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FEATURE

**Changing Lives through Qualitative Research:
Some Practical Principles and
Practices for Advocacy**

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Abstract. *Research in social sciences is or at least should be, primarily about improving people's lives. This is especially important in qualitative research. It is not uncommon to find many qualitative research books and articles encouraging qualitative researchers to give voice to participants who do not have any. In the literature, one branch that is concerned with this specific ethical duty of qualitative researchers is advocacy or advocating. While some qualitative research books and articles have referred to advocacy in passing, it is not a topic that is frequently discussed in the qualitative research fora, despite its significant importance. This paper defines what advocacy is, its importance in qualitative research, and the challenges of advocating. The ultimate goal of this paper is to discuss effective ways of advocating through qualitative research. This is especially important when conducting qualitative research with alienated, marginalized, dehumanized, and powerless groups of people.*

Keywords: qualitative research, advocacy, empowerment, humanization, discrimination, marginalized groups

Introduction

Research in social sciences plays many roles, such as expending knowledge, addressing a problem, testing a hypothesis, generating theories, experimenting with a method, and many more (Creswell, 2012). In a special way, it is meant to improve lives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mertens, 2015; Mertens et al., 2013). This is especially important in qualitative research (QLR), where researchers interact much more with the research participants than is common to quantitative research. Conducting research in social sciences is not and should never be primarily about the researcher's

self-promotion. It is about addressing social problems, making this world a better place than before (Patton, 2015). It is about continuously generating solutions to existing and new social challenges. In fact, QLR “should contain an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of participants, the institutions in which they live and work, or even the researchers’ lives” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 61). As a result of research that focuses on changing lives, it is possible to see a change in human life and society at large.

If research was true to its mission, indeed, this world would probably be a better place in which to live. Unfortunately, this is not a common trend of research. Generating solutions to real problems has not been the center of much research. Whenever generating solutions to real human life problems is the real focus of research, sometimes the results are not successfully communicated or the solutions are not that practical to the target groups or communities. In fact, to some degree, people have become so obsessed with theoretical knowledge that even what is expected to be practical solutions may turn out to be just theoretical knowledge. Additionally, some solutions that are generated may not have a solid research foundation. Furthermore, sometimes the solutions that are generated may be inapplicable or difficult for the target group. The complaint about the disconnect between research or theory and practice decades ago (Argyris & Schön, 1974) continues to be true. Yet, advocacy requires that qualitative researchers generate practical solutions that can help improve people’s human life; to change it for the better.

While a number of books and journals may have been written on this topic, they have either addressed it as a research approach, known as advocacy research (Given, 2008), or briefly mentioned it without elaboration (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The purpose of this paper is to create a detailed, although maybe not exhaustive, discussion of how to integrate advocacy in QLR; in other words, how to change or touch lives through QLR. While quantitative research is impersonal, QLR is much more personal. It engages researchers and research participants in a much more personal way (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It makes sense to expect advocacy to be much stronger and much more expected in QLR.

This paper starts by defining advocacy in QLR. Then, it discusses the importance of advocacy in QLR. Additionally, it lists the challenges of advocacy in QLR. Furthermore, it presents the advocacy agenda. As well known in the field, QLR “is not value-free” research (Leavy, 2014; Lichtman, 2013; Maxwell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, it is no surprise to state the clear advocacy agenda that is aligned with QLR. Last, the paper discusses practical ways of advocating in QLR. It is intended to guide qualitative researchers in their advocating effort while generating further discussion as more and more qualitative researchers intentionally embrace and integrate advocating in their scholarly work. QLR must be more than just generating knowledge, theories, or hypotheses. It must go beyond teasing the

researchers' and scholars' brain. It must lead the researchers to care about people and their environments.

Defining Advocacy

Merriam-Webster (online) defines advocacy as “the action of advocating, pleading for, or supporting a cause or a proposal” (Advocacy, n.d.). In this definition, we can retain three different orientations of advocacy. First, advocacy is about speaking on behalf of someone else. In this case, advocating is all about speaking for the research participants. This is related to using QLR to “give a voice” (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Haynes, 2018; McLeod & Thomson, 2009) to those who have none. Qualitative researchers are therefore expected to become the voice of the countless, voiceless people around the world. After all, to be a qualitative researcher, someone is already ahead of millions or even billions who cannot conduct research and have no voice to speak on their own behalf.

Second, advocating is about pleading for a cause. Around the world today, many different causes are worth pleading for (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Some of the most currently known that can work well with QLR include, but are not limited to, groups of people facing gender discrimination, genocide, sexual exploitation, human trafficking, racism, tribalism, nepotism, different types of oppression, voiceless-ness in different societies. By advocating, the qualitative researchers “empower” or “humanize” people who have been dehumanized or considered less than human over time (Given, 2008; Tolley et al., 2016).

