FAQ 5: How should qualitative research be evaluated?

What's the issue?

Qualitative research is usually evaluated differently than quantitative research, especially by ethnographers. As the data collection is often of a nature that is harder to be repeated (such as surveys or experiments, for instance), qualitative researchers came up with different a set of quality measures, such as credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability (see Guba and Lincoln, 1989), members checking, and others.

Common practice

- Researchers usually demonstrate credibility, in the form of properly used scientific methods, triaging, experience, and beliefs.
- Dependability as a criterion of consistency is achieved by auditing the procedure, where the research process and researcher's work has been closely examined and evaluated by other experts in the field.
- Transferability assumes that research methods, analytic categories, and characteristics of phenomena and groups are identified so explicitly that comparisons can be made between interviews or fieldwork, for example.
- Confirmability is usually also checked by auditing. Auditors (other experts in the field) focus on how the interpretations are grounded in the data, and whether they are formulated in ways consistent with the available data.
- The most basic evaluation for qualitative methods is members checking. Researchers simply check the data and interpretations, getting back to the respondents as the source of the original data of the study. This could take place either at the end of research, providing participants with reports to ensure that their views have been properly captured, or during the research process, where participants also help to design questionnaires and interview guidelines. In this instance, they are seen as co-researchers (Kellett, 2005). It can also be used to increase the credibility of the research.

Questions to consider

Which data quality standard is the most sensible to approach the qualitative data with? Are children old enough to go through members checking?

Pitfalls to avoid

A common mistake in qualitative methods is to look for "quantitatively" denoted validity and reliability as the only proof to scientific objectivity. Qualitative methods are often semi-structured or unstructured and even informal, which makes it difficult to determine in advance what researchers want to "measure". It is also literally impossible to replicate an observation, a focus group, or an interview to the extent researchers can replicate surveys, for instance.

Another mistake derives from the assumption that since researchers are dealing with participants' own accounts of social reality or, in some cases, observing and participating in several social situations, that they have access to social "reality itself". This notion is emphasized by the idea that they are looking at "natural settings" within which social interactions take place, and not at "second-hand" accounts. Yet all accounts (and observations) of social reality are mediated by participants, in one way or another and, thus, all research situations are, to some extent, "artificial".

References and further resources

Guba, E. G. & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA and London: Sage Publications.

Kellett, M. (2005). *How to develop children as researchers: A step by step guide to teaching the research process*. London: Paul Chapman.

Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. London: Sage Publications.