Qualitative Research Proposals: Common Pitfalls (and Solutions)

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Poll Question #1

• My research expertise is
  – Exclusively qualitative
  – Exclusively quantitative
  – Mostly qualitative
  – Mostly quantitative
  – Fairly mixed
Common Proposal issues

- Research Focus
- Terminology & jargon
- Sampling issues
- Common methods issues
- Qualitative Research Evaluative Criteria
Poll Question #2

• What types of qualitative approaches have you used for proposals and/or projects? (Select all that apply)
  – Content analysis
  – Grounded theory
  – Phenomenology
  – Ethnographic
  – Other
Research Focus: Pitfalls

• Aims that are not appropriate for qualitative methods:
  – establishing causality, generalizability across populations, etc.

• Focus is not clear and/or specific
  – Inductive does not mean without focus

• Focus is TOO clear and/or specific.
  – Overly deductive or hypothesis driven

• Multiple Aims that do not fit together
  – Conceptually
  – Chronological
Research Focus: Solutions

• Develop aims that:
  – Are appropriate for qualitative methods
    • Understanding, Identifying themes and factors (barriers, etc.), etc..
  – Narrow enough to clearly distinguish a specific phenomenon
    • Focus on specific experiences or settings
  – Open enough to allow for discovery

• Utilize a clear conceptual framework that:
  – is consistent with qualitative inquiry
  – actually informs the research proposal
Terminology & jargon: Pitfalls

• Using terminology that reviewers may be unfamiliar with.

• Including unnecessary philosophical depth

• Using terminology from outside of the study’s specific qualitative approach without explanation.

• Using technical terms in lieu of detailed descriptions of how the research will be conducted.
Terminology & jargon

• Describe method specific terminology in a way that demonstrates the fit between the research approach and question.

• Provide definitions of possibly unfamiliar terminology with clear descriptions of what this means in terms of this study. If you can’t provide a clear example, reconsider including the concept.

• Be consistent within the specific qualitative method. When deviating explain.
Sampling issues: Pitfalls

- No rational for sample type, size, or recruitment method
- Lack of iterative approach
- Lack of diversity
- Lack of homogeneity
- Failure to consider participant bias
- Naive participation expectations or assumptions
Sampling issues

• Support participant selection with appropriate literature:
  – Recommendations within the specific qualitative approach
  – Consistent with range of published studies with similar focus, method and populations
  – method
• Make the fit between participant selection and aims explicit
• Provide specific details re. iterative recruitment and data collection methods
• Address recruitment and data collection challenges
Methods issues: Pitfalls

• Poor “Fit”
  – The qualitative approach is not the most appropriate.
  – The qualitative approach drives rather than serves the study.

• Methods are not consistent with the specific qualitative approach and/or variation is not noted and justified

• Lack of clarity re. data collection and/or and analysis methods
  – (e.g. interview guides)

• No specifics are described for the “mixing” of methods.
Methods issues: Solutions

• Understand a variety of qualitative methods.
• Be willing to change methods while developing the research proposal.
• Describe specific guidelines for data collection and analysis including:
  – Scope and type of interview questions
  – Initial Interview guide
  – Protocols for open interviewing
  – Guidelines for iterative data collection revisions
  – Specific data analysis steps
• Cite standard and appropriate sources that reflect the specific method, type of study, etc.. When not possible provide rationale.
• For mixed methods include clear approaches to mixing data methods and findings
Qualitative Research
Evaluative Criteria

• The qualitative research literature presents a wide, and sometimes inconsistent variety of evaluative criteria.
• However, there are some common concepts:
  – “Fit”
  – Trustworthiness
  – Creditability
  – Confirmability
  – Transferability
• Proposals should address:
  – Method specific criteria
  – Common criteria
  – Funder specific criteria
Poll Question #3

• What has been the most weakness cited in your qualitative research proposal reviews? (select ONE)
  _ Research Focus
  _ Terminology & jargon
  _ Sampling issues
  _ Common methods issues
  _ Lack of Evaluative Criteria
Questions.
Resources

• Robert Wood Johnson: http://www.qualres.org/
• NIH: http://obssr.od.nih.gov/scientific_areas/methodology/mixed_methods_research/index.aspx
• Camic, P. (Ed) *Qualitative Research in Psychology: Expanding Perspectives in Methodology and Design*. APA
NIH Guidelines for qualitative research (abridged)

- The research paradigm and approach are clearly described.
- Research design rationale, strengths and weaknesses are discussed.
- Qual. & quan. methods are addressed with equal care and specificity.
- Mixed Methods: Integration of data and findings are explicitly described.
- Expertise needed for the study is available on the team.
- The research problem, aims, methods, and data analysis are linked and the terms are consistently defined and used.
- Limitations and potential pitfalls of methods and procedures are addressed.
- Rationale (theoretical and scientific) for sampling decisions are discussed.
- Data collection procedures are fully explained.
- Data analysis procedures are fully described for each aim or research question.