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FEATURE

Fostering Quality in Qualitative Research: A List of Practical Strategies

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Abstract. *Qualitative research is an ongoing disruptive innovation in educational research all around the world. For a century or more, the world has predominantly been under the dominion of quantitative research. In fact, when qualitative research was introduced a few decades ago, it met strong resistance and repugnance, just as is the case of any groundbreaking innovation. Today, this opposition to the different way of thinking that qualitative research promotes still exists in many countries around the world. One of the reasons why scholars resist qualitative research is that they simply do not know what it is and what makes a good qualitative research study. This paper uses leading qualitative research texts to propose a list of criteria to evaluate the quality of a qualitative research paper.*

Keywords: qualitative research, triangulation, quality in qualitative research, evaluation of qualitative research, myths of qualitative research, importance of qualitative research, evaluating qualitative research

Introduction

For quite a long time, higher education institutions have been predominantly focusing on quantitative research (Lichtman, 2013). Until recently, it was not uncommon to have professors frown at the idea of a student trying to write a thesis or dissertation using qualitative research (QLR) (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This reality is probably still true in several countries around the world. Although the integration of QLR in educational research textbooks has been done more than two decades, overemphasis in the use of quantitative research still persists in the academe as well as in research publications. Some of the possible reasons may be that people do not know how to translate the QLR theoretical findings into

practicality. Another reason may be simply because in many instances, QLR has not been effectively introduced in educational institutions. Additionally, there are several myths that have developed over the years such as QLR being too subjective, not generalizable, too easy or too difficult, or not scientific (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Bunkers, Petardi, Pilkington, & Walls, 1996; Ells & Gutfreund, 2006; Harper & Kuh, 2007; Yin, 2014). These myths are discussed later in this paper.

The lack of understanding of QLR and its importance, and how to apply it in educational research have led to misconceptions and fear of embracing it. The purpose of this paper is to define QLR, briefly discuss its importance and some of the myths related to it, and then present a list of practical strategies to improve quality in conducting and writing a quality QLR study. For the purposes of practical application, the strategies are presented following the common structure of a research paper. Such a practical list is meant to guide more effectively any novice qualitative researcher and reviewers of QLR manuscripts. Additionally, this list is supposed to continue the ongoing discussion on how to make QLR more practical for researchers (Lichtman, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Definition and Importance of Qualitative Research

To start with, it is important to define what QLR is. Such a simple step can help diffuse a significant amount of confusion from scholars' mind. The definitions provided here are just some of the several ones in QLR. There are many others available today. QLR is sometimes called qualitative inquiry or interpretive inquiry (Creswell, 2013). There is no one agreed-upon definition for QLR because different experts prefer different orientations (Hammersley, 2012). For the sake of the purposes of this paper, two orientations are considered: one on the role of the participants and the other based on the role of the researcher.

QLR is a type of research that focuses on "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experience" (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). In this definition, it is clear that the focus of QLR, especially when using human participants, is on their experiences and how they interpret the meaning of those experiences. Basically, in general, the meaning of the experiences is primarily about what the QLR participants think about their experiences and not about what the qualitative researcher thinks about the participant's experiences.

QLR research is also defined as a “way of knowing in which a researcher gathers, organizes, and interprets information obtained from humans using his or her eyes and ears and filters” (Lichtman, 2013, p. 4). While the previous definition places the emphasis on the interpretation of experiences on the perspective of the research participants, Lichtman’s definition emphasizes the subjectivity found in QLR by the fact that the qualitative researcher does not conduct a study with a blank brain. He or she brings his or her own experiences, assumptions, and beliefs that affect to some extent what data is collected and how it is analyzed and interpreted. For hardcore quantitative researchers, this subjectivity causes a problem of reliability because it implies that the researcher’s bias influences the study. Later in the paper, this seemingly problematic issue is addressed in the section where the researcher’s positioning is discussed.

QLR allows the researcher to bring “his or her eyes and ears and filters” (Lichtman, 2013, p. 4) to the study. Instead of using some type of preset instruments as is the custom in quantitative research, QLR is an effective approach to do research on complex issues (Creswell, 2013). In fact, QLR provides “opportunities to examine issues in depth that may yield a clearer understanding of what is happening in certain circumstances and how changes can be made to meet the needs” (Lichtman, 2013, p. xv). In quantitative research, everything is basically reduced to numbers (Creswell, 2012). Human participants are treated almost like inanimate objects. In QLR, however, the researcher understands that he or she is dealing with human beings with feelings, emotions, life, experiences, and a mind to interpret their personal experiences within the context where they are. The researcher understands that human experiences and social life is too complex to try to squeeze them into a few variables (Stake, 2010).

