

## Editorial

# Let Us Stop Apologizing for Qualitative Research



For too long, qualitative research on academic libraries has been marked with a negative definition—for example, nonquantitative handling of unstructured data. These terms carry a tone of apology and often mean impressionistic analysis of messy data. When compared to quantitative research, qualitative research is perceived as being less rigorous, primarily because it may not include statistics and all the mumbo jumbo that goes with extensive statistical analysis. Qualitative and quantitative research methods in librarianship and information science are not simply different ways of doing the same thing.

### Myths and Observations

Unfortunately, there are mixed feelings about qualitative research. Contributors to professional/research journals, reviewers of journal manuscripts, and some journal editors do not have an appreciation for, or understanding of, qualitative research. Why is this the case? One obvious reason is that scholarly research has long had a primary focus on quantification (how many? how much?), empiricism, prediction, control, inanimate instruments (tests, surveys, questionnaires), and precision in its findings. Many of the scholars contributing to research journals were trained principally to perform quantitative research. And many of the research journals have a readership primarily composed of quantitative researchers. It is difficult for this readership to find meaning in a research process that involves evolvment and flexibility. An inductive mode of analysis may be confus-

ing to researchers who depend on deductive analysis (e.g., statistical analysis).

Specific myths exist regarding the goals of qualitative research. For example, contrary to the belief of some, qualitative research seeks depth rather than breadth. In lieu of drawing from a large representative sample of an entire population of interest, qualitative researchers seek in-depth information about a smaller group. Also, there is the myth that qualitative researchers cannot obtain sufficient data by focusing on how and why people behave and think; such beliefs are held by people who do not understand—or care not to understand—the goals/purposes of qualitative research.

In my role as *C&RL* editor, it is common to witness reviewers failing to understand how and why qualitative research operates in the context of discovery rather than verification. The socialization and change processes drive new practices, new ways of thinking, and redirection or modification of new ideas. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research is not propelled by traditional perspectives, literature-driven questions, and hypotheses.

Qualitative research takes many forms in terms of methods. For example, naturalistic qualitative methods include in-depth interviews, case studies, open-ended questionnaires, ethnographic studies, participant observation, and focus groups. It is common to see an emphasis on words in qualitative research (e.g., spoken words, written words, recorded field notes, visual observation—including

live, videotaped, and multimedia—and narrative stories in either written or oral form). We should not underemphasize the importance of meanings in qualitative research. How do people make sense of their world and the experience they have in it? Qualitative research “implies a direct concern with experience as it is ‘lived’ or ‘felt’ or ‘undergone.’”<sup>1</sup> Unlike journal articles resulting from quantitative research whereby the content displays or implies examining specific component parts, the content of articles produced via qualitative research tends to reflect how all the parts work together to form a whole. It is assumed that meaning is embedded in a person’s experience and that such meaning is mediated through the researcher’s own perceptions.

Strengths of qualitative research derive primarily from its emphasis on words rather than on numbers. And the understanding of the words is a must. Affect, cognition, and intentions also require a comprehension not commonly found in quantitative research. The “interpretive” approach to the understanding of words and meanings is central to the goals of qualitative research. Due to the special emphasis on understanding, qualitative researchers get better results from studying a small group or individuals or environments that preserve the individuality of the study’s participants. They cannot obtain the same understanding/results from collecting data from large samples and aggregating the data across individuals or situations. By working with smaller groups/situations, qualitative researchers are able to understand how actions, events, and meanings are shaped by the unique circumstances in which they take place.

### Evaluating Qualitative Research

Even though qualitative research is different from quantitative research, both must be evaluated on the same basis; that is, does it make a significant contribution to the knowledge base and/or advance

theory? Qualitative research is capable of achieving these criteria in several ways. For example, it can provide data from groups not heard from before, replicate previous studies during a different time and space frame, and by studying new library services for the first time. It can be argued that qualitative research is so much different than quantitative research that it deserves its own evaluation guidelines. Much more work with, and understanding of, qualitative research must occur before we can establish distinct evaluation systems for this type of research.

### Conclusion

Qualitative research remains underutilized in the study of library issues and practices. A new mind-set for accepting qualitative research in formal studies of libraries and their activities has to be established and sustained. Performing qualitative research should not be perceived as easy. Moreover, improvements in qualitative methods should and must occur, and they have to come from experts in the field. Seasoned qualitative researchers have to explore strategies for pushing the traditional methodological boundaries back. Authors, editors, and reviewers have to gain a better understanding of qualitative research methods.

There is much to be realized in the library world by understanding, accepting, and using qualitative research. We must embrace and support qualitative research while making mistakes during its application, refining procedures and processes, and reaping its many short- and long-term benefits. This exciting research phenomenon is offering much more than ever anticipated by its critics.

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### Note

1. Robert R. Sherman and Rodman B. Webb, “Qualitative Research in Education: A Focus,” in *Qualitative Research in Education: Focus and Methods*, eds. Robert R. Sherman and Rodman B. Webb (New York: Falmer Pr., 1988), 7.