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Enacting internal coherence: as a path to quality in qualitative inquiry

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Enacting internal coherence: as a path to quality in qualitative inquiry

Abstract

In this chapter, I am going to make an argument about how to judge quality and do quality in qualitative research, I'm a little trepidatious taking this on: it's an old subject and many great authors have written on it elegantly (just a few examples: Angen, 2000; Barbour, 2001; Flick, 2007; Mason, 2002; Seale, 1999). People come to blows over the quality of qualitative research, perhaps because it goes to the question of whether it's worth doing research at all. Questions about quality are a big deal.

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A Discourse on Qualitative Methodologies

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16. ENACTING INTERNAL COHERENCE:

As a Path to Quality in Qualitative Inquiry

*In which we get thoughtfully messy,
and refuse to clean up afterwards*

In this chapter, I am going to make an argument.¹ It's an argument about how to *judge* quality and *do* quality in qualitative research. I'm a little trepidatious taking this on: it's an old subject, and many great authors have written on it elegantly (just a few examples: Angen, 2000; Barbour, 2001; Flick, 2007; Mason, 2002; Seale, 1999). People come to blows over the quality of qualitative research, perhaps because it goes to the question of whether it's worth doing research at all. Questions about quality are a big deal.

THE ARGUMENT STARTS HERE

Before I can talk about research quality, I need to define some central concepts, which I've expounded elsewhere (Carter & Little, 2007). A basic framework for research involves three key elements: methods, methodology and epistemology. Epistemology is a justification for the knowledge created in research. Methods are the actions taken by a researcher, including creating, engaging with and writing about data. Methods are what researchers do to create knowledge. Methodologies are justifications for research actions: they evaluate, formulate, or analyse methods. Methodologies reflect methods, can guide methods, and critically, also idealise methods (Kaplan, 1964). To illustrate this idealisation: think about the last research report you wrote, particularly the methodology section. Now think about the research activities on which it was based. Were these identical? Of course not. Was your published methodology a lie? I hope not! Methodology, our attempt to evaluate, formulate or analyse our methods, is always, whether done concurrently or retrospectively, a somewhat idealising sense-making process. It cannot be any other way.

This leads to my basic argument about quality. I am going to argue against mere procedure, whether that procedure is a well-known qualitative methodology or an instrumental checklist, as a path to research quality. I am going to argue instead for internal coherence between epistemology, methodology and method as the more difficult but necessary and ultimately more satisfying path to quality. I will make a critical distinction between claiming and enacting. I will conclude with what I see as the implications for the way we write.

But we are going to start with a mess.

CLEANING UP THE MESS

In fact, all research is a mess, but qualitative research is especially messy: so much so that it's an acknowledged part of our tradition. When we make motherhood statements about qualitative research, we often describe it as iterative and circular, feeding back on itself in an ever-tightening spiral, moving back and forth between analysis and data creation, remaining open to surprise (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Given that embracing mess is part of our collective identity, it's amusing to notice what happens when we articulate our methodologies. The fertile complexity that we are so happy to claim at a general level disappears when we make specific justifications for actual projects. Like children whose allowance depends on the state of their bedroom floor, we push the evidence of what we have really been up to into the cupboard, and stand nervously against the door. Often (now I'm stretching the metaphor to breaking point) we slap a label like "grounded theory" on the door to try to stop people looking inside.² Worse still, we sometimes use these methodological labels to stop ourselves from thinking about the process of research at all, which seems likely to be the opposite of what the authors of those methodologies intended us to do with them. We use idealised extant methodologies as armour, to protect us from the terrifying prospect of having to understand what it is that we are doing, to continuously think out our methods, to make our own internally consistent decisions, to defend ourselves against criticism.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

WHY CHECKLISTS WON'T GET YOU TO HEAVEN

Lately, at least in health and medical research, several checklists for evaluating qualitative research reports have been produced (Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007 refer to, and consolidate, a large number of these checklists). Commentaries on the place of checklists have also been written (e.g., Barbour, 2001; Flick, 2007). We're all familiar with checklists for quality improvement. When a hospital manager sets a maximum time that patients will be allowed to wait in the emergency room; when a professional organisation measures the "competencies" of its members; when a process worker systematically examines every tenth widget coming off the production line, we see checklists in action. In some situations, checklists are the best path to quality (they're especially useful for the widget-checker, who has to look at exactly the same features of exactly the same widgets over and over again). In contrast, along with some other authors, I think that checklists are often the opposite of quality assurance for qualitative research.