Last, advocating is really about the empowerment of the people for whom the researchers are advocating. The concept of “empowerment” in QLR is quite well known. QLR is expected to empower the research participants and/or the societies that they represent (Merriam, 2009; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018; Taylor et al., 2016; Tolich, 2016). This empowerment is not about making research participants the new oppressors of their neighbors; it is about liberating or helping them liberate themselves from any oppressive, debilitating, or dehumanizing practices or situations.

Importance of Advocacy in Qualitative Research

It is well known that the primary goal of QLR is generally to address local problems and give a voice to those who have none (Creswell, 2013; Lichtman, 2013; Wa-Mbaleka, 2018). In other words, the goal of QLR is for the researcher to be an advocate for the research participants. This is why advocacy is expected and it should always be part of any QLR study. It will be good someday to say that a QLR study is not complete until it has advocated for the research participants or the groups that they represent. While this may be a dream today, it is worth positing for the near-future generation of qualitative researchers.

As we look around what is happening in the world today, no one can reject the reality that it is “time to open up new spaces, time to decolonize the academy, time to create new spaces for indigenous voices, time to explore new discourses, new politics of identity, new concepts of equality and social justice” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017, p. 12). People and groups of people around the world have been suffering silently for too long. Social injustice has been reigning in so many social, economic, political, institutional, organizational, and family structures for a long time. Advocacy gives an intentional platform or approach to deconstruct oppressive practices, systems, structures, and cultures.

Researchers and other people must stop taking things at face value. What is needed is “new forms of critical ethnography, [and] new performance stages. We need to find new ways of connecting persons and their personal troubles with social justice methodologies” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017, p. 12). Qualitative researchers who fail to do advocacy work for voiceless, alienated or oppressed people may soon be found inadequate in their QLR studies. In fact, everyone conducting QLR should start integrating advocacy in his or her practice from now on. Critical analysis of what promotes social injustice and inequality must be utilized to expose oppressive practices, cultures, and systems and help empower people, communities, and societies at large.

Conducting QLR is not about self-enrichment or just self-actualization. It is not about receiving the best awards and recognition. It is about making the world a better place for everyone. It is about making a difference in people’s lives. It is about empowering people. It is about humanizing people. It is about giving people a voice. It is about “the pursuit of social justice within a transformative paradigm [that] challenges prevailing forms of inequality, poverty, human oppression, and injustice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017, p. 29). Therefore, QLR should always be “other-focused,” not “self-centered.” It should be personal to the research participants in that the researcher pleads for their cause.

Challenges of Advocacy in Qualitative Research

While the concept of advocacy is attractive, it comes with its own challenges. As can be expected, when oppression and social inequality exists, some people benefit from them. So, it is understandable to have quite a number of challenges. Given (2008) lists a number of them that are discussed here. Among them, we find limited knowledge, oppressive systems or cultures, the complexity of the problem, time constraints, lack of support, and limited funds or resources. This list is obviously not exhaustive.

Limited knowledge makes advocacy in QLR difficult (Tolley et al., 2016). Knowledge is power. Without knowing how to do advocacy, one may not advocate even if they are attracted to this concept. This is why advocacy in QLR must strongly be integrated with QLR courses and textbooks. Additionally, the remaining sections of this manuscript provide some specific paths and strategies to advocate.

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Furthermore, it is important for qualitative researchers to learn intentionally about advocacy in QLR and how to do it effectively. In fact, advocacy should be included in the criteria for the QLR study's rigor or trustworthiness, as proposed by Creswell and Poth (2018) about the procedures of conducting a good ethnographic study. This practice may help everyone to start taking advocacy much more seriously than it has been in the past.

Oppressive systems or cultures also make it difficult to do advocacy in QLR (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In different cultural contexts, different types of oppression are tolerated, accepted, and sometimes encouraged. Marginalized groups face "issues such as oppression, domination, suppression, alienation, and hegemony" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 61). According to Freire (1970), once an oppressive system is accepted, it becomes normal both to the oppressor and the oppressed. Although Freire was writing primarily about education, it is clear that what he wrote about applies to many social settings. In a later publication, he made it clearer that one of the major challenges of liberating people from oppression is the oppressed and oppressor's resistance against the liberation (Freire, 1992). Additionally, he found that once the oppressed is liberated, he or she becomes the new oppressor. Therefore, the work of advocacy in cultural systems is not something that can be done overnight. It requires some careful analysis and time.

