Is It Good Research? Quality Design in Qualitative Research:

Quality Approaches That Embrace Diversity & Inclusion

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Research Design Review – www.researchdesignreview.com– is a blog first published in November 2009. RDR currently consists of nearly 300 articles, has more than 950 subscribers and well over one million views. Although all of the articles in RDR pertain to some aspect of a quality approach to research design, five articles that appeared in 2022 highlight the relevance of quality approaches in qualitative methods to fostering diversity, inclusiveness, and giving participants a "fair voice." These approaches are fundamental to achieving useful outcomes.

Additional compilations of RDR articles – covering a wide assortment of topics associated with qualitative research methods, analysis, and methodology – are available for download. These include: ***The Unique Attributes of Qualitative Research: A Collection of 16 Articles***; ***The In-depth Interview Method: 12 Articles on Design & Implementation***; ***The Focus Group Method: 18 Articles on Design & Moderating***; ***Ethnography & the Observation Method: 15 Articles on Design, Implementation, & Uses***; ***Qualitative Data Analysis: 16 Articles on Process & Method***; ***Qualitative Research: Transparency & Reporting***; ***Reflexivity: 10 Articles on the Role of Reflection in Qualitative Research***; ***Methodology***; *and* ***TQF Research Proposal: 11 Articles on the Total Quality Framework Qualitative Research Proposal***.

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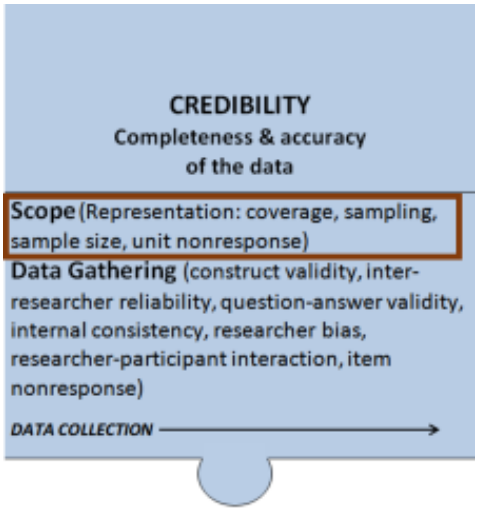
A TQF Approach to Choosing a Sample Design

The **Total Quality Framework** (TQF) offers qualitative researchers a way to think critically about their research designs and helps to guide their decision making. The TQF consists of four components, with each component devoted to the critical thinking considerations associated with a phase in the research process. The first component of the TQF is **Credibility** which is focused on data collection; specifically, Scope and Data Gathering. One of the many considerations related to Scope has to do with the sample design.



The following is a modified excerpt from ***Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach*** (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 25-26) on the different aspects of sampling that researchers might want to think about as they develop their qualitative research designs.

Once the researcher has identified the list (or lists) that will be used to select the sample, a decision must be made about which sampling approach will be used. If the decision is to gather data from each member of the population on the list (e.g., all 20 students enrolled in an honors science class), then there is nothing more for the researcher to consider. But for those studies where something less than the entire population will be chosen for study, additional Total Quality Framework (TQF) decisions need to be made about sampling.

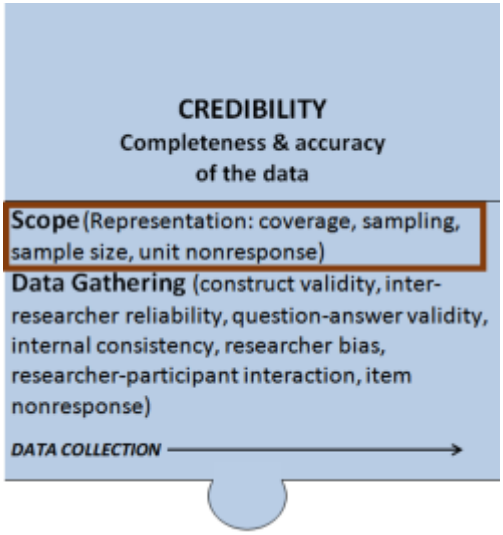
Here, qualitative researchers may needlessly lessen the quality of their studies by not giving these decisions sufficient consideration. In fact, some qualitative researchers may think that how they create a sample of the population is unimportant. Qualitative researchers may proceed in this manner because they mistakenly believe that systematic sampling is too hard to carry out (i.e., too complex, too expensive, and too time-consuming) and that it is "too quantitative" a concern. Yet, in the vast majority of qualitative studies, systematic sampling is neither complex, expensive, nor time-consuming, and should not only be a quantitative issue. And by using an organized approach for choosing which members of their key population to study, as opposed to merely using a convenient and disorderly approach to sampling, qualitative researchers avoid a major threat to the credibility of the data they gather. That threat is the possibility that those from whom they gather data are not, in fact, representative (do not share defining characteristics) of the population being studied.

