

Reflections on qualitative research process - 5 key learnings

During my current Doctorate studies, I have been embarking on a number of different research topics and studies, and have taken some time out recently to reflect and document the learnings that have emerged.

I am fortunate to have had formal research training and experience through my MBA and DBA degrees, in addition to research forming a key component of my work and career, especially within Consulting. In addition, I have been constantly supported and supervised by amazing Professors across various Universities. I have a deep desire to continue pursuing research studies, beyond my Doctorate, but want ensure its evidence-based and drives engaged scholarship. This means ensuring it addresses real problems within organizations and businesses, and seeks to help find solutions by making it practical and implementable within business.

Here are my top 5 learnings, as I reflect on my recent research experiences.

1. Importance of process

- a. It is important to map out ones workplan and process before undergoing qualitative research to plan properly.
- b. Going through this process allows one to take the lead time required to set things up (e.g. book interviews, ethics approval etc.) but also allows you to reflect on the planned process and adjust prior to undertaking it.
- c. Equally its important to be open to new processes and ensure that we improve on our process each time. I have noticed that I tend to dive into something very quickly if I have done it before and rely on the previous process that I used. But this inhibits one from learning and exploring new or better ways of doing something.
- d. Team based work: I find the process of reflecting as a group on our steps and processes very helpful. Sitting back and reflecting gave me perspective and positively influenced the way I / we

as team underwent the next pieces of research together. We also tried to ensure we learnt from each others' processes.

e. This is not only important from a planning and learning perspective but also from a reader's perspective. It is important for the reader to understand what process one underwent and why, in order to validate the research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2014).

2. Choosing and structuring the research question

a. I find this part particularly difficult. I think I have a good understanding of how to make a choice and the aspect of inductive vs deductive playing a role. But I still find it challenging because of how important the research question is in shaping the way the study gets conducted and takes shape, including how the results are presented.

b. It is important to consider in advance who the audience is and structure the question to address this audience. Business practitioners are interested in the results and practical implications (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2014). Therefore, the research question needs to be structured to deliver on this.

c. It is also important to make sure the way one plans to conduct their study (the process) will then address the research question. E.g. The questions used in an interview needs to be structured so it helps answer the research question.

3. Watch for but leverage your bias

a. Its always difficult as a researcher to not let your bias influence you. This is something that I am always conscious of. And I have always tried to eliminate my bias and view completely.

b. Since starting my DBA, I have realised that as a researcher, one doesn't need to eliminate it. There is power to the researcher's voice and opinions. "Qualitative writers allow themselves to be present in their writing" (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2014).

c. I am learning that I should safeguard against it influencing the results or pre-determining them. But that I shouldn't eliminate it all together and should express my own passion and views in relation to the findings of the study. "Qualitative researchers and writers tend to acknowledge their positions as active producers of those meanings" (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2014).

4. Be patient with qualitative research

- a. The process of qualitative research can be very time consuming especially if you are undergoing a coding process - whether using observations, doing documentary analysis, or conducting, transcribing, and analyzing interviews.
- b. One can easily lose motivation and momentum and therefore it is important to be aware of this and know oneself and how to manage this. As my MBA professor (Prof Kurt April) kept telling me - its a marathon not a sprint - pace yourself.
- c. I found it useful to have a workplan so I could measure progress. Seeing this progress kept me motivated. An example of this when doing literature review is – I would have a virtual pile of my articles and I would move them from one folder to another after I had worked through them. Visually seeing the folder increase on the one side and decrease on the other, motivated me as it felt like I was making progress. I did the same in a recent case study as I was interviewing, transcribing and coding - I would list all the activities and cross them out after each interview, transcript and code.
- d. This is also important when choosing your research question and focus. Its important to choose something that you are passionate about and is meaningful to you. Otherwise it becomes very hard to stay motivated in a process that can feel slow. Equally, one should choose something within a body of literature in one's own discipline. Have existing knowledge and a view on the topic can be motivating (however not required)

5. Reflect and adjust

- a. I have found that qualitative studies are more of a reflect and adjust process than quantitative studies. With quantitative studies, your end results inform you of the results and insights. With qualitative, because the researcher is involved and brings their own view in as a writer, the writing process does not start when the analysis is done.
- b. A qualitative researcher should begin early to start writing and reflect and adjust as they go along. The researcher already has knowledge and views on the topic and starting early allows you to explore what you know and what you don't. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2014).
- c. A big challenge that I struggle with is number of words. I tend to always write much more than is needed and I have to reflect and adjust after to make it more concrete after. I find this process really hard, but am working to improve this with each research study that I do.

References:

Eriksson, P., & Kovalainen, A. (2014). Qualitative Methods in Business Research (2nd edition). Sage publications

About the Author:

Zaheera Soomar has more than 17 years of experience leading on business strategy, organizational change, responsible business practice and innovation and large-scale transformation across multiple industries. She completed her MBA in 2012, at UCT GSB in South Africa. Her research thesis (which was published) focused on "Female Breadwinner: Resultant Guilt and Shame". Zaheera currently resides in Toronto, Canada, and is pursuing her Doctorate through Haskayne Business School focused on Responsible Business Practice and the Future of Work.