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FEATURE

Deconstructing Myths in Qualitative Research

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Abstract. *From the perspective of the qualitative researcher, there are certainly myths regarding qualitative inquiry, such as qualitative research is not scientific; qualitative research is totally subjective; qualitative research is merely descriptive; and qualitative is simply not reliable. While responses have been provided that seek to confront these external myths, qualitative researchers must also ask themselves: Could there also be myths within qualitative research? Might there be false beliefs that distort our view of reality, and that cause us to create misconceptions of regarding the qualitative approach and its methodologies? In this article, we consider four of these internal myths and endeavor to set the record straight.*

Keywords: qualitative research, qualitative inquiry, myth, false belief, tabula rasa, literature review, generalizability, generalization, focus group, risks

Introduction

A myth can be defined as a widely held, but false, belief, or idea (Oxford Dictionary). Fables, fairytales, and fantasies, fake news, urban legends, hoaxes, and illusions abound throughout cultures and in contemporary society. Scripture, however, reminds us that truth is of essence. Writing to his protégés, Timothy and Titus, the apostle Paul admonished, "Don't abandon the truth and chase after myths" (2 Tim 4:4, NLT) and again, "Show soundness by ceasing to give attention to myths and fables" (Titus 1:14, Amplified Bible).

Could it be that there are myths related to qualitative research? As qualitative researchers, we certainly recognize that there are myths *about* qualitative research. There are myths, such as Qualitative research is not scientific. Qualitative research is merely descriptive. Qualitative research is totally subjective. Qualitative research is simply not reliable (Athanasiou, Debas, & Darzi, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018;

Green & Thorogood, 2014; Osborne, 2008; Stake, 2010; Waller, Farquharson, & Dempsey, 2016).

We believe that we have good answers to confront these external myths, but might there also be myths *within* qualitative research? Are there myths that we believe as qualitative researchers and that distort our understanding of truth and reality within our own discipline? In this article, we will examine four such myths and seek to replace each with the facts of the case.

Myth #1: The researcher must approach a qualitative research topic with a blank slate.

Here is the basic premise: You must forget what you know in order to discover what you need to know. The result of accepting this assumption is the belief that a qualitative researcher must become a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate with no preconceived ideas or personal opinions (Flick, 2014; Given, 2008; Urquhart, 2013). Consequently, the researcher must launch into data collection as an uncontaminated vessel—without first reviewing the literature.

The origin of this premise is found in a valid tenet of naturalistic inquiry, namely, that a qualitative researcher must set aside extant theory (Hays & Singh, 2012; Lichtman, 2013; Trauth, 2001). Yet temporarily setting aside existing theory does not imply that a qualitative researcher is to ignore existing literature and theoretical constructs, becoming a *tabula rasa*. You simply cannot set aside what you do not have!

The problem lies perhaps in a superficial reading of qualitative literature. Early on, Glaser and Strauss (1967) warned researchers against allowing extant theory to dictate what is relevant in a qualitative study. Construing this warning, however, as a dictum requiring a blank mind is a misinterpretation of the intent (Urquhart & Fernandez, 2013). This concept of "setting aside extant theory" implies that the researcher understands the role of both knowledge and detachment. In this scenario, known or proposed theories are simply held in reserve for potential future comparison, should the analysis of the data indicate that they may be relevant. This allows the researcher to access existing knowledge in clarifying the problem and designing the study, without being trapped in the view that it represents the final truth.