QLR allows the researcher to undertake a scholarly journey that has no preset variables or boundaries (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2013; Lichtman, 2013; Stake, 2010; Yin, 2014). QLR allows the researcher to take a much more flexible approach in trying to address a complex issue (Yin, 2014). This flexibility, although highly valued by qualitative researchers, can make many novice QLR scholars uncomfortable. This discomfort is due to the fact that many people are used to the clear, objective structure of conducting quantitative research (Creswell, 2012) while QLR allows creativity in approaching research problems (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Complex issues require flexibility, creativity, and multiple methods of addressing the problem (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), and this is what QLR offers.

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In recent publications, QLR scholars seem to understand the discomfort of applying QLR quite well. Thus, many new QLR textbooks and articles provide more practical guidelines to novice qualitative researchers, as evidenced in the titles and the content presentation (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Brinkmann, 2013; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Glaser, 2013; Goodyear, Jewiss, Usinger, & Barela, 2014; Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013; Harper & Thomson, 2012; Heigham & Crocker, 2009; Lichtman, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014; Silverman, 2016; Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016; Thorne, 2016; Ulim, Robinson, & Tolley, 2003; Urquhart, 2013; Yin, 2014, 2015). A major effort is currently under way to translate what used to be predominantly theoretical and philosophical knowledge about QLR into practical strategies to conduct QLR. The current paper is supposed to be an addition to the ongoing work of making QLR more practical.

Some Myths About QLR

Because of so many myths that have developed due to lack of solid QLR knowledge or QLR understanding, QLR may continue to suffer rejection or lack of complete acceptance. This paper simply synthesizes a few persistent myths that have come up in the literature, such as those seen in Bogdan and Biklen (2007) and Yin (2014). The list presented here is not exhaustive.

First, QLR is criticized for being too subjective (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Reality is experienced subjectively by different people. Objectivity may not always be the golden standard when it comes to human life (Lichtman, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). While the idea of objectivity seems quite enticing, the complex problems of human beings sometimes requires subjective solutions depending on the situation and the context of the problem (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Second, QLR is not considered generalizable (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The problem with this myth is that those trained primarily in quantitative research have only one view of generalizability; that is, generalization to a certain population. QLR uses generalizability in two major ways (Merriam, 2009; Miles et al., 2014). One is the theoretical generalization. It means that instead of generalizing the findings over the population (because random sampling is not used in QLR), generalization is over the concept, the theory, or the phenomenon under exploration. In QLR, the main focus is on theoretical generalization

(Schwandt, 2015). Another way to generalize is to give the reader the power to generalize over his or her own setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After all, each individual who reads the outcome of a QLR study is able to decide on his or her own whether the findings apply to his or her situation, setting, or context.

The third myth is that it is easy to collect and analyze QLR data (Harper & Kuh, 2007). While this may eventually become true as one gains experience, in general, this myth has no solid foundation. The researcher must be meticulous in planning a QLR study, collecting, and analyzing data (Flick, 2006; Lichtman, 2013; Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2015a; Yin, 2014, 2015). Those who approach QLR from the perspective of this myth can easily end up doing poor quality research thus perpetrating the myth of QLR not being of high scholarly quality.

QLR is not about spending 5 minutes interviewing someone and then quickly synthesizing that conversation. QLR work must be well planned and carried out meticulously in order to demonstrate rigor, quality, and credibility as it will be subsequently seen in the list of quality indicators. QLR requires planning and thinking in a qualitative way (Saldaña, 2011, 2015b). Quality QLR requires data collection from multiple sources and a prolonged time in data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Lichtman, 2013); something that quantitative research does not commonly provide. When well done, these two strategies provide richer data than what can be collected in quantitative research.

The fourth myth here is the reverse of the third. Many people are hesitant to be involved in QLR because they believe it is too labor-intensive (Yin, 2014). Indeed, if the researcher fails to plan the study well, QLR can come in all different shapes that may make it quite labor-intensive in the management, analysis, and interpretation of the data (Miles et al., 2014). Proper training through personal readings, seminars, workshops, and courses can help build the needed QLR skills that can cut down the time needed to collect, manage, analyze, and interpret QLR data. Additionally, for people interested in large or several QLR studies, the integration of QLR computer software can save tremendous amounts of time (Creswell, 2013).