What is my reasoning? Checklists institutionalise the abdication of individual researchers' responsibility to think about what they are doing as they are doing it and to ensure that the logic of their study remains internally coherent. A checklist is not about logic, it is about procedure. A checklist says: don't think too hard, just tick these boxes! A checklist turns methods into magic.

Checklists are used as though they are neutral, but they are not neutral: they come with epistemology built in. Every checklist says something about the nature of knowledge. If you tick off "member checking of transcripts" on a list, you are

accepting the idea that every informant has a truth inside their head, which they might have expressed incorrectly the first time but will be able to "correct" when they see it on paper. If you tick off "high agreement between coders" on a list, you are acting as though the only "true" things in your data are those which you and your colleagues can agree on, thus denying your own ability to make a creative, unique, useful argument with your data. These are enormous assumptions, and it is crude and ridiculous to elide such enormous philosophical issues into a set of tiny checkboxes.

EXTANT QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGIES ARE IDEALISED RESOURCES,
NOT ABSOLUTE RECIPES

At the outset I said that I was going to argue against both instrumental checklists and slavish adherence to extant methodologies as paths to research quality. You'll also remember that methodologies, whether developed concurrently with research action or constructed retrospectively, are idealised. When you articulate a methodology, in your own head or for an audience, you are finding a way of justifying your research actions. A methodology cannot be a blow-by-blow account, it's not a massive concrete description of every step you took. It's reconstructed logic: an explanation, a justification. It's an attempt to make sense of things.

Now – think about the traditions we call methodologies in qualitative enquiry. Some of the basics are grounded theory, phenomenography and phenomenology, ethnography, case studies and narrative enquiry, but the list gets longer all the time. These methodologies, these clearly and not-so-clearly articulated traditions, are terrific resources. But they are reconstructed, idealised. They can never be realised in an absolutely "pure" form in method, because they are not methods, they are methodologies; they are not actions, they are justifications. Methods only exist in the time and place in which they are practised, and that time and place will subtly or not-so-subtly shape them.

I have written previously about what extant methodologies can do for you (Carter & Little, 2007). In short, methodologies should interact iteratively with your objectives, research questions and study design; they should connect you to the theories and disciplines which they come from and contain; and, if you think about them while you're doing your research rather than trying to tack them on at the end, they will shape the methods that you use. They can only do this for you, however, if you approach them intelligently as a resource. You should ask not "how to do" grounded theory, but what it will do for you and prevent you from doing, whether it's the best solution, and whether there's another methodology that would allow you to do more of what you want to do. You should think about the theoretical perspectives that are inherent in grounded theory (most versions have symbolic interactionism, at the very least, at their heart), and what assumptions are inherent in that way of viewing the world. And if you're going to use grounded theory thoughtfully, you will, as best you can in the situation, take advantage of the set of methods it suggests, particularly the step-by-step thinking discipline of theoretical sampling plus constant comparison.

Extant methodologies are not there to tell you what to do. They are resources that you can use to help you to think.

THE ALTERNATIVE TO CHECKLISTS AND METHODOLOGICAL "PURITY": CLAIMING AND ENACTING INTERNAL COHERENCE

So if you can't check things off on a list to ensure quality in your work, and if following a methodological formula won't guarantee quality in your work, what will? Internal coherence is the key. What do I mean by internal coherence? I mean having an epistemology, a methodology and a set of methods that each make sense in themselves, and that go together.