In general, QLR is expected to address complex social issues (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Lichtman, 2013). The complexity of the research problem can significantly affect the advocacy needed in that QLR study. For instance, in some societies where human trafficking or modern slavery is happening, the solution may not just be to stop the human traffickers. Advocating to stop human traffickers may not be the complete solution. Sometimes, the main underlying problem may be poverty experienced by the victims of that human trafficking system. Additionally, it might be linked to some cultural values that consider certain individuals in a society of less status than others. So, the more complex a research problem, the more challenging it is to come up with an effective advocacy plan.

Time constraint is another challenge in advocating (Leavy, 2014). As it has become evident so far in this paper, advocating is seen as an additional task to the qualitative researchers. Additionally, with a complex problem, more time may be needed for advocating. Additionally, the work of empowerment requires quite a lot of time. For the work of advocacy to be sustainable, the researcher may need to invest a long time in the process. For someone to do advocacy in QLR, it requires him or her to have special care and love for the people for whom he or she is advocating.

Another challenge that comes with advocacy is the lack of support (Decuir-Gunby et al., 2018). Again, it is important to remember that in bad, oppressive systems or cultures, there are always some people who benefit from those practices. Therefore, when a qualitative researcher wishes to challenge the status quo and liberate the victims, that researcher may not receive the support needed within the

community. Additionally, the people being advocated for may be afraid of repercussion or be skeptical when they are encouraged to challenge or get out of the oppressive institutions, systems, cultures, or practices. Support is needed from both parties for advocacy to work (Archibald et al., 2019).

Limited funds or limited resources pose another challenge to be discussed here (Tolley et al., 2016). This challenge was presented last so that readers do not think that this is the only challenge in the work of advocacy. Some advocacy work obviously needs funding, although not all of it. It is the researchers' creative responsibility to find or connect the research participants to funds or needed resources when necessary. Of course, one of the sustainable ways to deal with the issue of funds or other resources may be to generate them locally. For instance, in the study by Rosario, Domocmat, and Oniashvili (2016), they were able to mobilize scholarships for single teen mothers from local authorities where they conducted their study. The researchers did not generate the scholarships themselves; they influenced the policymakers to allocate the funds for scholarships.

Advocacy Agenda

While there may be different ways of synthesizing the advocacy agenda, the synthesis by Denzin and Lincoln (2017) and Guba (1990) is to retain for the purposes of this paper. First, advocacy is about making "systematic contacts with political figures, the media...the professional press and with practitioners such as teachers, health workers, social workers, [and] government functionaries" (Guba, 1990, p. 376). By doing so, the researcher is about to get the cause of the research participants heard by people who can generate solutions. For this dimension of the advocacy agenda, the researcher's work is mainly to connect the research participants to the human resources, the experts, or the people in power that are needed to address the problem.

Second, advocacy in QLR is about "showing how qualitative work addresses issues of social policy" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017, p. 1535). Indeed, QLR can be used to create, revise, or improve social policy that can contribute to the betterment of human or social life. Policies that are grounded in QLR can have a significant impact on the ongoing improvement of people, communities, and larger societies. They are aligned with findings from real life as synthesized from people's lived experiences. While numbers in quantitative research can present the general picture of the problem, stories from real people put a face to the problem under exploration. This makes a strong advocacy case to the policymakers (Wang, 1999).

The third dimension of the advocacy agenda is "critiquing federally mandated ethical guidelines for human subject research" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017, p. 1535). Human life is generally considered sacred. Additionally, all humans are believed to be created equal, no matter their context, gender, religion, race, age, caste, and other classifications. Under this assumption, ethical guidelines to bring greater good to the research participants and their environment means that contextualization must take

place when conducting QLR. There are basically no generic ethical guidelines that are good enough for all contexts in a country. Part of advocating is to contextualize the generic ethical guidelines, which may sometimes be different from or even conflicting with the generic national or federal ethical guidelines. This means that someone advocating for a special group of people may have to use a non-traditional way that is accepted by the target group to be able to obtain data and truth that will help empower or liberate that group. This is most likely an area of contestation in different arenas of QLR experts.

Last, advocacy in QLR is about “critiquing outdated, positivist modes of science and research” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017, p. 1535). Anyone knowledgeable about QLR knows that positivist methods are limited. They do not provide a deep or complete understanding of complex problems; yet, every day that goes by, more and more complex issues come up (Stake, 2010). While positivist, traditional research methods should not be discarded (because they still have a role to play), advocacy calls for more creative, flexible, robust, wholistic methods that only QLR can supply. QLR methods are needed to understand and address complex problems (Stake, 2010; Taylor et al., 2016; Yin, 2015) so that qualitative researchers can develop the appropriate advocacy. If the focus of the problem is only partial, as is commonly seen in positivist methods, the proposed solutions will be partial, and, in the end, the proposed advocacy may not fully address the whole problem under exploration.