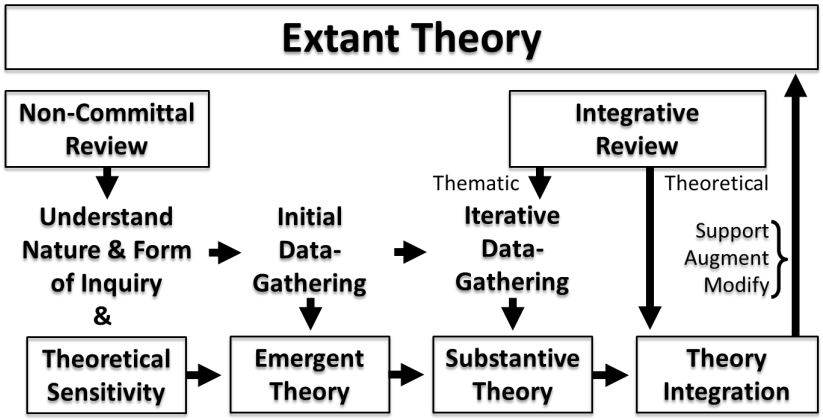
Now for the fact of the matter: A qualitative researcher should employ a two-phase literature review (Urquhart & Fernandez, 2013). The first phase is a *non-committal review* of the literature. In this preliminary review, the researcher scans the literature to develop theoretical sensitivity, as well as to understand the nature and form of the inquiry, seeking to better define the domain of the research problem and to learn about appropriate methodologies. Consequently, there are two components to this pre-study review: the qualitative researcher endeavors to learn about existing theories and notes those that may be potentially relevant for future

comparison; and the researcher tries to discover how other researchers have addressed aspects of the research problem or approached similar situations.

The second phase is an *integrative review* of the literature, which takes place after the initial data collection has begun. During this phase two forms of review are conducted. In the *thematic* literature review, which takes place once data analysis is underway and themes begin to surface, the researcher returns to the extant literature to further develop the emerging concepts. The primary focus is to seek converging and diverging literature to compare against observed patterns and emerging themes. In essence, the literature is treated as further thematic data to enrich the emerging themes in the study. Also, by comparing emerging patterns or concepts against the literature, the researcher may come to recognize the need for further sampling. Consequently, the thematic review has a key role to play in the quality of the emerging concepts, which become more robust and well-informed as a result of this process.

In the *theoretical* literature review, which takes place once the themes have been identified and a core pattern (emergent theory) has been defined, the researcher seeks to integrate these with relevant existing theories. This review in essence links the observed phenomena to extant theories in similar fields, and potentially even to meta-theories in distant fields. In sum, the first phase of the literature review is a non-committal review, where the researcher seeks to (a) understand the nature and form of the inquiry, and (b) develop theoretical sensitivity. This is followed by the integrative review of the literature, where the researcher endeavors to (a) enrich thematic understanding, and (b) link substantive and extant theory.

The elements of a qualitative literature review may be viewed as a process, as follows:



There is inherently, however, a potential tension between the way qualitative researchers work with the literature versus the way the literature is traditionally presented in journal articles (Urquhart & Fernandez, 2013). If the literature is discussed early in the report, qualitative authors may feel that they are not truly representing the manner in which the literature was incorporated in the study. If the literature is presented later in the report, however, the reader may not have the necessary information to appropriately follow and evaluate the study, and the report itself may run the risk of rejection by certain journals.

A solution to this dilemma may be to present early in the report that literature from the non-committal review that served to guide the nature and form of the inquiry, and that provided theoretical sensitivity. Then, in the discussion section of the report, one can present literature from the integrative review that enriched thematic understanding and that linked the findings of the study to existing theory (Suddaby, 2006). The bottom line is this: Qualitative research is not an excuse to ignore the literature.

Myth #2: Qualitative research results are not generalizable.

Here is the problem: Quantitative researchers at times (probably often!) dismiss the results of qualitative research based on the perceived lack of generalizability. Qualitative researchers typically respond that they are not concerned with generalization anyway, only with immersive data-gathering, thick description, and goodness of fit. The result? Few quantitative researchers are convinced! (Gheondea-Eladi, 2014).

Validity—the truth value of findings—and reliability—their degree of consistency—are ultimate standards in research. Each of these standards has both internal and external dimensions. For example, reliability (or dependability, as it is often referenced in the qualitative paradigm) has an internal dimension of inter-rater congruence and an external dimension of replicability. Internal validity, on the other hand, focuses on the match between constructs of the conceptual framework and instrumentation (much in the same way as the qualitative concept of credibility is established), while external validity refers to generalizability—the degree to which research results are applicable to other settings.