To achieve this, it is critical to realise the difference between claiming and enacting. Tell people that they must do something, and they will often start nervously claiming that they have done it, even if they don't know where to start. This became painfully obvious to me early in my supervisory career, during a day of student presentations. These students had all attended seminars where I had talked about different extant methodologies. Clearly I had done a woeful job, because at some point in each student's presentation, they said "and so I think I am doing ... [very small voice] *grounded theory*?" Each student who joined this "*grounded theory*?" queue made me sink a little further into my seat. My attempts to open up a world of possibilities had instead generated the contagious perception that studies needed labels. These students were claiming rather than enacting: they were using methodologies as armour, not resources. Because they didn't really understand the methodologies they were claiming, they were in fact making themselves more vulnerable. (This can be less true in journal articles, where editors and reviewers often let authors use such labels when there is little evidence that the authors have enacted them.) This moment crystallised for me the difference between claiming and enacting, albeit uncomfortably.

INTERNAL COHERENCE AND REFLEXIVITY

Because enacting internal coherence is the antithesis of a checklist or procedural dogma, it is more difficult to assess and practise. This is because enacted internal coherence depends on researchers really understanding what they're doing, and being consistently thoughtful about it. In fact, enacted internal coherence is a product of *reflexivity*, a concept to which we now turn. Schwandt highlighted several possible meanings of reflexivity: critical self-reflection, often recorded in a field journal; an awareness of one's role as researcher; or an ideological position producing "messy", "experimental", "incomplete" or "open-ended" texts, in which the writer is fully present (2007, pp. 260–261). In my experience reflexivity, at least for novices, most commonly translates into "self-awareness-plus-confession". If you can't be a blank slate, the thinking goes, an objective conduit for the unsullied truth, then you should let people know exactly what kind of slate you are. This is closest to Schwandt's first kind of reflexivity, but it puts the self-inspection not just in the field journal, but also in the monograph or article or book chapter.

I am no champion of false objectivity or the myth of the detached researcher: these are delusions of grandeur. At the same time, I increasingly think that vomiting up your darkest secrets is not reflexivity.³ Confession can just be catharsis; worse, it can be self-indulgent catharsis; worst of all, it can be self-indulgent catharsis that bears no relation to the empirical work. Confession is no good at all if it doesn't illuminate anything for the reader. Of course I'm not the first to claim this. Jennifer Mason's (2002) excellent introductory text, for example, has this idea woven through. Bourdieu made a similar point in his 2002 Huxley Memorial Lecture, arguing for reflexivity as an unswerving anthropological analysis of anthropologists and the field of anthropology, contrasting this with:

what Clifford Geertz ... calls, after Roland Barthes, "the diary disease", an explosion of narcissism sometimes verging on exhibitionism, which came on the wake of, and in reaction to, long years of positivist repression (2003, p. 282).

So: reflexivity is something more troubling than confession. Reflexivity is paying attention to every step of the research process, particularly to the fact that you yourself are doing it (whether you are asking questions or identifying a code or building an argument or crafting a sentence) and then making an account of what you actually did, all of the careful chaos and your role in it. Reflexivity is taking responsibility for your research. Reflexivity enables you to enact internal coherence, and this enacted coherence can rescue reflexivity from the quicksand of narcissism.

ILLUSTRATING COHERENCE (OR INCOHERENCE)

To be able to judge whether both claimed and enacted epistemology, methodology and methods are coherent, we need to know where to look for them. This section gives some examples of where to look.

Let's start with epistemology, as it commonly trips people up. As I have argued elsewhere, methods make epistemology visible (Carter & Little, 2007). If you can see the data creation, analysis and writing strategies of a researcher – the methods – you can see the epistemology (of course, this relies on clear reporting). If you want to be coherent, you need to ensure that your enacted epistemology is the same as your claimed epistemology.

