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Eleven Pitfalls in Qualitative Research: Some Perils Every Emerging Scholar and Doctoral Student Should Be Aware Of!

Izhar Oplatka
Tel Aviv University, oplatka@tauex.tau.ac.il

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Abstract

The current article analyzes potential pitfalls that each emergent researcher might face during the qualitative research process and illuminates adequate strategies to cope with them effectively. The author's personal and professional experience in supervising doctoral and MA students in their qualitative research and students' own reflections on the pitfalls they have faced are used as resources for this paper. Eleven pitfalls are depicted in this paper, divided into four phases in the research process, beginning from the preparatory phase in which the researcher plans the research program, through data collection and analysis, to the final phase of writing the research report. The paper provides some practical strategies to cope with these pitfalls successfully and effectively.

Keywords

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The current article analyzes potential pitfalls that each emergent researcher might face during the qualitative research process and illuminates adequate strategies to cope with them effectively. The author's personal and professional experience in supervising doctoral and MA students in their qualitative research and students' own reflections on the pitfalls they have faced are used as resources for this paper. Eleven pitfalls are depicted in this paper, divided into four phases in the research process, beginning from the preparatory phase in which the researcher plans the research program, through data collection and analysis, to the final phase of writing the research report. The paper provides some practical strategies to cope with these pitfalls successfully and effectively.

Keywords: research design, pitfalls, interviewing, doctoral studies

Introduction

Qualitative research has become a very common methodological paradigm in social sciences, education, and health studies in recent decades. Many researchers and students have been involved in naturalistic inquiries, using research tools such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups, textual analysis, ethnography, case study, observation and so on (Arar, 2017; Hennink et al., 2020). Their empirical works have been guided by a host of books and papers published in many languages since the qualitative paradigm gained an academic legitimacy in many disciplines.

While qualitative research has many advantages and merits (see the first chapter of every book about this research), novice qualitative researchers might face a wide variety of pitfalls when conducting their study and analyzing its data. For this reason, few qualitative researchers have emphasized plausible pitfalls in qualitative research, providing their readers with adequate strategies to cope with them (e.g., Baker & Lee, 2011; Froggatt, 2001; Niaz, 2009). For example, Easton et al. (2000) presented three of the pitfalls that can occur in qualitative research during data collection and transcription: equipment failure, environmental hazards, and transcription errors. In contrast, Cooper et al. (2014) focused on the selection bias and threats to external validity, the breach of participant anonymity and confidentiality, and threats to completion of recruitment, retention, and outcome measurement. Similarly, but in relation to grounded theory, Elliott and Jordan (2013) emphasized varied potential pitfalls and strategies to face them, such as the avoidance of forcing analysis in the early stages, the generation of a level of analysis based on fragmentation and non-integrated coding, and a failure to ensure that the analysis moves beyond narrative description to generate theoretical concepts. They further indicated that a pitfall commonly accounted to grounded theory research is that the analysis over-relies on coding and the concomitant development of an index of fragmented codes rather than an overarching integrated concept.

Consistent with these works, I would like to extend the conversation about disadvantages and perils in qualitative inquiry and suggest eleven potential pitfalls that each

emergent scholar might face. Likewise, it is my intention to illuminate adequate strategies to cope with them effectively.

Three sources of knowledge guided the writing of this paper. First, during the last twenty years, I have been supervising a host of master and doctoral students in their qualitative research program (both thesis and dissertation) and taught masters students how to conduct qualitative research in educational leadership and administration. The interactions I had with the students taught me a lot about their difficulties as well as about the perils they might encounter during their research program. Second, I also rely in this paper on the students' own reflections on the pitfalls they have faced during their research process. Third, as every academic, I have been reviewing many papers published in refereed journals whose main methodology was grounded in the qualitative paradigm. This experience taught me a lot about the pitfalls qualitative researchers tend to face and about the need to prepare emergent scholars in facing these pitfalls. The current paper is based on this knowledge and on extensive reading of papers and books that revolve around issues and methodologies in qualitative research in recent years.

