

Discussion of ‘Quality in Qualitative Evaluation: a framework for assessing research evidence.’

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Shortly after being asked to discuss this report I was sent an email by a qualitative researcher who takes part in a discussion group in which I participate. I offer it to you in order to give a flavour of the response that some people working in this tradition may have to the report.

He wrote:

I...feel disturbed by the fact that qualitative research is now absorbed into the quality and standards state bureaucratic machine.... ‘quality’ usually means that which is sanctioned to fit in with either minimal threats to organisational image/custom and practice. No chance either these days for critical emancipatory designs which expose contradictions between rhetoric and lived experience.

[In the report] post-positivist designs with expert peer checking and participant validation are seen to be synonymous with ‘quality’... If I was a postmodern ethnodramatist or ethnopoetic, I’d stand a cat in hell’s chance of being seen to be of ‘high quality’ as a researcher in Britain today...I get more out of reading Sarah Kane’s *4.48 Psychosis* or the wonderful collection of papers in Fee’s *Pathology and the Postmodern* than I do from the safe grounded theory pieces I see from time to time in the peer reviewed journals that are meant to inform and sustain our craft but which often bore me to death.

This is meant as a standpoint, rather than a ‘fair and balanced’ opinion and (last prediction) I bet my views won’t be seen as ‘quality’ quality by the qualitative research police in the National Centre for Social Research (hats off to George Orwell at this point).

References

Fee, Dwight. (ed.) (1999) *Pathology and the Postmodern: Mental Illness as Discourse and Experience* London: Sage.

Kane, Sarah (2002) *4.48 Psychosis*. London: Methuen.
(A play about the experience of mental illness)

A subsequent contributor to the discussion then replied:

[concerning] the point about becoming appropriated by the bureaucratic machinery of the state... I strongly subscribe to the view that you can only really change the system from the inside, so the recognition by government agencies that qualitative research has a role to play is most welcome... [but] I would be worried that qualitative research (and particularly ethnography) might lose sight of its historical role in providing a voice to marginalised and often (relatively) powerless populations. If we can hang on to that and not go 'native' in the technologies of governmentality, then I'm happy that larger organisations are recognising the quality contribution that qualitative research can make...

As the exchange above suggests, in any global exercise someone is going to feel left out. Qualitative research is not a single entity, but a broad church containing a wide variety of views and approaches. As Mary Dixon-Woods (the other discussant) has pointed out, different criteria are appropriate for different qualitative approaches.

Nevertheless, this is a very sensible and useful document

It is *sensible* because it charts a middle path between extremes incorporating a wide variety of views, recognising where they are incompatible and retaining areas of consensus. As the report makes clear, the views of qualitative researchers about appropriate ways to ensure good research knowledge are very diverse, and this is sometimes frustrating for the audiences of research. The authors indicate their points of departure with more extreme versions of qualitative research (see, in particular, Full report Box 4.3, p. 48) and their model, as a result, will have an appeal to most practising social researchers who, on the whole, are more pragmatic in orientation than some of the more extreme methodological theoreticians who have written about this family of methods.

It is *useful* because it summarises in a brief format some key criteria that are often helpful in assessing quality. However, the way in which the authors imagine the criteria may be used is also very well-judged. I particularly like the emphasis on the use of the framework as an aid, rather than a substitute, for judgement. Thus the authors refer to:

'the persistent concern that formalised criteria should avoid being rigidly procedural or over-prescriptive. It has therefore been devised to aid informed judgement, not mechanistic rule-following.' (Short report: p.5)

This respects the sometimes unpredictable ways in which qualitative inquiry can achieve significant insights. Qualitative research is itself appropriately conducted in a similar spirit. It is a form of inquiry that owes as much to the general tradition of scholarship in literature and the humanities as to the scientific tradition which tends to be more bound to method, technique and procedure (though this itself may be something of a stereotype). If this spirit is followed in the application of the framework, perhaps the unwelcome constraint feared by the first participant in the email discussion above will be avoided.

Extending the range of methods

The report is written in a context where evaluation research for policy makers, largely using interviews and focus groups, is the main kind of qualitative research being imagined, although the authors say that it will also be useful in doing observational work and documentary analysis. Box 4.4 (Full report: p.58) indicates that out of 298 evaluative qualitative research studies the authors found in a search through government web sites, the vast majority involved these methods.

just one government department (DoH) accounted for almost all of the reports where either documentary analysis or observation was carried out. Across the departments, interviews and focus groups were overwhelmingly the main qualitative methods noted. (Full report: p. 53)

In the full report's concluding comments the authors call for a 'creative extension of the range of qualitative research methods used in government evaluations' (p. 119). Elsewhere, they say that qualitative research is a method suited to

an in depth understanding of people's experiences, perspectives and histories in the context of their personal circumstances or settings...[and]... a concern with exploring phenomena from the perspective of those being studied. (Full report, p. 10)

This is a limited conception of the scope of qualitative method: policy related research would benefit from a broader range of data sources and analytic approaches. I'd like to focus on this and explore with you the potential of documentary analysis in providing policy-relevant research.