Bottom line, QLR is not and should not be value-free (Creswell, 2013; Lichtman, 2013). It must focus on the agenda to make this world a better place. It must focus on improving life (Creswell, 2013; Given, 2008). Advocacy must, therefore, be intentionally integrated with the design and execution of QLR studies. It may be a good idea for qualitative researchers to think from the beginning how they will deal with advocacy through their QLR study.

Major Aspects of Advocating in Qualitative Research

When advocating, three aspects may need to be taken into consideration. First, the researchers need to be aware of the levels of advocacy. Second, they must reflect on and involve the stakeholders. Last, they must use appropriate and sometimes diverse practical ways of advocating. This section discusses these three aspects to guide the qualitative researchers in the work of advocacy.

Levels of Advocacy

Advocacy can be done at various levels (Given, 2008). The nature of the research and the target group for advocacy determine which level of advocacy is appropriate. The researchers can advocate on an individual level. Narrative inquiries or single case studies could be good research types where the researcher advocates for one individual. For instance, someone may be conducting a research study with a political prisoner who plays a big role in society. Advocating for that one individual

can help free him or her and eventually bring out some positive ramifications to the general public.

The researchers can advocate on the group level. Advocacy could be solely related to a specific group of people in a certain community. In this case, not the whole community struggles with the same problem, but specific individuals in that community do. For instance, there may be children with disabilities who are denied access to universal education because of their disabilities. Advocacy work could solely focus on that specific group of individuals in a given community.

The researchers could otherwise decide to focus on a whole community for their advocacy. Community-based QLR studies focus on whole communities. A community struck by a natural disaster, poverty, oppression, war, discrimination, illness, alienation, and other similar issues that affect a whole community will be a candidate for such advocacy. In a wholistic situation like this, the researcher must ensure no one is left behind. Community empowerment is part of such advocacy.

The next level of advocacy is the national level. With large QLR studies that explore national issues, it is important to create or revise policies that can nationally improve lives. Studies such as those related to national education, gender discrimination, crime, illicit drugs, corruption, human trafficking, poverty, and other similar issues that affect people on a national level are a candidate for such national advocacy.

The last level of advocacy is the international level. This level is not common to most qualitative researchers. It requires someone to undertake QLR studies that are multinational in nature for advocacy to be justified and relevant. Usually, these studies are those funded by big corporations or organizations. They address issues that different nations share in common. The reality is that when dealing with international issues, it is good to address them concurrently in the countries that are affected.

Advocacy Stakeholders

The work of advocating involves three major stakeholders: those being advocated for (usually the research participants), those advocating (usually the researchers and other people interested in collaborating with the researchers for a specific cause), and those being advocated against (Given, 2008). Whenever advocacy happens, these three stakeholders come into play. The qualitative researchers need to understand these three well. Even more so, qualitative researchers need to have a clear idea about the people against whom they plan to advocate.

The qualitative researchers, or those advocating, need to know what they are capable of in the work of advocacy. They need to devise strategies for advocacy. They need to develop or find needed resources. They must evaluate what kind of resources are needed. They must have a clear picture of what kind of advocacy they

wish to pursue and visualize what kind of impact such advocacy will bring to those being advocated for. The researchers must decide whether they will use their own expertise or borrow expertise from somewhere else.

As far as those being advocated for are concerned, the qualitative researchers need to explore the issue in depth so that they understand well what and who they are dealing with. They must receive clear support from the research participants or from the people for whom they wish to advocate. Those being advocated for must understand the oppressive system that they live or work in. They must additionally be willing to challenge the status quo. Their cooperation is important for the success of the advocacy.

Those being advocated against may pose some serious challenges to the qualitative researchers. After all, those being advocated against may be benefitting from their oppressive system. On the other hand, they may not be aware of their oppressive systems, practices, or cultures. At first, they may be in denial and see no reason for the change. The advocacy may come to threaten their interests. Those advocating, whether it is the researchers or their partners, must know how to approach successfully those being advocated against. Without the buy-in of those being advocated against, the work of advocacy poses a serious challenge.

The last dimension is the set of practical ways of advocating in QLR. For the purposes of clarity of presentation, this aspect is discussed in the next section. These different ways are just some of those that can be practically utilized in many QLR studies. Having this skillset as a qualitative researcher can prepare people for good advocacy. The list is not exhaustive, but it is a good start in the right direction.