The value of this paper is in its attempt to simplify the pitfalls and make emergent scholars (including doctoral students) aware of them. Besides, an attempt is made to warn scholars about the dire consequences of these pitfalls and the need to cope with them in advance. The rest of the paper presents each of the pitfalls and suggests strategies and tools to handle them effectively.

Pitfalls in the Preparatory Phase

While the importance of the planning phase in any research program is widely understood, there are two potential pitfalls every qualitative researcher should be aware of before submitting his/her planning program.

Choosing a Topic of Much Relevance to the Student's Life

While every student in basic courses about science and research in social sciences has learned the famous criterion of "objectivity," yet many emergent qualitative researchers might face the peril of choosing a research topic based on their subjective experiences in the workplace (or in life). For example, many times master students in the program "educational administration and policy" propose to write their qualitative thesis about an event they have experienced in the school (i.e., their workplace). They tend to visit my office enthusiastically, telling me about their "innovative" idea for a research program, such as understanding a certain project or "something" that happened in their class. Then they wait for my response with much confidence that I will join their enthusiasm and accept their "proposal."

But I cannot express any enthusiasm, not because I am an unpleasant person, but because a research topic on this level (master thesis/PhD dissertation) cannot be grounded merely in the student's subjective experiences in the workplace. Rather, any search for a research topic (including the research purposes) ought to start in reading the adequate scholarship and research literature. This is particularly important in qualitative research in which the researcher is supposed to indulge into the field and collect verbal and textual data. After all, in this kind of research, the bias of the researcher, whether conscious or subconscious, can affect the data. The conclusions of the study can also be influenced by this bias. Thus, this bias can be strengthened whenever the chosen research topic is tightly connected to the researcher's subjective world.

The strategy to cope with this pitfall is simply to read the relevance scholarship (i.e., the one on which their future study draws) again and again before making any decision about

the preferred topic of the study. I always ask my doctoral candidates to go to the library and browse the books that pertain to the relevant scholarship and just read the contents and the chapters that catch their attention. This is a wonderful experience that can be done also virtually as many of our books nowadays are online. Then, the student is required to read quite a number of empirical papers in refereed journals and come back with his/her insights into the scholarship (e.g., common research purposes/questions, major findings). This helps the prospective doctoral candidate realize the streams of research that characterize the scholarship and many times to reveal new ideas for research that are remote from his/her own subjective experiences in the workplace.

Asking the Wrong People

It is commonly known that the qualitative researcher has to identify the target audience (i.e., informants) and select them accordingly so as to gain the insights s/he needs from them (Hennink et al., 2020). In other words, only informants who hold the information or knowledge that is of much relevance to the research purposes/questions should be selected for the sample in the qualitative research. For example, in one of my studies I aimed at exploring principal workload, using semi-structured interviews to better understand the meaning, determinants, and implications of this workload (Oplatka, 2017). To this end, I had to choose only principals who face heavy workload in their role. Otherwise, how could they provide me with the relevant information about principal workload if they had never experienced such a stressful phenomenon?

Unfortunately, although the answer to my pondering is essentially negative, some emergent qualitative researchers may give little attention to the pitfall underlying the selection of participants to their study. Many times, my students, and even authors of papers I was asked to review by journal editors, seem to be unaware of the need to focus on a very specific group of participants in qualitative research. Such a group enables the researcher to explore the researched phenomenon profoundly and to provide a "thick" description of its elements and contexts. Thus, emergent qualitative researchers may unconsciously recruit participants that cannot provide them with the data required to respond to the research questions. The dire consequences will probably appear in the phase of data analysis.

To overcome this peril, I always encourage my students to imagine the person in the researched context who could provide them with knowledge and then, to suggest some criteria for selecting the proper informants. This kind of sampling, named criterion sampling (Paton, 2002) is well-known to senior qualitative researchers, but sometimes emergent researchers might ignore this sort of sampling and recruit participants randomly, as if they conduct a quantitative research whose main focus is generalizability of the findings rather than analyzing a certain phenomenon in depth. For example, one of my master students explored the feeling of empathy among schoolteachers. To this end, she had to find teachers who feel empathy at work and display/suppress its elements in different contexts. Basically, she had to interview only teachers with some teaching experience and, therefore, she decided to include only teachers with five years in teaching. But this was not enough. Thus, she had to ask supervisors and principals to provide her with names of empathic teachers, i.e., these teachers who display empathy towards, for instance, underprivileged students and express this feeling during staff meetings. However, even when given names of teachers who meet this criterion, the student had to confirm during a phone call with the potential teacher that s/he tends to feel empathy at work (using preparatory questions). But at least she was given names of teachers whose superiors or colleagues believe they are empathic or even compassionate.