Take, for example, a focus group researcher that has a list of men and women who completed a cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) training class in the past year. The researcher can choose one of two basic approaches to selecting those who will be invited to participate in a group discussion. The often used but misguided approach is to start at the top of the list and contact people, one after another, until the focus groups have been filled with ostensibly willing attendees. The rigorous and correct approach is to use an organized scheme to sample CPR class graduates from across the entire list (i.e., stratifying the list and taking an 'nth' name approach). The second approach is preferred because it avoids the possible problem that the names on the list are ordered in a way that is not representative of the entire population of CPR graduates that the researcher wants to study.

A final TQF issue related to choosing a sample applies to qualitative studies that utilize observations of naturally occurring human behavior to gather data, such as in ethnographic research. In these studies, sampling considerations need to be applied to the times and the locations during which the behaviors of interest will be observed. By systematically choosing which locations and which times to conduct the observations—among all possible locations and times in which the behaviors of interest will be taking place—the qualitative researcher is greatly raising the likelihood that the observations included in the study are a representative subset of all the possible behaviors of interest to the study.

Roller, M. R., & Lavrakas, P. J. (2015). *Applied qualitative research design: A total quality framework approach*. New York: Guilford Press.

A TQF Approach to Sample Size



Sample size and sampling in qualitative research design have been discussed elsewhere in *Research Design Review*, see **"Sample Size in Qualitative Research & the Risk of Relying on Saturation"** and **"Shared Constructs in Research Design: Part 1 — Sampling."** In June 2022, **"A TQF Approach to Choosing a Sample Design"** was posted to *RDR* and considers ways to ensure that research participants are representative (share defining characteristics) of the population being studied.

The following is a modified excerpt from *Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach* (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 26-27) that briefly examines a Total Quality Framework (TQF) approach to another facet of sample design, i.e., sample size.

How large a sample to use is a decision that qualitative researchers need to make explicitly and carefully in order to increase the likelihood that their studies will generate credible data by well representing their population of interest. Unlike quantitative researchers who most often rely on statistical formulae to determine the sample sizes for their studies, qualitative researchers must rely on (a) past experience and knowledge of the subject matter; and (b) ongoing monitoring during the data-gathering period, which includes applying a set of decision rules, such as those listed in **"Designing a Quality In-depth Interview Study: How Many Interviews Are Enough?"** These decision rules consider (a) the complexity of the phenomena being studied, (b) the heterogeneity or homogeneity of the population being studied, (c) the level of analysis and interpretation that will be carried out, and (d) the finite resources available to support the study. These types of decision guidelines, along with past experience, should provide qualitative researchers with the considerations they need to carefully judge the amount of data necessary to meet their research objectives. (Of note, if a researcher does not have sufficient past personal experience, a literature review, or speaking directly with other researchers who do have such experience, should serve well.)

As importantly, during the period when data are being gathered, researchers should also closely monitor the amount of variability in the data, compared to the variability that was expected, for the key measures of the study. Based on this monitoring, researchers are responsible for making a "Goldilocks decision" about whether the sample size they originally decided was needed is too large, too small, or just about right. In making a decision to cut back on the amount of data to be gathered, because there is less variability in what is being measured than anticipated, the researcher needs to make certain that those cases that originally were sampled, but would be dropped, are not systematically different from the cases from which data will be gathered. In making a decision to increase the size of the sample, because there is more variability in what is being measured than anticipated, the researcher needs to make certain that the cases added to the sample are chosen in a way that is representative of the entire population (e.g., using the same orderly approach that was used to create the initial sample).

In all instances, and if the necessary resources (staff, time, budget) are available, it is prudent for a researcher to error on the side of having more rather than less data. Gathering too much data does no harm to the quality of the study's findings and interpretations, but having too little data leaves the researcher in the untenable position of harming the quality of the study because the complexity of what was being studied will not be adequately represented in the available data. For example, case study research to investigate new public school policies related to the core science curriculum might include in-depth interviews with school principals and science teachers, observations of science classes in session, and a review of students' test papers; however, as a complex subject matter, the research may be weakened by not including discussions with the students and their parents as well as by a failure to include all schools (or a representative sample of schools) in the research design.

Roller, M. R., & Lavrakas, P. J. (2015). *Applied qualitative research design: A total quality framework approach*. New York: Guilford Press.

Qualitative Research Participants: Gaining Access & Cooperation

The following is a modified excerpt from ***Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach*** *(Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 28).*

When developing the **sample design**, including the **sample size** for a qualitative study, careful attention needs to be paid to how the researcher will gain access to individuals in the sample and then gain their cooperation to participate in the research.