Last, some continue to think that QLR is not a scientific undertaking (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) although this myth is probably fading away. The adjective “scientific” refers to whatever is “done in an organized way that agrees with [specific] methods and principles” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, Scientific). QLR, when well done, follows specific methods and principles that have already been established. QLR done from simple commonsense can easily lead to poor quality.

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Anyone interested in QLR must take time to learn how to effectively conduct a QLR study.

Because of these myths and many others that have developed over the years, some people have learned to detest QLR and therefore be discouraged about undertaking it. In other places, the myths may be due to the fact that QLR is not well taught, or taught by educators who do not have much experience teaching or producing QLR. All these factors can lead to QLR being wrongly understood, implemented, and misinterpreted. All efforts must be made to continue providing practical application of QLR so that most people can be enlightened and thus promote quality QLR. The list below is one such step in trying to help people see QLR from a practical perspective. This list is by no means exhaustive. It is proposed to contribute to the practical application of QLR. It should generate additional constructive discussion to help continually improve practice in QLR.

The List of Quality Indicators in Qualitative Research

The list presented below is just a starting point in the effort to address the concerns and questions that have been raised in different places where I have given trainings, workshops, seminars, or classes on QLR, and as editor and peer reviewer of a number of QLR manuscripts. The list comes from both the existing literature and personal experiences. It should be of help to novice researchers, QLR students, and QLR authors and reviewers. For easier application of the list to QLR, the general format of a research article is used in this list so that readers can know exactly what is expected at each stage of a QLR paper. Numbering of the different practical guidelines is used here for easier identification, although not common in most journal articles.

Introductory Matters

The introductory matters of a research manuscripts include the title, the abstract, the keywords, and the introduction of the manuscript. In many research manuscripts (other than theses and dissertations), the research questions usually come right after the review of the literature. For the purposes of better organization of this proposed list, however, the research questions are addressed here.

- 1. Make a strong case for your QLR in the title, abstract, and keywords.** In the title, it is important to provide clues that the paper is about QLR.

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QLR has some specific designs and concepts that can be used in the title that help the reader notice quickly that the paper is on QLR (Creswell & Poth, 2016). For instance, concepts such as phenomenon, explore, lived experiences, process, and the target QLR research design of the study under exploration can give an idea of whether or not the manuscript is about a QLR study. In addition to that, the title should preferably provide some information about the research topic, setting, and participants (Wa-Mbaleka, 2014).

The abstract must briefly provide a brief general background of the study, the specific research problem, the purpose of the study, the research design, the research setting, the research participants, the data collection methods, some connection to theory, and a brief summary of the findings (Wa-Mbaleka, 2014). This format of the abstract seems to be generic to most research papers in the social sciences. Doing QLR does not exclude researchers from providing this complete information.

2. **State the importance of your research in the introduction.** In the introduction, the researcher must make a strong case for the study (Creswell, 2012). The introduction must provide a broader background of the problem, using existing literature. Additionally, it must narrow down to a specific topic and pinpoint the research gap in the literature. The introduction must provide and defend the research problem and the research purpose (Creswell, 2013), just as is the practice in most research studies.
3. **Pave a clear path of your research scope with qualitative research questions.** The research questions must be relevant to QLR (Merriam, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). For instance, in QLR, research questions should not be focused on finding relationships or testing or measuring some variables. While they must be stated in the third person, just like in quantitative research, they must be broader than those in quantitative research and focused on the phenomenon, process, setting, program, or individuals under exploration (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Specific designs may have some specific research question format that is expected. For instance, in phenomenology, it is important to ask the question “What is the essence of...?” (Van Manen, 2014). Questions starting with “what”, “how”, and “why” are common in QLR.

Literature Review

The review of the literature is about “analyzing and synthesizing multiple studies for the purpose of demonstrating their collective relevance” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 274) to the topic under exploration. One of the common mistakes found in manuscripts submitted for publication is probably the weak, inaccurate, incomplete, or old review of the literature (Casanave & Li, 2015; Pierson, 2004). This malpractice in QLR might be due to another misconception that a literature review is not needed in QLR (Flick, 2006). Generally, in research, nothing comes from a vacuum. In most QLR research designs, the review of the literature is expected.