Pitfalls During Data Collection

Data collection is a very critical phase in any research, particularly in qualitative inquiry in which the researcher has to devote much time and effort in collecting textual data in long meetings (e.g., depth interviews, observation). During this process, two pitfalls might appear.

Asking Narrow and Specific Questions in the Interview

Qualitative research uses open-ended questions to allow participants sufficient room to describe their perceptions and experiences. Thus, instead of providing questions with only specific answers, like a poll, qualitative research allows people to be themselves during the research process (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). However, many novice researchers might mistakenly use "if" or "whether" questions that might be seen "easier" to answer and "decisive" and, therefore, may provide the interviewer with an absolute response as opposed to open and "large" questions that are more complex to answer (and analyze).

While I can understand students' tendency to seek for easy solutions and quick responses to their questions and ponderings, the price may be high. After all, the aim of qualitative research is to provide a thick description of the researched phenomenon. But this aim cannot be achieved unless our participants provide us with unlimited and unconstrained answers. To this end, we need open-ended questions (as every book in qualitative research suggests and explains) that do not limit the interviewer's mind and allow him/her to respond in an extensive way. For example, instead of asking "do you feel overloaded in your job?" (Then, the answer might be yes or no, and that's all) it is better to ask, "Can you describe the overload in your job?" (Then, the answer might be much longer, provided that the criteria of our sample include employees who cope with many work tasks in a limited amount of time).

To face the human tendency to formulate short and "if" questions, I always explain to my students that "if" questions are not allowed in their interview transcripts (except in rare cases). I also encourage them to try and answer the questions in the interview guide by themselves before conducting the first interview. They are also required to reflect on their feelings while responding to the questions or to conduct a pilot test of their interview guide. For example, do you feel led by the question? Do you feel you have enough room to express yourself or your interpretation following the question asked? Is there any information you could add if the question were devised in a different way? Likewise, it is always recommended to add question words such as "why?" "When?" or "Where?" or phrases such as "please explain" or "I wonder if you could be more specific about…?" to enlarge the scope of the possible answers.

Focusing on Data Collection Without Concurrently Analyzing the Data

One of the major characteristics of qualitative research is its emergent and developing nature. Thus, while other forms of empirical investigations might differentiate between the data collection phase and its consecutive data analysis phase, it is not advised to follow this order in qualitative research design. In other words, data analysis cannot be seen as a separate activity that is distinct from either data collection or interpretation (Marshall & Rossman. 2011).

Unfortunately, however, many new researchers might decide to collect their interview transcripts first and only then to start analyzing them comparatively. This may derive from their socialization for positivistic methodologies that schedule the numeric data collection before the analysis (usually in the bachelor's degree) or simply from their time pressure. In this sense, some emergent researchers may mistakenly choose to undertake an intensive period of data collection and then move into "doing" the data analysis.

The price they are likely to pay, though, is high. The iterative aspect of the analytical process in qualitative research is beneficial because it allows the researcher to reflect on the interview transcripts and revise the interview guide accordingly. The researcher may want to consider adding new questions or deleting others due to new understanding of the research topic. Note, each interview provides the researcher with unexpected insights and paves the way for the following interviews in which the interviewer can elaborate on the new insight and, in turn, enrich the data collection process. So, every new researcher should remember that it is highly recommended to analyze each interview (or observation) just after its completion and before moving to the next interview meeting (or observation). This is what makes the qualitative study a developing research program.

Pitfalls in the Process of Data Analysis

When we think about quantitative data analysis, those of us who learned basic courses in social science research think about software such as SPSS or SAS. But, although we have varied software for qualitative data analysis, the role of the qualitative researcher during the data analysis is critical. No software can replace the human mind when it comes to interpretation of textual data. Thus, emergent researchers may face four pitfalls when engaging in the analysis of their qualitative data.