Who are 'people'?

The emphasis on understanding people's experiences is an accurate characterisation of much qualitative research – particularly that based on interviews and focus groups - but I would argue for a much broader definition of 'people' than is generally the case. It would be a mistake, for example, to imagine that this is confined to individual persons such as 'users'. This limited understanding is reflected in comments from a government research manager and a policy maker quoted in the report:

I often commission qualitative research ... when I want to understand ... how a user is likely to respond to either this initiative or this policy. I want to know how they see the world, what assumptions they make about it, what they're doing, what the Government is trying to achieve, how they're likely to respond ... Getting that understanding of why, how do people see the world and how are they likely to react to anything in the future. So it's a wonderful vehicle ... if you want to understand the motives of people and their views of the world.
Research manager (Full report, pp. 29-30)

It's ... really important as a way of understanding things in that, if you like, kind of hearing what people are saying without it being filtered too much and in a way that you can then hopefully interpret carefully, is a real privilege and

insight into people's lives, you know. So at its best I think it's just hugely illuminative of different perspectives and different views. *Funder* (Full report, p. 30)

It seems clear that these people are seeing qualitative research largely as an extension of the governmental line of sight into the motivations and behaviours of the population at large. It seems to be imagined as an extension of democratic consultation exercises, albeit conducted by specialists.

Instead, I would want 'people' to include organisations, institutions, nations, professional associations, firms, businesses, government departments and so on – entities nowadays often represented by the ubiquitous word 'stakeholder' – and not just the imagined average citizen or lay person. Further, understanding the objectives and cultures of large organisations is often done more revealingly through critical documentary analysis than through interviews with powerful 'stakeholders'.

The potential of documentary analysis

In much policy research the 'experiences' of those stakeholders who speak for large organisations are generally accessed by means of interviews and focus groups and their reports are often elevated from being reports of 'experience' to the status of 'perspectives' or even 'expert views.' In my view, a lot of good qualitative analysis, of relevance to policy makers, might be done if documentary sources were to be analysed, and from a discourse analytic point of view that (to use a bit of jargon now) 'problematise' the category of 'experience.' Documentary analysis avoids the problem of reactivity, where interviewees tailor their accounts to give a particular impression to the researcher. They are, in this sense, 'naturally occurring' or 'unobtrusive' data.

An example

What might this look like? Here is a brief example of such analysis, using data derived from the web site (web sites count as 'documents') of a government organisation: the Strategy Unit. It is a list of the titles of recent publications of this unit, and my analysis focuses on the choice of language made by the authors of these documents, which reflects something of the culture of this organisation:

Strategy unit: titles of recent publications

- Field Work: Weighing up the Costs and Benefits of GM Crops
- Ethnic Minorities and the Labour Market
- Game Plan: a strategy for delivering Government's sport and physical activity objectives
- Electronic Networks: Challenges for the Next Decade
- Waste Not, Want Not
- Risk: Improving government's capability to handle risk and uncertainty

- In Demand: Adult skills in the 21st century - part 2
- Delivering for Children and Families
- Private Action, Public Benefit
- Privacy and Data-Sharing: The Way Forward For Public Services
- Lending Support: Modernising the Government's use of Loans
- The Energy Review
- Workforce Development: "In Demand: Adult Skills for the 21st Century."
- Resource Productivity: Making More With Less
- Renewable Energy in the UK: Building for the Future of the Environment
- Tackling the Diseases of Poverty
- Strengthening Leadership in the Public Sector
- Migration: An Economic and Social Analysis. A research study produced with the Home Office.
- Rights of Exchange: SHE Trade Objectives On The Global Scale
- e.gov: Electronic Government Services for the 21st Century
- Prime Minister's Review of Adoption
- Counter Revolution: Modernising the Post Office Network
- Recovering the Proceeds of Crime
- Winning The Generation Game
- Reaching Out: The Role of Central Government at Regional & Local Level
- Adding It Up: Improving Analysis & Modelling in Central Government
- Wiring It Up
- Rural Economies
- e-commerce @its.best.uk
- Encryption and Law Enforcement

My analysis consists of singling out words and phrases used in these titles that convey the image that the people in this organisation thereby project.

