


Challenges for Qualitative Inquiry as a Global Endeavor: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

Understanding qualitative inquiry as a global endeavor leads to several challenges. First, we still live in different worlds of qualitative research—There are local traditions with limited exchanges. This has to do not only with language barriers but also with political and scientific contexts, in which research is embedded. These differences complicate the globalization of qualitative inquiry. Second, research issues become increasingly globalized: People are migrating into other cultures and bring along their cultural backgrounds and understandings—of social services, for example. If we want to study encounters of migrating people with the local social systems, we face a diversity of experiences and values. Third, for understanding such an encounter from both sides, we may need to adapt our methods or even need a triangulation of methods (e.g., biographic interviews, expert interviews, and ethnographies). In this special issue, challenges like these three will be discussed from different angles.

Keywords

qualitative research, methodologies, challenges, globalization

Global Expansion of Qualitative Research

In recent decades, qualitative research has become a global endeavor, as the growing number of publications shows that aim at stocktaking such developments. Several authors now argue for more openness to local and cultural diversity regarding the development and progress of qualitative research. In this context, several overviews of the internationalization of qualitative research, in particular, in Europe and across the cultural, linguistic, and methodological diversity can widen the perspective on what qualitative research in various geographical areas is like in times of globalization (see, for example, Knoblauch, Flick, & Maeder, 2005; Ryan & Gobo, 2011; Schnettler & Rebstein, 2012). One consequence of such a globalization of qualitative research is a growing discussion about indigenous methods, as documented in the Handbook edited by Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith (2008). This discussion focuses on theoretical, epistemological, and conceptual issues when using ethnography, auto-ethnography, and narrative and performative approaches.

Nevertheless, the local and cultural proliferation of qualitative research has led to discussions about borders between the core and peripheries and about how this trend challenges local traditions of qualitative research and the methods used in these contexts.

Peripheries of Qualitative Research

Hsiung (2012), for example, discusses a core-periphery divide in this context. Anglo-American (core) methods and texts are translated and exported to Asian countries currently and define what qualitative research is about and push local methodologies aside. The author discusses this core-periphery divide as related to language barriers—the English language publications are only accessible to those who are able to read and understand English. This language barrier also becomes relevant for publishing in these journals, which requires a good command of English or resources for translating or optimizing the non-native English authors' own writings. However, this is not only a particular problem for reading journal articles, which are seldom available in translations. This is also a problem with international conferences which are often only held in English—which means you need to be able to use English for listening to papers, for presenting your own papers (or posters) and for informal conversations with

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other participants. Language barriers play also a role in the access to textbooks. On one hand, textbook translations are now more common in several languages in Asia, Latin America, and Europe. As Hsiung mentions, these translations often come with examples difficult to understand without cultural background of the original writers or of the context in and for which the textbook was written. This also raises the question of directions of translations, as again most textbooks that are translated come from English language and sometimes from German, but seldom from other languages.

For overcoming such restrictions and for widening the (global) discourse on qualitative research methods, Gobo (2011) suggests as strategies,

- to ask methodologists from Asia, Africa, Latin America to publish their experiences and reflections
- to ask methodologists to narrow down the universal claims of their textbooks and handbooks
- to transform from within traditional research methods
- to make methodological journals really international. (pp. 433-434)

Spatial Versus Temporal Metaphors for Structuring the Development of Qualitative Research

Alasuutari (2004) discusses this problem by juxtaposing a temporal development approach (the eight phases of qualitative research suggested by Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) with a spatial approach that focuses more on local traditions of qualitative research, in general. However, as Alasuutari (2004) suggests, a general “progress narrative” (p. 599) taking a temporal perspective may obscure the fact that qualitative research has become a globalized phenomenon with different developments in various contexts. Alasuutari (2004) discusses two consequences in particular: (a) A progress narrative obstructs rather to account for several parallel developments; (b) a progress narrative overcomes earlier (“outdated”) versions of doing research (p. 606). Instead, he proposes a spatial, rather than a temporal, view of the development of qualitative research. In this way, Denzin and Lincoln’s (2011) history of qualitative research can be complemented with the various ways qualitative research has developed in other regions. This may be more appropriately for covering the specific local roles of qualitative research in debates in the “periphery.” Hsiung (2012) in this context mentions the involvement of qualitative research and methods in re-defining local sciences, and refers to Chilean researchers who challenge psychology with an alternative methodological concept based on qualitative research.