The Trap of an Unsystematic Analysis

Due to the excessive work required to analyze qualitative data (even in our times of computerized techniques), it may be very seductive sometimes to deny the need to engage in a long, systematic data analysis and, in contrast, prefer easy solutions. How great it can be to look at the interview transcript or the observation report and write down insights and illuminations from our mind! It is so easy to read these texts and come to conclusions without being engaged in coding, comparison and thematic constructions. Indeed, it is easier but very ineffective, because the human mind cannot process so much information and get to know the reality just by looking at a huge number of pages and words. It is simply not working.

Along the years, I learned to distinguish between reports of findings that are based on systematic data analysis and these that are not. While in the former, the findings section has been organized and structured according to themes, categories, and sub-categories in what Strauss and Corbin (1990) called 'the story-line' in qualitative research, the latter reports of findings have been messy and unorganized, leading to uncertainty and confusion. Thus, new researchers who are unable to value the importance of systematic analysis (led by proper books and papers) are likely to lose the benefits of qualitative research; the identification of patterns and categories that reflect the depth of the researched phenomenon. No doubt, this could lead some research efforts toward false conclusions.

To avoid falling into this trap, students and emergent researchers should find the proper research strategy and method of analysis in the study and follow their practical suggestions carefully. In addition, the systematic analysis should be documented and stored because both PhD committees and journal reviewers ask from time to time to provide a sample of the analysis. This gives an example of the categorization process during the data analysis and the ways in which the themes have been developed.

Confusion between the participant's attitudes and actual experiences. Let's assume again that our research purpose is to explore the emotion of empathy among managers. More specifically, we would like to explore their sense of empathy towards employees and clients, for example, and to understand how they manage (regulate) their empathy in different contexts.

In fact, we do want to know how our interviewees elicit empathy, feel empathy in their bones, and display or suppress their empathy under certain circumstances.

Sometimes, however, our interviewees (i.e., the managers) cannot or do not want to share their sense of empathy or their empathy regulation and, instead are talking about their own perceptions of empathy in managerial positions. If we are not aware of the differences between perceptions/attitudes towards empathy and actual feelings/experiences of empathy (regulation), we may find that our interview transcripts are replete with managers' views of empathy in the workplace, in general, and in their job, in particular. But, this was not our initial goal when planning our study. Besides, this is a kind of knowledge we could collect by means of questionnaires rather than by in-depth interviews.

Qualitative research can tell us more than others' attitudes or views. Through interviewing and observation, we can learn about patterns of empathy regulation among managers or unearth their own feelings of empathy we did not expect them to feel (Oplatka, 2018). Likewise, the processes explored in qualitative research provide for a potential understanding as to why an experience or feeling may shift over time. To this end, though, the researcher should distinguish between one's perceptions toward the researched phenomenon and one's own engagement/experience/feeling in the researched phenomenon. Otherwise, s/he will realize after the data analysis phase is over that his/her initial intentions have not been explored thoroughly.

An Attempt to Quantify Interviewees' Voices

Sometimes emergent scholars or article authors wrongly assume that adding the number of interviewees in each theme or category will strengthen the validity of their findings and gives the reader an impression of the "size" and "ratio" of their findings. From my own experience as a qualitative researcher, reviewers whose main research paradigm is positivistic may even require the author to provide statistical representation of each category, because they cannot judge its quality without being given the accurate number of participants.

One should bear in mind that the qualitative research process does not provide statistical representation, but merely interpretive data that is grounded in the voices of the participants (Hennink et al., 2020). Their interpretations simply cannot be measured. For example, when we explore employees' interpretations of elements in organizational crisis, what is most important in qualitative research is not the number of respondents that view organizational crisis in a form of "a," compared to those who view it in a form of "b." Rather, it is interesting to probe into the elements of this organizational phenomenon profoundly and explore each one of them distinctively and concurrently, as part of the larger contexts in which they appear. Put another way, through the interpretations of employees in our study we strive for receiving a holistic view of the reality in times of organizational crisis. For this reason, we are required to choose our participants from a particular group of employees (e.g., managers who are familiar with the crisis) and seek for a coherent "story-line" that explains the manifold nature of any organizational (and social) reality.

