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Handling Qualitative Data: A Review

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Abstract

In *Handling Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide*, Richards (2009) presents the reader with beginner-to-intermediate knowledge of qualitative research and the requirements to develop a successful project. Throughout the text there are boxes of information that capture essential steps or informative pieces that the reader should make note of or make it a point to remember. Richards also reminds the readers that one of the most important parts of research is to start. Procrastination can be the researcher's greatest enemy.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Data, Records, Project

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Handling Qualitative Data: A Review

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In Handling Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide, Richards (2009) presents the reader with beginner-to-intermediate knowledge of qualitative research and the requirements to develop a successful project. Throughout the text there are boxes of information that capture essential steps or informative pieces that the reader should make note of or make it a point to remember. Richards also reminds the readers that one of the most important parts of research is to start. Procrastination can be the researcher's greatest enemy. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Data, Records, and Project.

Looking at the book *Handling Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide*, brought on a sense of patience and calmness. The cover is printed in light pastels and a single pine tree seemingly represents the most important subject of the book. The typography is clean with "HANDLING QUALITATIVE DATA" in all capital letters as if sending the message that this is the meat of the text. Actually, it is; while this book scratches the surface of qualitative research overall, the focus always remains on qualitative data. The author glides through important areas of qualitative research and presents them with a "you can do it" tone. Throughout the interior of the text there are boxes of information that capture essential steps or informative pieces that the reader should make note of or make it a point to remember. This book serves as a great companion to an advanced undergraduate research course or a research design course at the master's level.

A sign that your qualitative research project may not come to fruition is the lack of willingness to start. Many times researchers attempt to think ahead to what the conclusion of the research will be and that can be frustrating especially if there is no mental visualization of what the end result will look like. This can add to the procrastination of project initiation. Qualitative research is multifaceted and cannot be simplified in one sitting through a single thought process. Richards (2009) presents chapter one as the most important step that applies to a successful qualitative research project: setting it up. I found this chapter interesting to read because my approach is similar to many novice researchers, that is, to get started and work as we go through the process. At least that is the way I had attempted to begin my dissertation process. I too quickly found it difficult to see the end and thought maybe I did not choose the right topic. The solution to this, Richards adds, is to create a plan or map out the process. Describing how the research will take place and acquiring the resources is completely different than attempting to draw a conclusion. This process sets the framework for a solid dedication to the project.

Once the project is underway, generating the data becomes the first step in the process. The purpose of qualitative research is to provide a new understanding to a phenomenon; therefore, the qualitative data is often fluid and complex. Not only does the data itself contribute to the overall project, but the data develops with the use of data

records such as “memos, annotations, background material, and reflective essays” (Richards, 2009, p. 35). Choosing a method to collect data has been made mostly popular by the use of interviews. Richards, however, states this method is the most intrusive way to collect information. She continues by depicting a scenario where a researcher would go in with a battery of questions for individuals in order to figure out the problem. This example does not seem to fit with the way in which an ethical qualitative research project would unfold. However, the author does provide other ways to collect data that may not be described as intrusive. Participant observation places the researcher in the context so that it resembles much of what we do every day. Focus groups and document analysis are examples of non-obtrusive qualitative research.

Whatever the method of choice is for data collection, bias is one thing that all researchers will deal with. Bias can be seen as negative when it consumes the researcher and gets in the way of well-produced research. On a positive note about bias, Richards (2009) provides this example:

The noun means a diagonal line or stretch across woven cloth. Cut or hung on bias, the cloth will be slanting. A badly cut garment will hang awkwardly, pulled by an unrecognized bias. But haute couture uses skillful bias-cut all the time, to achieve a perfect drape. All cloth has bias – you can either control for it by cutting straight, or you can use it well, by careful design. (pp. 22-23)

Part I of the book ends with a chapter on data records. Richards (2009) mentions that getting the data is only as important as the quality of it. Good quality data should include “accuracy, notes on context, thick description, usefulness, and reflexivity” (p. 57). The most widely-used interview method for data collection has consequences that can prove to be costly. If the research project is not well thought out, the researcher can find himself or herself bearing the cost of transcribing. If the researcher is transcribing the interviews, then cost will not be an issue, but time will. On the other hand, transcribing can be rewarding in so much as bring to mind context that was otherwise forgotten or cause the researcher to reflect upon moments that took place in the field. One important message that Richards makes the reader aware of, is that of storing data as soon as possible. She points out that storing data in qualitative research software is not only a good idea, but should be customary. Anything that arises concerning the project can be stored, documented, and noted. Software allows the researcher to go to a specific topic or subject of interest without having to sort through piles of paper as researchers did in the past.

