

Issue #15, September 2007

Qualitative Research: challenges and opportunities

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Consulting assignments undertaken by LDC Group often involve both quantitative and qualitative research methods and data analysis. Qualitative research is sometimes not well understood and we thought it might be useful to provide an overview of qualitative research given that the bi-annual Association for Qualitative Research conference is scheduled for November this year.

The following discussion is an overview highlighting key considerations in qualitative research.

How might we define qualitative research?

- 'Any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)
- 'A set of practices that work from assumptions that are different from those of quantitative research and sit outside the practices common in traditional scientific research' (Associate Professor Carlene Boucher 2007)
- Usually concerned with capturing and understanding the meanings and interpretation that underpin and guide people, processes and systems.

Qualitative research: some views

- A body of research techniques which seeks insights through loosely structured, mainly verbal data rather than measurements. Analysis is interpretative, subjective, impressionistic and diagnostic.
www.mrs.org.uk/mrindustry/glossary.htm
- Research that derives data from observation, interviews, or verbal interactions and focuses on the meanings and interpretations of the participants (Holloway and Wheeler, 1995)

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healthlinks.washington.edu/howto/measurement/glossary/

- A research method that measures information based on opinions and values as opposed to statistical data.
www.communication.gc.ca/glossary.html

Challenges: accusations and issues

Accusations

- Too subjective and biased
- Validity and reliability is weak
- Slow and expensive
- Accuracy can't be assured
- Phenomenon can't be proven

Issues

- Requires particular competencies in the researcher
- Complex ethical tensions
- Needs clear risk management
- Involves more complex client relationships

Validity and Bias: the quantitative view

- Asserts an external reality independent of researcher's view of it
- That it is objective and accessed only by direct observation of the facts
- Only factors that can be directly observed constitute acceptable data
- Values and opinions of researcher have no place – contaminate the data - render it biased & invalid
- Researcher must remain neutral and value free
- Researcher describes, classifies & explains how facts are connected

- The aim is to discover the truth and generate causal laws that can be generalised across like cases
- No such thing as pure objective observation of much human behaviour in real work situations
- All observation is theory or value laden, and dependent on past experience of the observer
- The concerns of qualitative research are different - around the nature, significance and impact of participant constructions of meaning, making knowledge shareable, usefulness and relevance to practice
 - enables observations and learnings to be grounded in the multiple realities of organisational life, rather than filtered through a research approach that only admits data that is regarded as 'objective' and measurable

Good Research

- Organisational researchers are concerned with:
 - relevance, usefulness, resonance and data that support informed, evidence-based decision making – qualitative & quantitative
 - Not outcomes that predict future behaviour and results, be generalized to broader populations or need to be proven, validated or replicated.
- All credible researchers regard as essential:
 - transparency of process and method, systematic and internally consistent approaches to data gathering

and analysis, a clear chain of evidence and ethical practices

Strategies promoting sound qualitative research

- Fitness for purpose: nature of the research problem
- Usefulness, relevance & practicalities
- Space for contracting & re-contracting
- Inclusion & involvement of stakeholders eg member checking, dealing with uncomfortable findings
- Mixed methods
- Method is characterised by transparent and rigorous research processes & practices located in the relevant community of practice/literature
- Ethical practices are evident
- Reflective practice and supervision

Action Research

- A family of approaches which are action oriented and concerned with improving performance & practice
- Rejects the separation between thought and action and seeks to increase knowledge and contribute to the flourishing of people & communities
- Distinguishing characteristics:
 - Involves some form of participation
 - Research is a force for change
 - Data & evidence are systematically collected & arise from the experience of research participants
- Some examples of application in evaluation

- See Reason, P & Bradbury, H (eds), 2001, Handbook of Action Research, Participative inquiry and practice, Sage, London.

By Anne Smyth and Liz Dimitriadis, members AQR.

AQR Conference 2007: Qualitative Research and the Professions

Association for Qualitative Research

The AQR is an international organisation which aims to further the practice and study of qualitative research by:

- Improving the theory, practice and use of qualitative research across the disciplines of the human sciences;
- Providing a forum for the discussion of ideas via regional meetings, publications and an international conference;
- Linking people who have similar interests in qualitative research;
- Providing education and training in the methodologies of qualitative research;
- Establishing and maintain ethics and standards in the practice of qualitative research; and
- Recognising in appropriate ways outstanding contributions to the theory and/or practice of qualitative research.

AQR runs workshops on qualitative research methods and tools throughout the year and also holds a conference

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every second year. This year the conference will be held at Monash University (Caulfield Campus) on the **13th and 14th of November 2007**. The title of the conference is 'Qualitative Research and the Professions', and the conference will:

- Focus on the broader community of qualitative researchers;
- Bring together academic qualitative researchers and those who work in other professional roles; and
- Explore what each of these research communities can learn from one another, share knowledge, reflect & discuss important questions.

If you would like to know more about the conference, please visit the AQR website at:

<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/aqr/>

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