cultural perspectives are available to us (Hammersley and Atkinson 2003).
QUALITATIVE RESEARCHERS IN A REFLEXIVE MODE?

REFLEXIVITY: INTERPRETING THE DATA

Any understanding of the world depends upon having prejudgment (Gadamer, 1996).

What social scientists must do to achieve understanding, is to reflect on prejudice (prejudgment), and to distinguish ‘enabling prejudice’ from ‘disabling prejudice’ Schwandt 1997).
EPISTEMOLOGY AND INTERPRETING QUALITATIVE DATA

• Researchers make assumptions about “truth”
• The theory of knowledge – how do we know what we know?
• Broadly, epistemology defines how the researcher understands their role in producing knowledge gathered in data collection for example
• Often this is not made clear or acknowledged by many qualitative or quantitative researchers

Quality control of the data

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DATA AUTHENTICITY AND EVALUATION

1. Are the methods appropriate to the questions asked?
2. Is the connection to an existing body of knowledge or theory clear?
3. Are there clear descriptions of the criteria for selection of participants for the study, the process of collection and analysis?
4. Was the data collection and record keeping systematic?
5. Is reference made to accepted procedures for data analysis?
6. Is there clear distinction between the data and the interpretation by the researcher?

Criteria for verification of rigor in qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)*

INTERPRETING DATA - KEY MESSAGES

• Researchers bring their own professional, life experiences and views to the research
• Knowledge, methodology, methods and research questions are all intricately connected
• Ask if the work is systematic, rigorous, and flexible?
• What is truth – do we know?
• Self reflection and reflexivity is vital in interpreting high quality research
• Time consuming and demanding
References