In grounded theory, however, an exception can be made given that the researchers’ main goal is to come up with a new theory grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2014). Still, in grounded theory, the researchers are encouraged to use the existing literature as a source of data. This practice shows that the review of the literature cannot be ignored in QLR. In writing the review of the literature, the researcher must take many factors into consideration. Among others, these include quality of the content, structure, scholarly writing strategies, scholarly and seminal sources, and a good theoretical framework.

- 4. Select an appropriate content for your review of the literature.** The content chosen for inclusion in the review of the literature must be clearly relevant to the topic under exploration (Flick, 2006; Schwandt, 2015). It must be complete in providing a solid foundation of the topic. The content should provide different important perspectives on the topic. It must include both previous research and theoretical papers.
- 5. Follow a clear structure in the review of the literature.** One of the ways to make a manuscript readable is to subdivide the literature review into clear subsections. It helps most readers to understand better the different topics presented in the literature review. All the topics presented in the literature review must be presented in a logical order, following a specific structure (Pierson, 2004). For instance, effects and consequences should not come before causes of a phenomenon. All the sentences of a paragraph must converge towards the same main idea of the paragraph and must, together, present a complete idea. All paragraphs must support the section under which they are found. It is ideal to clearly connect all different parts of the literature to the central topic of the study. Such a connection can come in the form of a

concluding sentence or paragraph at the end of each subsection of the literature review.

6. **Use the “Pearls Metaphor” to create a clear link between the different parts of the literature review.** The “pearls metaphor” can be applied to any part of the paper. Basically, pearls are always connected with a string that holds everything together. Without that string, everything falls apart. In the review of the literature as well as the rest of the paper, everything must be interconnected. All the subsections of the literature review must come together as one unit. The literature review must be connected to the topic, the title, the problem and purpose statements, and the research questions. The results must be aligned with the methodology, the review of the literature, the introduction, and the title. Everything must be interconnected from the title to the conclusion (Tracy, 2013). The researcher should never go off-topic in a QLR study.
7. **Use the “Blender Metaphor” to integrate different sources in the review of the literature.** One of the mistakes in a number of QLR manuscripts is probably the practice of using one source per paragraph and using each source once only throughout the manuscript. A literature review is a discussion by many scholars on the topic under exploration. Therefore, in each paragraph, more than one source should be cited. Each paragraph should have many sources blended together to make a point.
8. **Present a critical analysis.** Critical analysis is another common challenge in research manuscripts (Coughlan, Cronin, & Ryan, 2007). The review of the literature should not be solely about synthesizing the existing literature. Another important aspect is to present a critical analysis of previous research. It strengthens one’s research paper by identifying weaknesses in previous research. It helps make a stronger case why the new QLR study is needed.
9. **Use quality sources.** It is important to use scholarly sources, preferably peer-reviewed materials (Wa-Mbaleka, 2014). Scholarly journal articles and research manuscripts should be given preference. The researcher must make sure to use seminal works (or most cited works). These are usually works of the experts on the chosen topic. Additionally, the manuscript must be predominantly based on recent sources. This consideration is important because of today’s much higher accessibility to and production of new content.

- 10. Present a clear and relevant theoretical framework.** The manuscript must be based on a clear and relevant theoretical framework (Flick, 2006). The theoretical framework should be a theory or a set of theories that make the foundation of the QLR study (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Each theory or model must be synthesized and linked clearly to the research study under exploration. The theoretical framework is a major part of the foundation of the study.

Methodology

Each QLR study must present a clear methodology section. In this section, it is a standard practice to discuss the research design, setting, participants, sampling, data analysis, and ethical consideration. Additionally, it is important in QLR to report the researcher's reflexivity. The methodology section, therefore, needs to be thoroughly presented and justified.

- 11. Choose and defend a specific QLR design.** QLR is a big umbrella under which many research designs are found. For instance, Creswell and Poth (2016) present narrative inquiry, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study, as some of the major designs in educational research. There is a long list of QLR designs useful in different fields (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Atkinson & Delamont, 2011; Creswell, 2013; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Harreveld, Danaher, Lawson, Knight, & Busch, 2016; Heigham & Crocker, 2009; Kim, 2016; Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2012; Leavy, 2014; Lichtman, 2013; Longhofer, Floersch, & Hoy, 2013; Saldaña, 2011; Van Manen, 2014; Webster & Mertova, 2007; Wertz et al., 2011). One emerging one in QLR that is not yet too common is based on the different types of meta-synthesis, which is a way of synthesizing primary QLR studies (Hannes & Lockwood, 2012; Saini & Shlonsky, 2012).

