

# Making Qualitative Research Count

By Suzanne Henwood

**W**hile qualitative research has now been around for many years, in some disciplines there is still a sense from some quarters that it is in some way of less worth than scientific, positivistic studies. One way to minimise the impact of that is to ensure that qualitative research is of high quality, from conception and design, right through to dissemination. It is said that without methodological rigour, research is insignificant and susceptible to researchers fabricating the truth, (\*1) of course this is true in both paradigms, but in qualitative research it is wise to ensure all efforts to ensure rigour are overtly discussed in detail, as a negative view is often held of it before the contents are even read.

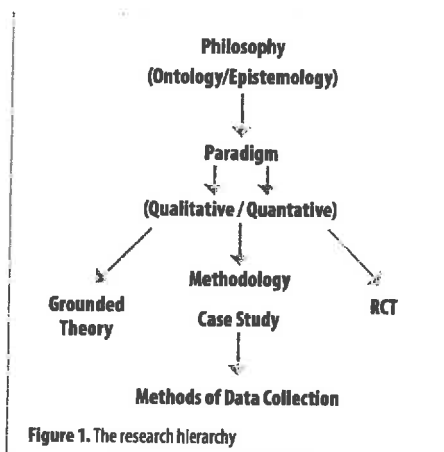
There are many areas of quality which are worth considering when conducting (and critiquing) qualitative studies and this article will discuss the key issues for consideration.

## Research design

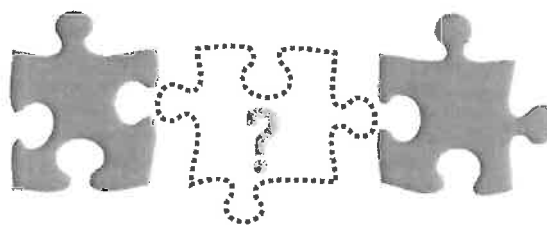
Designing a qualitative study is different from designing say a clinical trial. Consideration is given to higher level, philosophical components of design, which are not always considered in other paradigms. Mark Saunders and Paul Tosey in *Rapport* (issue 30, Winter 2012) looked at those 'outer layers' of research design through the research onion. When I teach this to my students I look at what I call 'the research hierarchy' (Figure 1) and always start from the top and work down.

Thinking through what is known to exist (ontology) and how we know that (epistemology) is an important part of checking out and making conscious your own frames and beliefs about the subject. In any design this needs to be considered, prior to designing the study, and when reading qualitative studies you will want to know this has been covered in order to show how that higher level of rigour has been considered. Talking this through with others in the field can be invaluable to ensure all possibilities are explored and you do not confirm your own limited thinking in your reflections.

¶¶ Ensure that qualitative research is of high quality, from conception and design, right through to dissemination ¶¶



The choice of Research Paradigm leads from that higher level of discussion and was covered in an article by Paul Tosey and Suzanne Henwood in *Rapport* (issue 26, Winter 2011). This article looks specifically at qualitative work, which opens up a range of methodologies you might like to choose from, some of which have been discussed in length in research articles (Grounded Theory in *Rapport*



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One way to explore this is to include Negative (or deviant) Case Analysis. (\*4, \*5)

*Auditability or Dependability*: is the information open to being tracked from the research question or idea for investigation, through to raw data and on to analysis and interpretations of the findings. (\*3) (This corresponds to reliability in quantitative quality studies.)

Other questions you might ask are as follows.

Are there sufficient details given, to enable others in the field to evaluate the findings (such as context, timing, methods used)?

Has any confirmation (*Confirmability*) (\*3) or 'triangulation' of the data been undertaken to confirm findings from one source with data from another source?

Has any *Member Checking* been undertaken? This is where you will check out the transcripts of interview or focus group data with the participants. This can be done at two levels:

- 1 a basic level of checking for accuracy and completeness of the transcript; usually offering the chance for revision or withdrawal of any data prior to Interpretation; and
- 2 taking the interpretation of the analysis back to the participants to ensure that the interpretation is consistent with that of the individuals involved. An alternative is to use another experienced researcher to also look at the analysis, to verify the emerging themes – ensuring good confidentiality of all data at all times.

Are the findings consistent? (\*6) If the study were repeated, at the same time, with same people, in the same or similar context would the same result be obtained? Or might someone else come up with very different results, with no significant variables changing?

#### Transferability

It is not the aim of qualitative studies to offer generalisable findings. Findings are appropriate to the time, context and people that data was gathered from. However, it is possible in some studies (with some caution) to offer suggestions of transferability to similar contexts, which can be tested out and may lead to further studies. (\*7)

As a researcher and consumer of research, look out for where there may be over generalisation of

#### References

- (\*1) JM Morse, M Barrett, M Mayan, K Olson, and J Spiers, 'Verification strategies for establishing reliability and validity in qualitative research'.  
 (\*2) J Gilgun, 'Reflexivity and qualitative research'.  
 (\*3) EG Guba, 'Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries'.  
 (\*4) YS Lincoln and EG Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*.

findings. Good rigorous studies are honest and open about where the results are applicable and do not over claim their potential.

#### In summary

One of the key points is can you be confident in the truth of the findings (your own or those you are reading)? What information do you need in order to be able to decide whether or not the study is trustworthy? Have both the strengths and weaknesses of the study been fully explored? As the researcher it is your responsibility to ensure that information is given to your readers, and as a reader a decision will have to be made as to whether or not the results you are reading about are worthy of sharing or using in further work. Krefting (\*6) calls this 'Truth Value': exploring whether or not you are confident in the truth of the findings.

Buchanan (\*8) stated that qualitative research 'cannot be determined by following prescribed formulas. Rather its quality lies in the power of its language to display a picture of the world in which we discover something about ourselves and our common humanity'. Seale and Silverman (\*9) went so far as to suggest this could lead to 'methodological anarchy'. Few qualitative researchers today would, I believe, resist discussing rigour and how it has been assured. The need to establish quality and rigour of qualitative studies is well established, it is our role now to ensure we do nothing to take away the credit of good quality research as we disseminate what we have done to wider audiences. ❧



(\*5) N Mays and C Pope, 'Qualitative research in health care: assessing quality in qualitative research'.

(\*6) L Krefting, 'Rigor in qualitative research: the assessment of trustworthiness'.

(\*7) AK Shenton, 'Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects'.

(\*8) DR Buchanan, 'An uneasy alliance: combining qualitative and quantitative research methods'.

(\*9) C Seale and D Silverman, 'Ensuring rigour in qualitative research'.