Thus, if statistical data are required, qualitative research is not the form of research that should be used. But, if interpretive data are required, statistical data had minor (if any) meaning in analyzing the voices coming up in the interview meeting or in the case observed by the researcher. Luckily, facing this pitfall is easy; simply do not add statistics of any kind to your report unless it further sharpens your findings and only in vital cases.

Pitfalls in the Writing Phase

It is a wonderful moment in the research process; we have collected and analyzed our data and are ready now to put in writing what we have revealed. But three perils are still there, and we might put attention to them before we start our report writing.

Writing the Findings Based on Voices Rather Than Categories

We have many pages of interview transcripts on the desk or in our computer. The analysis phase is over and we are ready to write down our findings. We have constructed themes and categories and all we have to do now is "just" to add our voice and support it through quotes from the field. Let's start writing the "story-line."

But it is not as easy as it may look like. Many times, emergent authors follow the voices of the interviewees rather than their systematic analysis and voice. For example, let us assume that we collected data about employee anger in the workplace. The first part in the findings section refers to the meanings that interviewees attach to anger regulation in their job (i.e., when they could display anger and when they are expected to suppress it). But, instead of identifying sub-categories (i.e., different meanings of anger regulation) in which the author's voice is dominant and the quotes from the interviews are used to support this voice, the author presents a quote after quote, each of which represents another interviewee's individual meaning of anger regulation. What the reader reads is actually a list of interviewees' quotes that might differ from each other but misses the whole picture. The individual quote cannot be the focus of the text but rather it is the categorization process that locates each quote within a larger context and gives meaning to the findings that enrich our knowledge of the researched phenomenon.

To avoid the construction of the findings section as a list of quotes, it is necessary to analyze the data in a way that results in themes, categories, and sub-categories and bear in mind that the sole quote does not stands for itself but is there to represent the reality as it has been constructed in the analysis phase. While it is tempting to follow the easy work of presenting a quote after quote, it is necessary to read empirical papers published in refereed journals that accept only papers whose findings section is written according to accepted qualitative reporting techniques. This may save a lot of time and obviate mistakes in the writing phase.

The Discussion Is Written Like the Findings Section

As indicated, an effective data analysis phase results in themes and categories that include both the author's voice and the quotes from the field (Marshal & Rossman, 2011). Thus, the findings section should detail in depth the categorization process and present themes, categories, and sub-categories in a coherent and systematic way. In contrast, the discussion section should move to a higher level of analysis and presents major insights emerging from the analysis as well as compares them with past research and common theories/models in the field of study.

Sometimes, however, authors will likely repeat the structure of the findings section, but instead of providing quotes as they did in the findings section, they simply compare every theme or category with past research. In doing so, they are unlikely to provide the readers with major conclusions and insights required to understand the conceptual and empirical values of their study and, therefore, may cause unnecessary repetitions. The discussion must not overlap the findings section, and vice versa.

To prevent this pitfall, emergent researchers should sharpen the distinction between findings and discussion. While the former is assumed to give detailed information about a wide

variety of aspects found in the study, the latter is supposed to sum up the major findings in a form of insights. Insights go beyond the individual quote or category and provide a larger view of the research phenomenon. Each insight elucidates some reference to past research and to potential explanation of the major findings. In a simpler way, just compare between the structure of the findings and that of the discussion. If they are identical, be careful, it is a trap.