The author delves into part II of the book with ideas surrounding the data and the coding involved in qualitative research. Simply put, if the value of the records collected, are subpar, then the analysis will reveal it. A researcher may conclude that there was not enough data collected or that the collection efforts were poor. In reality, Richards (2009) states that the way in which the data was handled, translates its quality. All ideas and concepts related to the study should be explored and stored in a way that it can later be accessed. The reason for conducting a qualitative research study is to find out something that is of interest to the researcher and provide a contribution of the phenomenon; therefore, there will definitely be material to analyze and present. Once this has been

established, reading the data should become a ritual. By this I mean, a process that is repeated for every piece of data. Individual preferences are typically okay, but Richards (2009) provides five steps that can aide in the reading process:

- 1) read and re-read
- 2) anything considered interesting should be documented
- 3) if it is interesting then ask why it is interesting
- 4) open up interesting passages and explore them, compare them to other situations
- 5) ask why you, as the researcher, are interested in that topic and record your answer. (p. 77)

Logically, coding is associated with numbers or symbols because coding is most familiar in quantitative research and literature. Coding in quantitative research reduces the data, whereas, in qualitative research the goal is to retain data. Coding allows the researcher to break out a topic into subtopic and review them as needed. Once the data has been sorted and categories of information have been compiled, coding will allow effortless access and perhaps provide a new perspective. Richards (2009) writes about three types of coding, descriptive, topic, and analytical coding. Descriptive and topic coding are straightforward; however, analytical coding requires that the researcher think about ideas and meanings of the data as well as construct new ones.

Ideas will develop throughout the entire research process; however, Richards (2009) states that handling those ideas is not only necessary, but it can contribute to the overall project. Organization of those ideas will require consistency, Richards mentions “speed, reliability, and efficiency” as being key to accomplishing this task. As soon as an idea is thought of, it should be coded. The work does not end there; the coding should match the code of the previous topic. If not, the category will not be dependable and when the theme is discussed there will be missing data. Efficiency of the organization allows for a vast array of categories that will build a catalog. The catalog will grow as ideas expand. Naming conventions of the categories are very much needed as they will provide an accessible link between how a researcher thinks of the category and produces information with it.

At this point of the research, it is safe to begin thinking about how the project may conclude. In part III of her book, Richards (2009), sets the mood for project completion. She asks that the researcher start thinking about what is expected and how it will be achieved. The methods and analysis will need to be explored in order to answer this. Thoughts of what would be satisfactory, possible outcomes, how you know when you are there, and the reliability and validity of the project are covered in the last part of this book. The satisfaction of the project will depend on whether or not all steps in the proposal were successfully accomplished. The analysis should contain depth and breadth and not provide a description alone. The possible outcomes of the project could be thought of as a film. Many scenes are shot, but those scenes alone do not create a movie. When put together the data can offer insight as to what may be going on. Throughout the process, hard work and dedication are what drove the project to fruition. Richards (2009) purports that not every researcher will have the nostalgic feeling of accomplishment. This should not be a reason to doubt the work; the structure of the research and the outcomes will be supported by the data. The validity and reliability are essential to the project. In order to present valid data, the author suggests using triangulation and/or member

checking. These methods allow the data to be examined for accuracy. Reliability reverts back to the coding; so long as the coding remains consistent and congruent, the data will be reliable and the results will be trustworthy.

In all, Richards (2009) provides a book that is accessible and free of intimidation caused by the use of technical lingo and long drawn out chapters. On the other hand, the audience for this book seems somewhat limited. While reading through the book, the author mentions projects that she uses as examples and refers the reader to the companion website located at <http://www.uk.sagepub.com/richards/> . While looking through her website, I read a few reviews that others have posted on her page. They were all favorable; however, the majority of reviewers claim that the book is best suited for undergraduate research, entry master level research methods courses, or for students who received their degrees from institutions that may not adhere to similar research protocol. I could not agree more.

References

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Author Note

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