1. Action words

Action
 Building
 Delivering
 Improving
 Modernising
 Reaching out
 Recovering
 Strengthening
 Tackling
 Winning
 Wiring...up

2. Future and ‘now’ words

Building for the Future
Game plan
Strategy
The 21st Century
The next decade
The Way Forward
@its.best.uk

3. Exciting words

Challenges
Energy
Productivity

4. Good words

Benefit
Capability
Development
Leadership
Objectives
Renewable
Skills
Support

5. Balanced words

Costs and benefits
More with less
Waste not, want not
Weighing up

6. Important words

Prime Minister

A linguistic analysis of a document, then, can be effective in assessing the perspective of an organisation or an institution. The Strategy Unit is shown to be a particular kind of organisation, different (for example) from an academic research unit. It charts a course between the academic virtues of fairness, objectivity and balance, and political requirements for energy and optimism.

A full documentary analysis would not be confined to such publicly accessible material, but might seek out less visible documents, such as minutes of meetings or, perhaps, emails sent between members of the organisation.

Interviews and focus groups as opportunities for observation

As well as expanding the range of data and materials for analysis, policy evaluation research could benefit from a different and more 'observational' approach to interviews and focus groups.

Importantly, such analysis ought to be done by a researcher who puts to one side (or 'brackets', in the jargon) the claims to reader's loyalty made by the source of the data. It is usually fairly clear in an official document that some sort of ideological agenda is driving the choice of words, but it is not always made so clear that material derived from interviews and focus groups with 'ordinary' people, citizens, voters or 'users' of services can be treated in a similarly sceptical fashion.

In fact, very many qualitative studies tend to idealise or even romanticise the supposed authenticity of the views of people derived from 'depth' interviews. This tendency may be particularly strong in a policy evaluation context, where these sources are ordinary citizens or voters and where qualitative research has been chosen over quantitative because of its imagined friendliness to 'users' and its democratic credentials. Idealisation of 'oppressed' or 'marginalised' voices can also be quite evident in some more politicised and anti-governmental versions of qualitative research.

Instead of treating interview and focus group data as a resource for discovering people's experiences and perspectives, there is an alternative approach that treats the interview itself as a special kind of observational site. The researcher then asks questions of the sort:

- What devices are being used by this speaker /these speakers to make their account (s) persuasive?
- What assumptions underly the story that is being presented?
- What broader sets of ideas are being drawn on here, and how do these relate to the policies and programmes I am interested in?

How would this work in practice? Recently I came across a call for proposals to evaluate the effects of changes to prison mental health services in which one of the aims was 'to measure staff and patient satisfaction with the process and outcome of change.'

If we set aside, for the moment, the requirement to measure and imagine a qualitative research response to this: one kind of qualitative research would be to assemble these people (prisoners, staff) and ask them about their experiences of the service and whether they feel happy with it. Analysis would then focus on the issue of satisfaction.

An alternative approach would be to try to see what the interviews with both staff and patients reveal about conceptions of what it is to have good or bad mental health. Thus, the following questions might be asked:

- What wider sets of ideas do the speakers draw on to form their concepts of mental health?

- How congruent are the views of staff and patients?
- How congruent are staff and patients' views with the way in which the designers of the service think?
- What implications do any divergences have?

In such an analysis the simple idea of 'satisfaction' will be extended and deepened. An understanding of what ideas people bring to the concept of 'satisfaction' will emerge. The effect is to make qualitative research a more intellectual and questioning exercise than currently imagined in government policy evaluation research.

Conclusion

Qualitative analysis is often at its best when it is taking a critical and sceptical view. It is better to conceive of it not as simply a special way of gathering evidence but, more broadly, as providing an intelligent contribution to a developing conversation about social and political issues. In this respect I agree with the anonymous researcher who wrote the email with which I began this discussion.

In fact, one of the major contributions that truly independent qualitative research can make to policy makers thinking is to assist in re-thinking the assumptions that have led to particular policies. This can sometimes mean engaging in a debate with policy makers about the research questions that have been set for a project, which may themselves reflect unexamined assumptions. Equally, the views of 'users' can be treated sceptically without necessarily losing respect for democratic values: their views and ideas need to be *analysed* rather than just *reported*. All of these kinds of analysis require a degree of independence of thought and an interest in uncovering what may lie behind the surface.

I can recommend this research report on the judgement of quality in qualitative research to you, then, sharing with its authors the hope that it will be seen as work that is not a final word on the subject, but is essentially educational and developmental.

If, though, the report is to contribute to the education and development of people involved in commissioning and doing qualitative evaluation research, it ought to be incorporated in staff development and training experiences, in which participants compare and discuss their applications of the framework to particular examples of qualitative evaluation research. Through this kind of practical engagement the framework will to achieve its considerable potential for educating people unfamiliar with qualitative research and, for others, refining judgements and broadening the imagination when considering the quality of research.

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