FOCUS ON METHODOLOGY

Problematising voice in qualitative health professional education research

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Abstract

Qualitative research is inherently relational, thus paying attention to subjectivities is important. As researchers, we are fundamentally entangled in the research through the decisions we make about design, the rapport and shaping of interviews to construct the data and the lenses we bring to interpretation and sense making. This is a multivoiced project, including at the very minimum, the researcher(s)' voice and those of the participants. And yet we see several practices that either diminish our role in the research and/or labour under the misapprehension that only the participants' voice matters. This paper unpacks common practices that misrepresent the multivoicedness of qualitative research and presents strategies that acknowledge and work with the complexities of representing voice in research. E.B. White aptly said, "I have yet to see a piece of writing, political or non-political, that does not have a slant. All writing slants the way a writer leans, and no man is born perpendicular."

Introduction

Qualitative research is ubiquitous in health professional education. For researchers used to the rules of quantitative research, the relative freedom of qualitative research can be bewildering. Broadly speaking, qualitative research is an umbrella term for research approaches that seek to understand natural phenomena, such as human experiences, and/or change them. What makes for good qualitative research is contested and depends on the paradigm the researchers draw from, the relevant methodological traditions and the orientations of the researchers. In this paper, I highlight a bundle of practices that seek to privilege participant voice above the researcher and to purposefully sanitise the role of the researcher. For many, these practices carry over—incorrectly—from quantitative research, but they fundamentally conflict with the principles of doing good qualitative research.

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The question I tackle specifically is: Whose voice is privileged in qualitative health professional education research? In this paper, I am referring to constructivism paradigm research that seeks to understand and reframe problems in health professional education (Regehr, 2010), which is interpretive and subjective. This is the most common type of research papers that I see in my role as deputy editor of the journal *Medical Education*. Briefly, constructivism:

> is a paradigm wherein humans are not conceived of as discovering or finding truths about external reality; instead, people build or make knowledge. People construct concepts, models and schemas to understand the world and their experiences. This construction does not happen in isolation of others; instead, individuals construct meaning against a backdrop of the languages, practices, cultures, etc. that are shared with others. (Varpio et al., 2021, p. 168)

As highlighted in this definition of constructivism, people build or make knowledge; it is constructed intersubjectively; and there are multiple realities, that of individual participants and our own. There might be commonalities, but there are differences— some stark, others more nuanced.

I start by presenting practices that overly privilege participant voice, then offer those that seek to diminish the researchers'. Whether knowingly or unknowingly, what these practices betray is an allegiance to a post-positivism paradigm—single-objective, external, tangible, measurable reality (Young & Ryan, 2020)—perhaps a hangover from clinical training and the hegemony of quantitative research in the clinical and biomedical sciences. For those seeking to do good research, it is important to understand and declare the philosophical understanding that one aligns themselves with as well as what is common to the research approach adopted. For a fuller exposition on paradigms, refer to the "Philosophy of Science Series" in *Academic Medicine*, lead by Varpio and MacLeod (2021) at https://journals.lww.com/academicmedicine/pages/collectiondetails.aspx?TopicalCollectionId=70.

The practices of only/overly privileging participant voice

Here I wish to discuss two common practices: making unrealistic claims about voice and having too many quotes and not enough analysis.

Making unrealistic claims about voice

As researchers, we should resist making overly simplistic knowledge claims. For example, a researcher might claim that the "participants speak for themselves" or the research aims to "make voices heard" or "to give voice to participants" as though this offers a transcendental, universal truth.

Qualitative researchers try to understand the world through others' experiences, then construct stories to influence the audience to understand a particular point or concept or

pattern of events. A typical findings section will tell a story from the research. This story is an interpretation of the data woven in a particular way to answer the research questions. There will often be high-level interpretation followed by illustrative quotes. These quotes are curated to tell a story the researcher wants to tell of the research, one that is constructed from lots of other stories (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012). Such research narratives may come from many sources (e.g., participants, theory, personal experience, etc.), and what renders the narratives "useful is not their origin but the way in which they shape the audience's world view and thereby the options that are open and actions they can take" (Stahl, 2014, p. 2). It is not fruitful or possible to apportion a value to each voice, as the product is transformative of the composite parts. In other words, the whole is more than the sum of the parts.