Practical Ways of Advocating in Qualitative Research

There are many different ways of advocating in QLR. This section discusses just seven of them proposed by Coffman and Reed (2009) and Given (2008). These include developing an advocacy mindset, connecting the suffering to the resources, influencing new policies or revising existing ones, raising awareness about inequalities, publishing studies with practical models, policies, or frameworks, using QLR designs that support advocacy, and collaborating with relevant partners. These can be used individually or in combination depending on the context, research problem, or research participants. Qualitative researchers interested in advocacy are encouraged to be creative in their advocating effort. They can do this as part of their social responsibility or as an approach for community empowerment (Given, 2008).

1. *Developing an advocacy mindset.* Obviously, researchers cannot advocate for the research participants or target group if the researchers themselves do not have the mindset of advocating. As far as QLR is concerned, the researchers must first develop the advocacy mindset. When the researchers understand the seriousness and importance of advocacy, when they understand the opportunity that advocacy offers them to change or improve lives, when they see it as their

right and their responsibility, then they can undertake the work of advocacy. This is the reason why, as indicated earlier in this paper, advocacy must be part of QLR courses so that it can be learned together with other skills pertaining to conducting rigorous and trustworthy QLR studies.

2. *Connecting the victims to the needed resources.* Some people and communities suffer simply because they are not informed about the available resources that can help them. A qualitative researcher who is aware of the different resources in society or a nation may help connect existing resources to the people being advocated for. In other cases, the researchers may not be aware of the resources. However, the use of the online search may help the researcher identify existing resources. Some may be offered through private organizations, while others may be government services and resources that already exist.
3. *Influencing or creating new policies or revising existing ones.* The end result of a QLR can be a list of recommended policies to improve the people's lives for whom the researcher is advocating. Through the course of the QLR, the researcher may discover that some existing policies are obsolete, incomplete, incomprehensible, irrelevant, or misleading. Advocating, in this case, could mean systematically working on revising those existing policies for the betterment of human life, communities, or society at large.
4. *Raising awareness about inequalities.* As discussed above, once people have lived with inequalities for a long time, they start believing social injustice as normal life. Unfortunately, both the oppressed and oppressor get to the point of accepting this oppressive reality. One of the most practical advocacy practices is, therefore, to raise people's awareness about inequalities. This can be done through publication in scholarly arenas, political arenas, news media, social media, and even through public and private speaking events. This is the first step towards the liberation of the victims.
5. *Publishing studies with practical models, policies, or frameworks.* This type of advocacy is probably common to many qualitative researchers who either do not know about the other ways of advocating or choose not to use the other types of advocacy due to constraints in time, power, resources, knowledge, or willingness. While it is good advocacy, and it is probably one of the most commonly used ones in QLR, it has one major problem. Many studies published in scholarly journals are hardly ever read by policymakers. Without an intentional effort to deliver such works to influential people, good models, policies, and frameworks that could make a difference in people's lives may never get to the people who can influence positive change.
6. *Using QLR designs that support advocacy well.* Some QLR designs are naturally set to challenge the status quo and lead to improvement. For instance, photovoice, arts-based body-mapping, critical research, phenomenology, critical action research, photovoice, and feminist studies are expected to empower the research participants and the groups or communities they represent

(Tolley et al., 2016). Any qualitative researcher primarily driven by advocacy may actually find it more practical to design QLR studies using such designs because, in essence, these designs require the researchers to do some advocacy work.

7. *Collaborating with relevant partners for advocacy.* By now, it should be clear that qualitative researchers do not need to have a lot of resources to do advocacy. When human and financial resources are needed, the qualitative researchers need to be intentional in finding potential collaborators or partners who can buy into the cause being advocated for and are willing to support the cause or provide the needed resources. For such collaboration to be successful, trust between the qualitative researcher and the partners, mutual respect, accountability, passion for the common cause are keys.

Conclusion

Advocacy should be part of all QLR studies. After all, research in social sciences is expected to improve human life (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Advocacy in QLR is possible. Qualitative researchers just need to know how to do it. They need to develop a mindset for advocacy. Advocacy needs to be part of the QLR study's trustworthiness. Advocacy must be intentionally taught in QLR classes so that prospective qualitative researchers can be equipped with the necessary skills to integrate it into their QLR work.

Qualitative researchers, just like other types of researchers, need to stop being self-centered. After all, QLR is about human life and about improving it. All qualitative researchers are called to plan intentionally to advocate in all their research endeavors. They also need to read more about this important dimension of QLR so that they can be better prepared for advocacy. Last, every qualitative researcher is encouraged to change the world—one person or community at a time. Once everyone does the work of advocacy, together, we can indeed change the world.

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