

FAQ 39: How do I report my qualitative data?

What's the issue?

In the end there is not all that much difference between reporting quantitative and qualitative data – the main issue is to present the findings of a study in such a way that those who wish to use them can understand what has been done and what the results are.

Common practice

Qualitative data analysis is often constructed around themes, and so is the reporting. To support the analysis it is common to include direct quotes from, for example, interviews.

In the final stages of qualitative data analysis data should be organized so that general themes can be formulated. It is also important to refine concepts, and to link them together in order to create a clear description or explanation of the main theme under study. The individual concepts and themes that you may have found should be put together to build an integrated explanation, which should then be interpreted in the light of the literature and the theories presented in your theoretical framework. This process will allow you to emerge with some over-arching themes that can be helpful in tying the individual pieces of your data together (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Keep in mind that representing qualitative findings as comprehensively as they deserve is challenging. In particular, in searching for the most economical examples to present, you may be tempted to choose the most vivid, striking, noticeable examples but which do not necessarily represent the typicality of the phenomenon being examined. Practical limitations may also result in the presentation of de-contextualized, fragmented data, rather than an integral part of the presentation (Livingstone & Lemish, 2001).

Finally, invite your readers to critically judge your work by cross-examining your interpretations. After all, texts are not only “freely interpreted but [are] also cooperatively generated by the addressee” (Eco, 1995: 3).

Questions to consider

Common questions that readers want qualitative reports to cover are, for example, as follows:

- Design: How were subjects selected?
- Research situation: What information was given to the participants beforehand, for example?
- Transcription: How thorough was the transcription and what instructions were given to the transcribers?
- Analysis: How was the analysis constructed? Was it based on a personal intuitive interpretation, or were some formal procedures applied?
- Verification: Which measures were taken to ensure the validity of the findings?

Pitfalls to avoid

Kvale (1996: 253–268) gives some general points for improving qualitative reports:

- Avoid boring reports. Research should always carry a story that someone might care about.
- Tiresome findings (quoting interviewees at great lengths).
- Method as a black box (insufficient information given about the research design and the methods used).
- Focusing the research and the analysis towards the final report.
- Writing for the readers – a research report should contain all the necessary information.
- Think thoroughly about possible ethical issues.
- Avoid reports that are too long. Quantity seems to be a persistent problem for qualitative researchers who seem to feel that the sheer number of pages will justify their studies not having quantitative data.

References and further resources

- Eco, U. (1995). *The role of the reader. Explorations in the semiotics of texts*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
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- Rubin, H. & Rubin, I. (1995). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
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