It is common to hear a PhD scholar, towards the end of the project, claiming one epistemology and enacting another (or in fact, just generally getting in a muddle.) So, for example, Sam might claim that her analysis expresses the objective truth about the process she is studying. "I have found out what it's absolutely like", she says, "I really know the truth about these peoples' experience now". But nothing follows to substantiate that very big statement. She does not claim to have been able to "bracket" herself and simply report the participants' knowledge (I personally find this logic unsupportable, but it would be consistent with her claimed epistemology), she has done nothing to minimise her impact on her informants, there were not multiple analysts or measures of agreement between them, she has not verified her work with her participants. Her claim of objectivity is empty. On the

other hand, John claims to have conducted a constructivist analysis. However, he says, he has a problem. His committee think his informants were telling him what he wanted to hear. His findings are not reliable, they say – how can you trust clinicians to tell the truth about a subject as delicate as his? He did not ask consistent questions, he had different conversations with each informant. His results are meaningless. John is terribly shaken by this. He doesn't understand his claimed epistemology, so he cannot argue convincingly against his committee. A constructivist researcher would never assume that there is a single, stable, accessible truth inside the heads of his informants. He would believe that the world is the way that we make it in our talk and our actions, and that the talk of participants reveals a great deal about this process. He may not find a universal truth, but he can develop a complex picture of how people construct an issue in a particular context – in this case, clinicians with relevant experience in conversation with him.

What about the idealised sense-making exercise that is methodology? What might an incoherent methodology look like? Imagine researchers claiming grounded theory as their methodology and studying diet and eating. We developed questions, they say, about knowledge, attitudes and behaviours around food and eating. We drew a quota sample, making sure we had even numbers of men and women, of parents and non-parents, and of high-income and low-income people, and ran focus groups with the folks we had recruited. We developed a list of key themes before the interviewing started, coded the data with these themes, and made constant comparisons between groups according to demographics and their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours.

This is not a coherent methodology. Why not? You could argue this simply as a matter of taxonomic precision. A grounded theory study needs a few key features (including, minimally, theoretical sampling, and inductive development of “open” or “line by line” codes from the data, informed by one's theoretical sensitivity (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967)). If we call everything grounded theory, the term becomes meaningless. But there's a more important objection that is more relevant to coherence. Grounded theory arises from a particular theoretical base, symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism was posited in direct opposition to the kind of individualistic behaviourism that brought us KAB (knowledge-attitude-behaviour) research (Becker, 1998). Interactionism posits that active people are constantly constructing the meaning of things together, and changing those meanings in interaction. It does not conceptualise things like “attitudes” as static: it is interested in change and agency and dynamism. The lack of coherence between the methodology claimed and the evident theoretical commitment in this situation suggests a lack of understanding of the theoretical ideas inherent in the methodology, and thus a lack of coherence.

IN WHICH WE MAKE A THOUGHTFUL MESS,
AND REFUSE TO CLEAN UP AFTERWARDS

A good methodology leads to, and demonstrates, a thoughtful mess because a good methodology is one that is constantly being revised, always open to new leads. A qualitative research question is a puzzle that can be solved in an infinite variety

of ways, so we need to spell out the ways in which each puzzle was solved. Although I don't always agree with their solutions, the people who have created checklists for reporting qualitative research are onto something in this regard: we need to improve the quality of our reporting. At the moment, particularly in practice disciplines like health and medicine where word lengths are short and quantitative techniques dominate, there is a tendency to simply list methods, and provide no methodological reasoning at all.

METHODS: We interviewed 50 people. Their demographics are in the table. We used analytic tricks from grounded theory. We generated seven themes. RESULTS: Theme One...

(I'm exaggerating, but you see my meaning.) A label is claimed as armour, and the inappropriate implicit reasoning that accompanies it (the provision of demographics, for example – on this see Morse, 2008) demonstrates that it was not used in any meaningful way. This is not a methodology, it is not a justification.