Qualitative Research as an Export Article

In Germany, for example, qualitative research and methods were rediscovered in the 1970s when basic texts on Grounded Theory, symbolic interactionism, and ethnomethodology were imported. Thus, ethnomethodology or symbolic interactionism became available for German discussions (in German). The model of the research process created by Glaser and Strauss (1967) attracted much attention and promoted the idea that it could do more justice to the objects of research than was possible in quantitative research.

At the end of the 1970s, a broader and more original discussion began in Germany, which no longer relied (exclusively) on the translation of American literature. This discussion dealt with interviews, how to apply and how to analyze them, and with methodological questions that have stimulated extensive research (see Flick, von Kardorff, & Steinke, 2004, for an overview).

In the 1980s, two original methods were developed that became crucial to the establishment of qualitative research in Germany: the narrative interview by Schütze (see Riemann & Schütze, 1987) and objective hermeneutics (see Reichertz, 2004; Wernet, 2014). Both methods no longer were imports of American developments and stimulated extensive research practice, mainly in biographical research. Most important was their influence on the general discussion of qualitative methods in German-speaking areas. Thus, by the 1980s, the latest, an independent methodological discussion, development of methods and research practice began. However, the outcomes of these developments are hardly recognized in the mainstream discussion and literature of qualitative research—its language, research traditions, and examples (exceptions are Flick, 2014; Flick et al., 2004). This raises the question of how far such developments are re-integrated in a global discourse about qualitative research and methods.

Global, Local, Glocal: Doing Qualitative Research in a Global Context

Referring to doing qualitative research in a global context, discussions started and have to be recognized as necessary. These discussions focus the Western culture based tacit assumptions of some of the major qualitative methods. This can only be illustrated here briefly for interview methods and observation: In Western European societies, it is quite common that people are interviewed and it is also common to talk about one’s own personal history and individual experiences to a professional stranger. It is not uncommon to have such a conversation recorded if some rules are defined

(anonymization, data protection, etc.). It may be an irritating idea but still quite common that your statements later are analyzed and interpreted. Gobo (2011) problematizes a number of necessary and taken for granted preconditions of using this approach in qualitative research. These include the ability on the part of the interviewee to speak for himself or herself, and an awareness of himself or herself as an autonomous and independent individual; an extended concept of public opinion, necessary for communicating opinions and attitudes and describing behaviors considered private in a pre-industrial society, and so on. As we experience in our own research with migrants from Russian-speaking countries, being interviewed (and recorded) has different connotations and is much less a common routine (Flick & Röhnsch, 2014). Instead, we found that for many participants, interviews are connected with being investigated by the State and the expected self-disclosure is anything but normal, but conflicting with some cultural values. The same skepticism applies to research involving observation where a researcher takes notes about everyday routines and interaction and writes reports about field contacts. Again this is linked to practices of control by the State and of breaching privacy. These cultural differences in the meanings linked to practices that are basic for prominent qualitative methods become relevant in applying these methods in intercultural contexts, in recruiting participants and in negotiating informed consent with them (see Mertens, 2014) and has an impact on what we can analyze as data in the process. These issues cannot be discussed here extensively but illustrate the need for reflecting on our research approaches for their underlying and sometimes implicit cultural assumptions.

Interviewing With Foreign Languages

If interviewing can be seen in general as “learning from strangers” as Weiss (1994) has put it, language can become a crucial point if researcher work with interviewees who have a different language or a limited command of the researchers’ language. The use of interpreters or translators can be a solution here, but, as a growing body of literature about this shows, this becomes a methodological issue in itself (see, for example, Edwards, 1998; Edwards & Temple, 2002; Littig & Pöchhacker, 2014). Questions here are how far translation is a practical issue that should be controlled and made “invisible” as far as possible by reducing its impact in the interview situation. Or does it constitute a different research situation, which involves a third major actor—the interviewer, the interviewee, and the translator, whose contributions have to be analyzed as well? This also raises the question, if translation and translators’ impacts should be seen only as an issue in data collection. Or should translators also be involved in the analysis of the (translated) data (see the paper by Littig & Pöchhacker in this special issue)?

The Contributions to This Special Issue

The idea for this special issue has been developed in the context of a plenary at the Eighth International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (2012). Its contributions to this issue take up some of the points that have been raised in this introduction so far and complement them with some wider considerations.