Some textbooks have been written also on how to use QLR in specific fields such as applied linguistics (Heigham & Crocker, 2009), evaluation (Goodyear et al., 2014), mental health (Harper & Thomson, 2012), nursing (Beck, 2013; De Chesnay, 2014), organizational studies (Symon & Cassell, 2012), psychology (Willig, 2013), public health (Ulim et al., 2003), public relations and marketing communications (Daymon & Holloway, 2011), social change (McLeod & Thomson, 2009; Trainor & Graue, 2013), social sciences (Lune & Berg, 2017), sports and sport management (Edwards & Skinner, 2009; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). A research paper should not be based broadly on QLR. It must follow a specific QLR design. Whatever QLR design is

chosen must be justified for its appropriateness. The researcher must provide a convincing reason why the chosen QLR design was the best for the study. Additionally, experts on that specific design must be cited. Last, the rest of the paper must be aligned well with the chosen design. It is important for the researcher to know well the QLR design considered for the study.

- 12. Follow an emerging approach.** Data, as connected to the research problem and questions, should guide the researcher on the important aspects of the QLR study (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Lichtman, 2013). The researcher should not preset some parameters, such as variables or hypotheses, to guide rigidly the study. For instance, in theoretical sampling used in grounded theory, initial findings lead to additional sampling to enrich the study, as new leads come up (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser, 2004; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).
- 13. Describe the research setting fully.** For the readers to visualize better the setting where the study took place, it is important for the researcher to describe it fully (Yin, 2015). Thick description is one of the recommended criteria for quality QLR (Creswell, 2013; Lichtman, 2013). The goal of the description of the research setting is to take the readers there so that they can see better what the researcher saw, hear better what the researcher heard, and feel clearly what the researcher felt in that setting. Readers should be convinced that the researcher was indeed there. The researcher must provide a complete mental picture of the research setting. It helps readers put the findings and data interpretation within the correct context.
- 14. Study participants in their natural setting.** Many QLR scholars emphasize the need for studying participants in their natural setting (see for instance, Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Lichtman, 2013). This expectation is based on the assumption that the participants' natural setting reflects closely their reality. It also allows the researcher to collect more data from observation. Last, it makes research participants more comfortable as data collection is done within a setting familiar to them.
- 15. Develop and validate your instrument.** Unlike quantitative research in which the researcher can use a pre-established instrument, in most QLR dealing with human participants, the researcher is almost under obligation to come up with a new "instrument" for each new QLR study (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Yin, 2014). Replication as used in quantitative research does not seem to play well in QLR. This is because settings, situations, and participants' behaviors are

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dynamic and unpredictable and, to a great extent, nonreplicable (Lichtman, 2013).

- 16. Practice triangulation.** QLR data is richer and more credible when triangulation is used. Triangulation is highly recommended methodological approach used to obtain multiple perspectives on the same reality. Triangulation can be done using multiple methods, multiple data sources (such as interviews, observations, documents, and artifacts), multiple researchers, and multiple theories to confirm the emerging findings (Merriam, 2009). What is commonly used and maybe mostly expected for novice researchers and novice QLR reviewers is the multiple data sources. QLR scholars, however, should not ignore the importance of the other triangulation methods.
- 17. Collect relevant and enough data effectively and efficiently.** QLR data must be directly linked to the research problem and purpose. It should be data needed to address the target problem. It should be enough in addressing the research problem and questions (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2011). In the way it is presented, it should be clear that the researcher used effective and efficient ways to collect the data. The manuscript must present clear and logical QLR data collection steps used in the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The readers should know how data was collected and why it was collected that way (Lichtman, 2013). They must be convinced that the methods used and steps taken were the best for the study.
- 18. Provide evidence for prolonged engagement in the field.** A survey in quantitative research can be administered in a few minutes. In QLR, prolonged engagement in data collection is expected to convince other scholars of enough time spent to understand the complex issue under exploration. Since QLR deals with complex problems and promotes deeper understanding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lichtman, 2013), data collection cannot be done in a hurry. QLR data collection requires time and special care for details.
- 19. Explore the problem in depth.** One of the major advantages known for QLR is that it allows the researchers to explore complex issues in depth (Flick, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). When using QLR, the researchers should plan to dig deep into the issue. Such an endeavor can help them uncover the complexities of the issue and thus provide more holistic and more complete solutions. For such an in-depth exploration to happen, the researcher needs to plan the study well and allot enough time for data collection and data analysis.