Reaching to Broad Conclusions

Very reasonably, researchers aim to look beyond a particular study and discover something that can be applied to other contexts. But generalizability in qualitative research is, by and large, limited (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Many times, nevertheless, emergent researchers and PhD students tend to suggest broad conclusions that cannot be grounded within their data. Vaivio (2008) warned qualitative researchers not to over-generalize their data and remain modest in their expectations:

> . …Qualitative management accounting researchers can be prone to over-generalizing their findings. Having presented management accounting as a contextualized practice within a unique case study setting, some researchers then suddenly suggest that the findings can be generalized, in a statistical sense, to a larger organizational population. This inappropriate claim constitutes the misplaced universalism problem. It stands as another pitfall of qualitative management accounting research, which stems from a positivist or modernist conception of science. (p. 78)

Note, the aim of qualitative research is not to engender generalizations of a statistical nature or surveys. In fact, "universal" generalizations cannot be devised based on a small sample that characterizes qualitative inquiries or case studies. Therefore, any broad conclusion at the end of the report is doomed to fail and might be criticized by the readers.

To avoid such a pitfall, emergent researchers should be very careful before they attempt to follow their counterparts from the positivism (i.e., quantitative research paradigm) and reach to "universal," cross-cultural/national conclusions. I always encourage my students to reflect on their conclusions and ask themselves if they are allowed to write them down given the limited nature of their data.

Additionally, qualitative researchers can arrive at a different kind of generalization—theoretical generalizations (Vaivio, 2008). They can unearth the strengths and shortcomings of their researched case and altering or even refuting them. They can also use their findings as a means to suggest initial hypothesis for use in further studies that seek universal generalizations and higher external validity within larger populations.

Qualitative Data Represents Interpretive Rather Than Objective Reality

The data we usually collect in qualitative research is of the type of subjective interpretations and meanings (Hennink et al., 2020). This means, among other things, that the conclusion we can reach cannot refer to objective realities but to interpretive ones. For example, when our data points to any impact of a certain determinant on the researched phenomenon, the impact cannot be treated as if it represents an objective reality but as a perceived impact, one that is interpreted as influencing the phenomenon (or influenced by in case of outcomes) in the views of the participants.

To refrain from falling into this trap, we simply have to be very careful and avoid claiming for any cause-and-effect relationship or for any influence between variables, as if we

engaged in robust methodologies and numerical data produced from large-scale surveys. Whenever we do want to indicate some sort of influence among different aspects, we should carefully explain that it is based on the interpretation(s) of our interviewees/participants and cannot stand as an objective entity. I would recommend adding adjectives such as "perceived," "interpretive" and the like to emphasize the subjective meanings of our qualitative data.

Conclusions

My purpose in this paper was to illuminate eleven plausible pitfalls during the process of qualitative research and to suggest some strategies to face them effectively. The pitfalls have been divided into four phases in the research process, beginning from the preparatory phase in which the researcher plans the research program, through data collection and analysis, to the final phase of writing the research report.

Emergent researchers should be aware of these pitfalls and learn how to face them successfully and effectively. A failure to do so may result in severe empirical impediments and in difficulties to convince the readers (or the PhD committee) of the quality of their research.

Note, however, that I have no intention to claim that the pitfalls analyzed in this paper comprise an exhaustive list of pitfalls in qualitative research. As the reference list below shows, other researchers have paid attention to pitfalls and perils during the qualitative research process and illuminated many others. Thus, the more we are exposed to possible pitfalls in our qualitative research design, the better we can follow the varied phases in our research process. Several hours of reading can save much distress or even anguish in the future.

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Author Note

Izhar Oplatka is a professor of Educational Administration and Leadership at The School of Education, Tel Aviv University, Israel. Prof. Oplatka's research focuses on the lives and career of schoolteachers and principals, educational marketing, emotions and educational administration, and the foundations of educational administration as a field of study. His most recent books include *Reforming Education in Developing Countries* (2019, Routledge), *Emotion Management in Teaching and Educational Leadership: A Cultural Perspective* (with Arar, EMERALD Publishing Limited), *Project Management in Schools* (2018, with Yemini and Sagi, Palgrave-Macmillan), *Higher Education Consumer Choice* (2015, with Jane Hemsley-Brown, Palgrave), *The Legacy of Educational Administration: A Historical Analysis of an Academic Field* (2010, Peter Lang Publishing); *The Essentials of Educational Administration* (2015, Pardes Publisher, in Hebrew); *Organizational Citizenship Behavior in Schools* (2015, Routledge, with Anit Somech). Please direct correspondence to oplatka@tauex.tau.ac.il.

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