The first article by Nigel Fielding is “*Qualitative Research and our Digital Futures*.” He discusses parallels of the current developments on a global level—like the Arab Spring, the West’s fiscal crisis, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—with the developments in the 1960s. The emergence of Grounded Theory, the first interventions of postmodernism, and critical perspectives based on the counter-culture, feminism, and ethnic and sexual minorities came up in that period as a response to critiques and crises of social science. As a current development similar to those shifts in social sciences, the author discusses the growth of “citizen research,” the recognition that “generic” research methods bear Western assumptions, and the struggles over what research is for (and against).

Kathy Charmaz takes up the problem of a global use of textbooks and approaches mentioned above, when she discusses “*Grounded Theory in Global Perspective: Reviews by International Researchers*.” She starts from the assumption that Glaser and Strauss (1967) created Grounded Theory as a method and an approach in specific disciplinary, methodological, and uniquely American cultural contexts, but neither expected the method to spread beyond sociological borders nor to gain international recognition. Charmaz devotes her article to questions such as: How do diverse international researchers use a uniquely American method in their research? Which problems arise? How and to what extent do these researchers adapt constructivist grounded theory methods to fit their cultural contexts? How do they evaluate constructivist grounded theory?” For answering these questions, she takes responses from international colleagues about their experience of using and teaching constructivist grounded theory.

In the third article on “Socio-Translational Collaboration in Qualitative Inquiry: The Case of Expert Interviews,” Beate Littig and Franz Pöchhacker take up the issue mentioned above of how to use translation in multi-lingual interview research. The authors develop arguments, “for a systematic involvement of qualified interpreters and translators throughout the process of qualitative inquiry, and describe their role in all relevant stages of a research project” (p. 1085).

In the next article, Uwe Flick and Gundula Röhnsch give an example of such a research coming from a study with Russian-speaking migrants interviewed in Germany about their experiences with addiction and utilizing help

for this problem. In their article, “Migrating Diseases—Triangulating Approaches: Applying Qualitative Inquiry as a Global Endeavor,” they discuss problems like differences in concepts of what qualitative research in their interviewees and interviewers. That methods like interviews may have a different connotation in other cultures, where their interviewees come from is a second problem. This leads to needs to do and analyze interviews differently. For understanding, how the help-seeking processes in this context work and what makes them more complicated, the authors applied a triangulation of episodic interviews with the clients (in German or Russian) and expert interviews with service providers about the support for the target group.

In his article, “Qualitative Research in the UK: Short-Term Problems, Long-Term Issues,” Harry Torrance addresses short-term global problems and long-term global trends for the example of qualitative research methods in education. He takes a critical stance toward pursuing questions about the diversity of qualitative research in different contexts and globalization and redirects the question:

The issue is not whether or not qualitative approaches to social research are developing across disciplines and continuing to receive funding and policy attention in diverse countries around the world, but rather to what purposes are qualitative methods being put? What research agendas are being pursued, and who sets them?” (Torrance, 2014, p. 1110)

John Johnson’s contribution “Scholarly Innovation for Difficult Times” takes the current global situation as a starting point for re-thinking the role of social science. As the current situation is characterized by multiple crises, a need to think outside traditional disciplines and boundaries is identified. As a solution, the author suggests problem-based, international teams of collaborative workers, scholars, and researchers are needed to bring new knowledge and perspective to our situation.

Rounding up this series of articles is a commentary by Norman K. Denzin with the title “Reading the Challenges of Qualitative Inquiry as a Global Endeavor,” in which he re-imagines qualitative inquiry in the context of globalization, problematizing the concepts of nation, transnationality and inquiry itself.

All in all, the series of papers in this special issue shows different ways and levels of approaching the topic of qualitative research in a globalizing context: Receptions of traditionally North American approaches in other cultural context is one axe for discussing this issue (Charmaz). Contrary trends toward localization and citizen research mirror the challenges of globalizing qualitative research (Fielding). Practical issues of using specific methods (interviews) in globalizing contexts are the second level (Littig & Pöchhacker and Flick & Röhsch). Re-contextualizing these trends and challenges back into the more general

challenges inside of North American (Denzin & Johnson) and U.K. (Torrance) specific developments is the second axe of this field of discussing the widening scope of qualitative research as a global endeavor.

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