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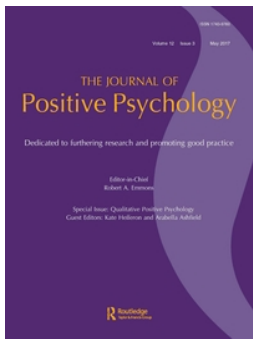
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COMMENTARY

Demonstrating the validity of qualitative research

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Most qualitative research had its origins in philosophical traditions such as phenomenology, pragmatism, and constructivism, which argue that all the knowledge that we can obtain (both of ourselves and the world around us) is inevitably mediated and constrained by our own perspective, purposes, language, and culture (Camic, Rhodes, & Yardley, 2003). This argument applies to obtaining knowledge through research. The traditional scientific aspiration to obtain 'objective' knowledge, ideally unaffected by the activities and preconceptions of the researchers and participants, is therefore viewed as unachievable and indeed inappropriate. This difference in the epistemological assumptions and aims of qualitative and scientific psychological traditions necessitates quite different approaches to demonstrating the value and validity of research. Scientific psychology relies on measures of psychosocial processes that can be shown to be independent of their context – for example, assessments of constructs and relationships that can be reliably quantified by different researchers in different people and contexts at different time-points. In contrast, qualitative psychology seeks to investigate how psychosocial processes are shaped by all the people, activities and understandings that make up their ever-changing context (including the research context). For example, our 'Person-Based Approach' to intervention development uses qualitative research to find out how people interpret, react to, and utilize our health management support interventions, so that we can make them more persuasive and compatible with intervention users' lives (Yardley, Morrison, Bradbury, & Muller, 2015).

So if scientific criteria for valid knowledge production are inappropriate for qualitative research, how is it possible to demonstrate that a qualitative study has been carried out to a high standard and generated useful knowledge? Over the past two decades a large number of papers and chapters have been published providing guidance, and happily the principles behind these recommendations are broadly convergent (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008). Procedures

for enhancing, evaluating, and demonstrating the quality of qualitative research can be broadly grouped into four key dimensions: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigor; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance (Yardley, 2000, 2008).

One of the key advantages offered by qualitative research is that it can examine and theorize contextual effects. A qualitative study could demonstrate sensitivity to context by showing awareness of the participants' perspectives and setting, the sociocultural and linguistic context of the research, and how these may influence both what participants say and how this is interpreted by the researcher. For example, a qualitative study we carried out to explore older people's views of falls prevention revealed that the linguistic and sociocultural context of the term 'falls prevention' had enormous influence on people's attitudes to them (Yardley, Donovan-Hall, Francis, & Todd, 2006). All our participants agreed that falls prevention was a good idea – but only for other people who were older or frailer than them. This view was expressed by people of all ages, even those who had already fallen and been seriously injured (Yardley et al., 2006). It emerged from analysis that older people associated 'falls prevention' with the stigma and restriction of being seen as no longer able to be active and independent. Since a key element of falls prevention consists of exercises to improve strength and balance, acceptance and uptake can be transformed by emphasizing their positive benefits rather than risk reduction – for example, relabeling them as 'Better Balance' exercises to help maintain active independence (Yardley, Beyer, Hauer, McKee, & Ballinger, 2007).

Of course qualitative analysis must, crucially, be able to show sensitivity to the data – for example, by not simply imposing pre-conceived categories on the data but carefully considering the meanings generated by the participants. Commitment and rigor can be demonstrated by in-depth engagement with the topic, including thorough data collection, displaying expertise and skills in the methods employed, and undertaking a detailed,

in-depth analysis. Transparency means that the reader should be able to see clearly how the interpretation was derived from the data, while importance refers to the requirement for all research to generate knowledge that is useful – whether in terms of practical utility, generating hypotheses, or even changing how we think about the world. These criteria for good qualitative research are intended to be extremely flexible – there are many ways in which each could be fulfilled; their aim is not to prescribe a particular approach to qualitative research but to help researchers to reflect on and justify the methods they use.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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