In doing a company-sponsored in-depth interview study of employees, for example, gaining access to the employees who have been sampled may be as simple as sending each of them a notification that their employer has authorized the researcher to contact them to request their participation in the research study. Or it may be as challenging as gaining permission from "gatekeepers" who have the right to deny access to the individuals the researcher wants to study — e.g., parents of the children who will be studied, presidents of the professional organizations whose members will be studied, wardens of prisons whose inmates will be studied, etc. The challenge of gaining access from gatekeepers is essentially finding successful strategies that (a) provide guarantees to the gatekeepers that no harm will come to the participants, (b) communicate the worthiness of the research study, and (c) offer some benefit to the gatekeeper or the organization.

Once access to the sampled participants has been granted, the researcher must use strategies to gain cooperation from those who have been chosen. Ideally a very large portion of those who have been sampled will agree to participate. Gaining cooperation is important. This is because, from a **Total Quality Framework** standpoint, individuals who are chosen to be included in the study but do not participate (e.g., because they refused to cooperate) may differ in important ways from those who do participate, jeopardizing the integrity of the data which can lower or even undermine the **credibility** of the qualitative study. If, for example, a disproportionately greater number of males, compared to females, who have been sampled from a list of college freshmen can never be contacted or refuse to participate, and if these sampled males would have provided data that are materially different from the data provided by the other freshmen on the list who did participate in the study, then the research findings will be biased because of the data missing from a major subgroup of the population.

To avoid these problems, qualitative researchers need to utilize strategies meant to overcome the reason(s) that causes some people who are sampled to not cooperate and fail to participate. Such strategies include:

- Building rapport early with the participants, thereby gaining their trust.
- Assuring the participants of complete confidentiality.
- Explaining the non-material benefits to be gained by participating (e.g., helping to raise the quality of life in the neighborhood).
- Explaining the material benefits, if any, to be gained by participating (e.g., the offer of an Amazon gift card).

Whichever strategies the researchers choose to deploy, ideally they will be tailored (at the individual level) to appeal to the particular types of participants in the sample in order to overcome reluctance or unequivocal refusal during the recruiting process.

Exploring Human Realities: A Quality & Fair Approach

The following incorporates modified excerpts from ***Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach*** *(Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 2-3).*

As the channel by which researchers explore the depths of human realities, qualitative research has gained prominent status that is accelerating over time as quantitatively trained mentors in academia are increasingly asked to assist in students' qualitative research designs, and as the volume of published works in qualitative research aggressively grows (cf. Charmaz, 2008; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Silverman, 2013). Even psychology, a discipline that has traditionally dismissed qualitative research as "subjective" and "unscientific," has come of age with slow but continued growth in the field of qualitative psychology (cf. Wertz, 2014). These advances have given rise to a vibrant array of scholars and practitioners who harbor varying perspectives on how to approach qualitative research.

These differing perspectives are best exemplified by the **paradigm debates** among qualitative researchers. The focus of these debates is on the underlying belief or orientation the researcher brings to any given qualitative study. In particular, these discussions center on the philosophical constructs related to the nature of reality (ontology) and that of knowledge (epistemology). It is the researchers' sometimes divergent views on the presence and extent of a "true" reality—for example, whether it is the (post)positivism view that there is a single objective reality that can be found in a controlled scientific method, or the constructivism–interpretivism paradigm that emphasizes the idea of multiple realities existing in the context of social interactions and subjective meanings—as well as the source of this knowledge—for example, the dominant role of the researcher in **critical theory**—that have fueled an ongoing dialogue concerning paradigms within the qualitative research arena.

And yet, regardless of the philosophical or theoretical paradigms that may guide researchers in their qualitative inquiries, qualitative researchers are united in the fundamental and common goal of unraveling the convoluted and intricate world of the human experience.

The complexities of the human experience present unique challenges to qualitative researchers who strive to develop research designs that result in contextual data while incorporating basic standards of good research. To that end, many qualitative researchers, routinely focus their attention on the importance of methodically rigorous data collection practices and verification checks (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002); well-thought-out procedures and analytic rigor (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006; Berg & Lune, 2012), and frameworks that promote critical thinking throughout the research process (Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017; Roller & Lavrakas, 2015).

By transcending the paradigm debates, a quality approach to qualitative research fosters the essential element of fairness while maximizing the ultimate usefulness of the research. Fairness

means giving participants a fair voice in the research. A "fair voice" is not a small q positivist-Big Q non-positivist issue (see Braun & Clarke, 2022) but rather the researcher's quality approach to data collection and analysis that gives careful consideration to the scope of the sample design, researchers' skills that prioritize inclusion, ongoing **reflexivity**, and other quality research strategies that embrace diversity in our participants and our methods.

A quality approach that promotes fairness to explore the complexity of human realities is a non-debatable goal of the qualitative researcher.

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