Generalization, however, can be defined in various ways: as "an act of reasoning that involves drawing broad conclusions from particular instances" (Polit & Beck, 2010); as "an inference about the unobserved based on the observed" (Gheondea-Eladi, 2014); and as a "claim that what is the case in one place or time, will be so elsewhere" (Payne & Williams, 2005). Others note that generalization is not only concerned about drawing conclusions from a sample to a population, but also from case to case (Bryman, 2008). All told, generalizability implies that results are applicable across time, space, and case.

There are three fundamental ways that generalization can be established: statistical generalizability, analytical generalizability, and transferability (Firestone, 1993; Polit & Beck, 2010; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2009). *Statistical generalizability* is based on a sample being representative of its sampling frame, a fact which allows the researcher to generalize findings back to that larger frame. A problem arises, however, when the researcher actually wishes to apply the findings to the total population, of which the sampling frame is only a part, and of which it may or may not be representative.

To illustrate, let us suppose a researcher wishes to study spatial ability differences between adolescents who are right-hand dominant and who are left-hand dominant. The researcher creates a random sample of adolescents who are public high-school students in a given metropolitan area. The findings derived from that sample are then applicable, by extension, back to public high-school students in that metropolitan area. Making these findings applicable to the total population of all adolescents, however, would be an over-generalization. Adolescents in private schools, or those in middle schools or junior high-schools, or those in rural areas or other regions may be similar or may be quite different. We simply do not know.

Consequently, there are caveats regarding statistical generalizability (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). First, a considerable amount of quantitative research utilizes a convenience sample or other non-representative sampling strategy. Second, even when a truly random (or well-stratified) sample is used, the researcher typically endeavors to apply the findings to the total population, rather than limiting the application of findings to the sampling frame. Either of these situations invalidates statistical generalization.

In *transferability*, the researcher provides thick description, which is embedded in the research report received by the practitioner, who can then apply the findings to the local context based on similarities between the research description and the characteristics of the current setting. This transfer of findings is, of course, a type of generalization, in which findings are applied across time, space, and case. Such generalization has sometimes been described as moderatum generalizability (Payne & Williams, 2005), in which a responsibility rests upon the researcher to provide as much contextual information as possible in order to assist the reader/practitioner in identifying those relevant characteristics that should be transferred to a different setting.

There are also caveats, of course, regarding transferability. First, the researcher, who best understands the findings of the study, has no direct role in their application. Second, there is typically no feedback loop or cross-check as to whether the reader/practitioner, who at times may know little of qualitative methodology, has appropriately applied the findings of the study to the circumstances of the local context, thus establishing goodness of fit.

Analytical generalizability refers to generalization to theory instead of to a population or to a specific setting (Halkier, 2011; Neergaard & Leitch, 2015). This form of generalization is based on how constructs emerging from the data relate to each other and how they relate to extant theory. In the latter case, there are several possibilities: (a) Findings can support an existing theory. (b) Findings can add new dimensions to existing theory. (c) Findings can significantly modify existing theory.

To summarize, statistical generalizability applies findings to a population or more appropriately, to the sampling frame. This form of generalization is used primarily in quantitative research. Transferability (moderatum generalizability) applies findings to a specific setting and is used principally in qualitative research. Analytical generalizability, by contrast, applies findings towards a theory and can be used in both quantitative and qualitative research.

So how do we go about deconstructing the myth that qualitative research is not generalizable, even for those who may argue, albeit incorrectly, that transferability is not a form of generalization? Quite simply, we do so by utilizing analytic generalization in qualitative research (Gheondea-Eladi, 2014; Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014).

Surprisingly, there are strange phenomena taking place in qualitative research. First, qualitative researchers rarely discuss the generalizability of findings, and second, qualitative researchers rarely argue that analytic generalization is a core purpose of their endeavor. If there is no generalization, however, we are conducting action research, in which findings are limited to the data-gathering setting, and in which the researcher and the practitioner are typically one and the same. While action research can, in fact, utilize qualitative (as well as quantitative) methodologies, action research is not the same as qualitative research (Meyer, 2000).