Lack of in-depth exploration in QLR can negatively affect the trustworthiness of that research study.

- 20. Use QLR Sampling.** By default, in QLR, the focus should be on purposive sampling. The researcher must purposefully select the participants who can provide the best information possible. According to Patton (2002), “The power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth” (p. 230). The selection criteria of the participants must be clearly spelled out and justified. Within purposive sampling, there may be other subsets, such as snowball sampling, multiple variation sampling, and convenience sampling (Creswell, 2012). Additionally, theoretical sampling is another powerful sampling method that must be part of any grounded theory study (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Urquhart, 2013). Probabilistic sampling (e.g., random sampling) should not be used in QLR.
- 21. Uphold all ethical standards.** Each institution that produces research should have an Ethical Review Board that provides guidelines and training on how to produce research in an ethical manner. Each paper must follow some basic ethical principles such as those related to privacy, confidentiality, prevention of risk or harm, voluntary participation, and other humane treatment of the participants (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012; Smith, 2003). The paper must have a section that specifically addresses the ethical standards followed; especially that in QLR, there seems to be more complex ethical issues than in quantitative research (Wiles, 2013).
- 22. State the researcher's positioning.** Also referred to as reflexivity (Lichtman, 2013), the researcher's positioning is the intentional statement by the author about his or her bias, past experiences, beliefs system, and worldview that may have some impact on the QLR study. Reflexivity is defined as the “researchers' engagement of continuous examination and explanation of how they have influenced a research project” (Dowling, 2008, p. 747). QLR is not value-free or free from bias. The researcher is expected to clearly state the bias and how it may have affected the data collection, analysis, or interpretation.
- 23. Analyze data qualitatively.** Many different ways of data analysis are available for QLR (see for instance, Miles et al., 2014). The paper must present clear steps that were taken to make sense out of the raw and often disorganized QLR data, all the way through coding and analysis

(Saldaña, 2012). The paper should explicitly explain how the author made sense out of the data.

Results

In QLR, more flexibility and creativity are allowed depending on what the author wishes to convey and how he or she wishes to convey it (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). Despite this flexibility, however, some common features must be presented. For instance, in most QLR papers, the paper must have clear and logical data presentation, convincing and substantiated data interpretation. This section describes what is expected from the results of a QLR paper.

- 24. Present data logically and clearly.** Data must be presented in a clear and logical way. Anyone with scholarly reading skills should be able to easily notice a logical flow of QLR data presentation. The use of tables, outlines, graphics, headings and subheadings (Miles et al., 2014), and many other creative displays make data presentation easier to understand. The use of bare text without some enhancing features such as those mentioned here can make the text difficult and less pleasant to read.
- 25. Use direct quotes to substantiate your results.** In QLR data analysis, it is important to use some of the direct quotes from the data to substantiate what is being presented in the paper (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Miles et al., 2014). The direct quotes are most likely the major evidence of the data analysis and interpretation. Without them, it may be difficult to prove the trustworthiness of the study.
- 26. Use adequate data interpretation.** Interpreting QLR data is all about drawing major meanings from the analyzed data (Miles et al., 2014; Silverman, 2014, 2016). At this point, the writer must try to address clearly the research problem and the research questions. The paper must present the big ideas, big themes, major propositions, emerging theory as reflected in the analyzed data. At this point, the paper must discuss how similar and different the findings are from the existing literature. Many QLR experts would agree that data interpretation overlaps in the results as well as the discussion sections of a QLR paper (Creswell, 2013; Lichtman, 2013; Miles et al., 2014; Silverman, 2005, 2014, 2016).
- 27. Explain the negative case.** When one specific source does not agree with the majority of sources of data, it is not to be rejected as it is commonly the practice in quantitative research. A negative case must actually be presented to

demonstrate different perspectives on the issue (Yin, 2014) and thus increase the credibility of the QLR study. Negative cases should not simply be considered as outliers. They can provide information needed to give a different view on the same topic. Presenting negative cases shows how determined the researcher is in reporting the findings trustfully.