A good methodological argument will tell the messy story of method, and will do it in a way that explains method in the context of theory, and of the objectives and questions that a study addressed, and will show the way that epistemic questions shaped methodological choices. A methodology must be a story, because it needs to justify something that people did in a place over time. If it is really going to reflect the mess of research, it is going to have to talk about how things shifted and changed. Contrast the impoverished text above, for example, with Becker and colleagues' classic interactionist ethnography, *Boys in White*. Although not everyone will agree with the methods or theoretical commitments of the authors, I commend the first chapter to you as an example of transparent methodologising. Some four pages in, just for example, the authors write:

In explaining our further theoretical specification of the problem, we are tempted to make our decisions seem more purposeful and conscious than in fact they were. We did not have a well-worked-out rationale for these choices. Rather, we went into the field and found ourselves concentrating on certain kinds of phenomena; as we proceeded, we began to make explicit to ourselves the rationale for this concentration of our interest. The areas we found ourselves concentrating on were consistent with our general theoretical assumptions, but did not flow logically and inevitably from them (Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961, p. 20).

They go on to explain how they chose what to attend to in the field. Setting aside the obvious problem of monograph writing versus paper-length writing, this fragment is a far cry from “We interviewed 50 people”. So: if a researcher who had enacted internal coherence wrote a great methodology, what might it look like? It might tell the reader, for example:

- What theoretical or political commitments guided the choice of topic;
- What extant methodologies were selected/combined and why, and how these resonated with theoretical commitments;
- The reasoning behind the initial site or sample selection.

- How the sampling evolved over the course of the study, and why;
- How the researchers related to the participants, consistent with their epistemological commitments;
- How the researchers' interpretation of the data compared with the "first order" accounts of the participants;
- What each investigator's role was in the analysis;
- How the theories brought into the analysis changed the analysis over time;
- How the researchers ensured the quality of the study, consistent with their epistemological commitments;
- How the ethical aspects of the study evolved, not just that ethics "approval" was gained (Guillemin & Gillam (2004) have shown how ethics and reflexivity are intertwined).

All these elements should be in agreement, and all should be couched in the language of the researcher's theory of knowledge. This may be the present, fractured voice of the poststructural analyst, or the distant, ordered voice of the "social scientist". This is matter for personal conviction, as long as it is done consistently.

You may have noticed something in the list above. There's a lot of talk about theory. That's because theory is central and necessary to this process. The understanding required to enact internal coherence is likely to require the work of others. Thousands of researchers and theorists have gone before you and have wrestled with the issues you are confronting. You need their writing. It can inspire you, it can feed creative abduction from your data, it can create a context for your original work. Enacting internal coherence is much easier when you have a bigger picture to relate it to, whether this comes from your own explorations or from your knowledgeable colleagues.

Qualitative research is untidy. We have been saying so for decades. It's time we learned (or perhaps remembered) how to write articles that show it, to make an argument for the consistent thinking and acting that holds a messy research venture together. It's time editors and reviewers demanded and made space for it.

Get out there. Read a lot. Make a thoughtful mess. Refuse to clean it up. Explain how you made it. Be proud of the originality of your insights.

That's qualitative enquiry.

NOTES

¹ Some of these ideas were presented at the International Institute for Qualitative Methodologies Conference entitled "Advanced Qualitative Methods" in October 2008, and I very much appreciate the support and feedback I received from the folks in the audience. Rose Barbour's infectious enthusiasm, in particular, encouraged me to write down and extend my ideas, and for this I'm very grateful.

² You will see that I often use grounded theory as an example in this chapter. This is for two main reasons: because I use grounded theory myself so it's easy for me to talk about, and because it seems to be the methodology most offended against. I'm sure similar complaints could be made by those working in other traditions.

³ I am indebted to Jennifer Mason for this bit of my argument. She gave an excellent workshop after the aforementioned conference, in which she talked about the experience of reading theses with confessional preambles that bore no relation to their other content. Her comment planted the seed for this section of my chapter.

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