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Education And Debate Qualitative research in health care

Assessing quality in qualitative research

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Rapid Response:

Re: Assessing quality in qualitative research

This letter is an epilogue to the article by Mays and Pope (2000), "Assessing quality in qualitative research". The authors adapt a subtle realist position to evaluate quality in research. They offer seven different ways of ensuring quality as well as a set of questions to ask of a qualitative research study.

Being a researcher from the subtle realist camp, this article is an interesting and informative read. I have been following the work of several authors who offered distinct guidelines for enhancing quality in different qualitative research methods (for example, Gibbert et al. 2008; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This letter draws from these prior works and is intended to be a rejoinder to Mays and Pope – basically proposing three more aspects which could be important in assessing the quality of qualitative studies. Based on prior literature, I suggest that a high quality qualitative study should ideally exhibit the three interconnected aspects of methodological originality, theoretical/practical/heuristic significance, as well as timeliness.

A methodologically original study

Qualitative research is dynamic. Various discussions of methodological breakthroughs which could facilitate this dynamism have been going on during the past decade. Innovation in methods is highly prioritized by research funding bodies and journals (Jewitt et al., 2016) as one of the prerequisites of scholarly impact (Berg and Perry, 2006). Being innovative or original brings recognition and esteem to scientists (Guetzkow et al., 2004; Judge et al., 2007). Considering the importance of originality in scientific progress, the application of relevant innovative methods in answering research questions could be considered as one of the criteria for quality. The dimensions of methodological originality could pertain to a study's research design, way of synthesis, or newness in the discipline.

A significant study

Tracy (2010) describes a significant study as one which extends knowledge, improves existing practices, and/or empowers others. Based on this, I would propose that qualitative researchers should make sure that their study is theoretically, practically, and/or heuristically significant. A theoretically significant study would extend, build, and critique existing theory and offer new understanding of social phenomenon. Practical significance pertains to the study's ability to provide hands-on solutions to societal issues. A heuristically significant study would develop curiosity in people (Abbott, 2004) and suggesting new arenas for future research. Indeed, it is unrealistic to expect one study to address all dimensions of significance. But being significant in one way or other could be expected of a high quality study.

A timely study

Today qualitative methods are increasingly being incorporated into researching the social, political, or managerial dimensions of contemporary phenomena. This raises a call for studies which are timely. Since data content changes so swiftly, relevant data should be generated, acquired, and utilized in a timely way (McGivray, 2010) to ensure the meaningfulness and usefulness of the study (Cai and Zhu, 2015). Timeliness of the study thus constitutes the third aspect of a quality study.

If implemented systematically, qualitative research has the potential to make contributions to research and society that go beyond mainstream conceptual development. Undeniably, the list of aspects I mention here are not exhaustive. This letter is just an attempt to enable and encourage a more holistic approach to conceptualizing quality in qualitative research, by adding on to the existing exemplar work by the authors.

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