So how do we enable analytic generalizability? Primarily, in two ways: through our sampling strategy and through our data analysis approach (Gheondea-Eladi, 2014). In terms of sampling strategy, we need to utilize purposive sampling, rather than convenience (haphazard) sampling or snowball sampling. These latter strategies should be reserved for pilot tests, and perhaps for difficult-to-reach populations, such as drug users. Purposive sampling, by contrast, is guided by theoretical considerations, and this allows inferences to be made back from the particular instances to a more general theory.

In terms of the analysis approach, we can either use bottom-up coding or top-down coding. In bottom-up coding, we depart from the data and use abstraction from coding schemes (themes) to develop a theory that emerges from the data, which is then tested against further sampled data. This approach is used primarily in grounded theory research. In top-down coding, we depart from theory and use

coding schemes to assess this theory within the data. This approach would typically be used in most other forms of qualitative research.

In sum, since qualitative research can, and should be, generalizable, an open discussion regarding generalizability should be the norm in reporting qualitative research. This discussion should address the sampling and coding methods employed and their relationship to external validity. The report should specifically discuss analytic generalizability, as well as the potential for transferability.

Myth #3: Focus groups, if used at all in qualitative research, should follow set criteria.

There are at least two false beliefs that comprise this myth. The first false belief holds that in order to be effective, focus groups must follow "the blueprint." This blueprint states that (a) focus groups to should limited to 6 or 7 participants, so that all participants can get adequate air-time. (b) Focus groups should be demographically homogeneous, so that respondents are comfortable and speak freely. (c) Moderators should say little and follow the script, so that outcomes can be compared among the various focus groups (Kitzinger, 1995; Langer, 1999).

The second false belief maintains that in the era of social media mining, focus groups are simply obsolete (Heist, 2013; Killian Branding, 2017; Pfanner, 2006; Schelmetic, 2016). Back in the primitive age, when people actually talked to each other, focus groups constituted one of the few tools in the nascent qualitative researcher's repertoire. Now, in the new age of mobile technology and big data, we have come so very far that focus groups are but a footnote in the history of qualitative research. Nonsense!

Here are the facts, with five core concepts coming together to make the case (Breen, 2007; Krueger, 2002; Langer, 1999; Millward, 2012). First and foremost, focus groups continue to be a key form of triangulation in qualitative research. There are at least two reasons for this role. (a) Focus groups provide access to key respondent groups. While social media and mobile devices constitute important developments in qualitative data collection, interviews and focus groups can incorporate the view of segments that might otherwise be ignored. (b) Focus groups allow for more responsive and extensive data-gathering. This is due to the interactive and iterative nature of focus groups, which allows for branching and probing.

Second, the ideal number of respondents in a focus group depends on many factors, such as type of respondent, topic, and moderator style. While it is generally true that the smaller the group, the less synergy takes place, resulting in lower energy, mini-focus groups of 4 to 6 individuals may still be appropriate for certain types of respondents.

Third, effective focus groups can be either homogeneous or heterogeneous. A qualitative researcher can use homogeneous groups to (a) enhance the comfort level of respondents on sensitive or intimate issues, (b) to provide respondents with the freedom to speak freely about those not in the group, and (c) to afford the researcher with the opportunity to compare various types of respondents. By contrast, the researcher may choose to use heterogeneous groups (a) to study how different types of respondents interact, (b) to avoid "group think" where members simply acquiesce to the dominant view, and (c) to save the time and resources compared to that required to form groups for each demographic type.

Fourth, focus group moderators, at times, may need to take a leading role in the group. The idea that a moderator should say little is only true in an ideal world where respondents speak one at a time, stick to the subject, do not monopolize the conversation, and provide short detailed explanations. This rarely happens! In the real world, a moderator's role is active—providing focus and cadence, managing group dynamics, offering non-leading feedback, and probing for further detail. In essence, moderators need to be responsive and creative in order to be effective.

Fifth, effective moderators use discussion guides, not scripts. A script is a research protocol that must be followed verbatim. A discussion guide is a research tool to be implemented with flexibility. A discussion guide typically includes a general list of topics, a suggested sequence, and potential branches and probes. In a focus group, a "seize-the-moment" style often feels more spontaneous and conversational, and respondents are more likely to open up. Each group, however, has its own rhythm and the researcher should seek to harness its energy. If respondents, for example, become animated about a subject and the moderator cuts them off and moves to another matter, energy is dissipated that the group may not easily regain.