28. **Use meaning constructed by the participants.** QLR depends heavily on the meaning that is constructed by the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Van Manen, 2014). This construction of meaning by the participants is highly expected, even though it is well known that each researcher is believed to be “using his or her eyes and ears and filters” (Lichtman, 2013, p. 4). Again, the use of direct quotes from the primary sources such as interviews can help represent with strong evidence the meaning that participants make of what is happening in a research study.

Discussion

Some journal articles have a specific section for discussion. Others combine it with the results or with the conclusion. For the sake of differentiating this aspect of a QLR study from other aspects, this discussion section is discussed separately.

29. **Address the research problem and research questions.** In the discussion, it is important to focus on addressing directly and clearly the research problem and the research questions. It is not uncommon to find manuscripts submitted without a clear discussion on how the study’s research problem and research questions were addressed. After all, the primary purpose of conducting a research study is to try to find solutions (Creswell, 2012, 2013). A paper without a clear discussion on how the study addressed both the research problem and the research questions is simply incomplete.
30. **Link to existing knowledge base.** In the discussion of a QLR paper, it is important to link the new findings to the existing literature (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Yin, 2014, 2015). The discussion must demonstrate how the new findings either confirm or contrast what was found in previous studies. Additionally, the discussion should provide a clear link to the theoretical framework introduced earlier in the paper. Such a link makes the connection more meaningful.
31. **Focus on theoretical contribution or theoretical generalization.** In QLR, generalization should be theoretical, not to a population. The findings should

be discussed in light of the theoretical framework and existing literature. For practical purposes, generalization should be left to the readers (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). A QLR study should not be about generalizing over a certain population. After all, by default probability sampling is not used in QLR, thus preventing the researcher from generalizing over a certain population. If the study yielded a new theory, it is important to present it and discuss it in relation to existing theories (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 1990, 2015).

Conclusion

No matter what research design is used in a study, the paper must have a clear conclusion. In the conclusion, the researcher must synthesize the findings, provide practical implications, and some avenues for further research. Additionally, it is important for the paper to present clearly the limitations of the study; that is, what could have been done better in the study.

32. State the major synthesis of the findings. The major aspect of a conclusion is primarily the synthesis of the findings of the study. In the conclusion, the researcher must provide a clear summary of the major findings of the study. Anyone should be able to read the paper's title, abstract, introduction, and conclusion to know in general what the study was all about and what the findings were.

33. Provide practical implications. The issue of having a disconnect between research and practice has been reported over the years (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Creswell, 2013; Janesick, 2011). Yet, one of the major reasons for conducting research is to improve practice (Creswell, 2012) or life (Creswell, 2013). The conclusion, therefore, should provide a clear path for practical application of the findings of a QLR study. This makes research findings worthwhile for the readers and practitioners.

34. Further research opportunities. For the sake of those interested in a given research study, opportunities should always be provided on what other aspects of the research study need further exploration. Such recommendations for further research can clearly guide additional work on the issue under exploration, either by the author himself or herself or other scholars interested in the same topic. Such practice helps expand the body of knowledge on a specific topic.

35. Think about other important issues. The author must consider a few other important issues when preparing a manuscript for publication. The paper must be well proofread before submission. The editor and the peers expect any scholarly paper to be written scholarly. A manuscript with many editorial issues can easily lead readers to question the credibility of the paper. Authors, therefore, need to know the required writing style and the editorial policies of the journal where they wish to submit their manuscripts. They can also use the help of a personal editor, a colleague, a co-author, and even some computer software such as EndNote, Mendeley, TurnItIn, and Grammarly to improve their manuscripts. These software packages can help improve the editorial aspect of the paper. Last, the author must choose a journal that publishes QLR papers, a journal that is fit for the topic under exploration, a journal with no publication fees or fees that the author can afford. It is also important to avoid publish in predatory journals.

Conclusion

One of the reasons why hardcore quantitative researchers struggle to believe in QLR is that some QLR papers may have some questionable quality. Although much has been done in recent years to try to define what makes a good QLR study, not much has been published to show step-by-step, practical guidelines on how to ensure quality in a QLR paper. This paper is an attempt to help researchers in practical evaluation of the quality of a QLR paper. These guidelines were presented following the generic format of most research journal articles. This presentation was made with the purpose of helping QLR scholars and enthusiasts with practical guidelines that can be used for most QLR manuscripts. While the proposed list of guidelines might not be exhaustive, this manuscript should help continue the discussion on providing clearer guidelines on how to enhance and evaluate quality in QLR studies.

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