In qualitative market research, for example, if an idea or product meets instant respondent rejection, the researcher should probably explore what underlies this reaction: Is there anxiety regarding change? Is there need for additional information? Is there rejection of specific aspects? What is it that might bring acceptance?

As qualitative researchers, we must remember that the beauty of qualitative research is its dynamic flexibility. Some aspects will turn out to be rich; others less so. New ideas may emerge, which can then be incorporated into the discussion guide. We may discover that questions may need to be rephrased to clarify areas of confusion. And, of course, respondent reactions may alter the approach.

What is the bottom line in all of this? Focus groups have been, are, and will continue to be a flexible and valuable qualitative data-gathering strategy. Remember, you do not abandon old friends, just because you gain a new one.

Myth #4: Qualitative research carries few, if any, inherent risks to researcher or participants.

Again, there are at least two false beliefs that undergird this myth. First, because a qualitative researcher seeks to be neutral and impartial, he or she will be unaffected by the research experience. Second, because the researcher endeavors to minimize any research effect upon the setting, the risk to the participants will be minimal.

To deconstruct this myth, perhaps we should take a moment to contrast quantitative and qualitative paradigms in terms of the relationship of the knower to the known. In the positivist paradigm of quantitative research, the researcher should be detached. The ideal is an *in vitro* study with its carefully controlled environment. In the naturalist paradigm of qualitative research, the researcher should be immersed. The ideal is an *in vivo* study in the natural setting. So let us suppose we are going to study the personality of lions. Yes, that is the beasts of prey. An *in vitro* scientist will study the lion behind bars. The *in vivo* scientist will study the lion on the savannah, no bars between. Yes, there is no risk to the researcher in a qualitative study!

The fact of the matter is that there is not only the potential for physical risks to the qualitative research, but there are certainly significant mental health risks (Bloor, Fincham, & Sampson, 2007; Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2008). For example, how will the researcher be personally affected by conducting the interviews and engaging in the observations? Might what will be seen or heard, for instance, result in "guilty knowledge," such as information regarding involuntary or planned crimes? These ethical dilemmas are real and not uncommon.

Consequently, every qualitative researcher needs to have a confidant, someone who will be the researcher's counselor on matters of ethics or the experience of personal trauma during a study. This needs to be determined in advance. Not all issues can accurately predict and know to whom you will go in the event of difficulties can bring comfort and minimize distress.

In terms of the participants, all known risks should be disclosed. While qualitative researchers would not knowingly harm human subjects, there may still be significant risks involved. These may include psychological stress, loss of status, legal liabilities, ostracism, or political or economic repercussions (Hadjistavropoulos & Smythe, 2010; Morse, 2001; Sanjari, Bahramnezhad, Fomani, Shoghi, & Cheraghi, 2014). It is an ethical responsibility of the qualitative researcher to conduct a risk assessment and then disclose any known risks in the informed consent.

The qualitative researcher should also carefully protect the right to privacy. As researchers, we respect and protect participant privacy by avoiding subtle invasions. For example, we should not record conversations on hidden devices. We

also protect subject identities by using pseudonyms and face blurring, and avoiding the use of any other potential identifiers in research reports. Any exceptions to these parameters must be expressly authorized by the participants in writing. In sum, risks to participants and to the researcher must be acknowledged and minimized.

Conclusion

In this article we have examined four myths that lie *within* qualitative research, and that have the potential to distort the results of our endeavor and our effectiveness as researchers. These myths must be deconstructed and replaced with realities.

First myth: The researcher must approach a qualitative topic with a blank slate. The fact: A qualitative researcher should use a two-phase literature review.

Second myth: Qualitative research results are not generalizable. The fact: Qualitative researchers should utilize analytic generalizability.

Third myth: Focus groups, if used at all in qualitative research, should follow set criteria. The fact: Focus groups continue to be an effective and flexible qualitative strategy.

Fourth myth: Qualitative research carries few, if any, inherent risks to researcher or participants. The fact: Risks to participants and researcher must be acknowledged and minimized.

May the myths crumble and the facts endure!

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