Too many quotes, not enough analysis

Another practice to avoid is the presentation of an overly long findings section with excessive quotes and not much story/interpretation (Cristancho et al., 2021). The researchers may be labouring under the misapprehension of naïve realism that such an approach gives "voice" to research participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Cristancho and colleagues (2021) make it clear that readers should not have to work to connect the points in an argument and the interpretive leaps based on the quotes offered as evidence. They note that "good researchers interpret and contextualise to make meaning for their readers, and such contextualisation is the basis of scientific storytelling" (p. 111).

There is no external truth or meaning instantly recognisable in a quote. Reading itself is an act of interpretation and negotiation of meaning based on the frames of reference we bring to the text and our relevant social, cultural and historical milieu (Tummons, 2014). And so a reader may not/will not reach similar interpretations as researchers will by reading a single decontextualised quote, when as researchers you have been engaged in analysis over time and across the entire data-set. Morse (2017) notes that "to identify the interpretive intent of text, analysts must examine research data in their original form, within context, and in light of the question asked and actually hear the interview" (p. 1389). This is more than we can expect of a harried reader or reviewer of a journal article. In making judgements about the quality of research, a reader is asking, "Is this interpretation trustworthy given the conditions of knowledge production?" rather than, "Would I reach the same interpretation?"

As a reader and reviewer, I look for a balanced paper, where none of the sections of a paper overwhelms the length of the others. One tip I learned to minimise the problem of overreliance on quotes is to write the findings section without the quotes. Once you are happy with the story you want to tell, you can introduce quotes as illustration of key points, adding in relevant contextual detail. This ensures that your interpretations stand alone. Alternatively, take the quotes out from an advanced version of the findings section to check for coherence and fullness of the interpretations. Placing quotes in a table can

help keep quotes succinct, however this can be constraining and potentially fragment the story (Lingard, 2019). A findings section of a paper should offer readers conceptual understanding more than an inventory of its components (Cristancho et al., 2021).

The practices that diminish researcher voice

Three common practices that diminish the researcher's voice and sanitise their role in qualitative research are minimising the researcher's role, using the language of emergence and using third-person language.

Minimising the researcher's role

This practice is about claiming a purely external position to the research. When I first learned about researcher roles, a common heuristic was to think about insider or outsider researchers. Insider researchers were members of the community being researched, while outsider researchers were not. Being an outsider somehow meant we could be neutral or, perhaps, not take things for granted. Research by Bruskin (2019) on the microprocesses of research shows that researcher roles are more fluid and shaped in situ. Rather than a dichotomy, the work of Bruskin prompts thinking of roles along a continuum with multiple dimensions, with researchers constantly moving back and forth along a number of axes, depending upon time, location, participants and topic. Accordingly, we are always both. Milligan (2016), similarly grappling with the blurring of lines regarding research position, posited the "inbetweener" (p. 235), neither insider nor outsider.

Below is a salient example of the complexity of role that comes from observational work in the clinical environment:

> The researcher (JH) leading the filming in [the] emergency [department] was a social worker who used to work in that department. [JH was] known to, and respected and trusted by many of the senior doctors, which enabled access to the setting/practice. Yet, it placed her in situations of dilemma when consultants sought advice about arranging accommodation for a homeless teenager or support to a distressed patient or to them after a particularly tough shift. As a team we talked through these situations knowing that the assigned researcher "roles" do not overtake existing relationships and [that] … professional judgement [should be used to make decisions] in the situation. (Ajjawi et al., 2020, p. 912)

What this brief interaction shows is the multiple layers of relationality between a researcher and participant. In this case, JH kept meticulous reflexive notes questioning her position and the dilemmas that interrupted her researcher role and demanded different responses.

Let's take a look at common data collection approaches to unpack the notion of knowledge co-construction. Interviews are a process of knowledge construction through dialogue. Audiodiaries can also be conceptualised as knowledge co-construction, as participants share stories with the researcher, often speaking to them by name, and

the researcher might then asynchronously check in, acknowledge, seek clarification and contribute meaning (Monrouxe, 2009). Observation is even more embodied. For example, in research conducted with colleagues on power in general practice interactions (Rees et al., 2013), I collected video data of patient–general practitioner (GP)–medical student triadic interactions in the clinical environment. My positioning physically in the room was peripheral, and I declared my position as a non-participant observer. In addition, I am not a GP and so an "outsider". And yet, I would often be included in brief interactions, or jokes, or through eye contact and recognition. The student might ask what I thought. My presence fundamentally shaped the interactions in many more ways than I can explicate here. My position shifted as insider and outsider throughout the research as I affected others and was affected by them. There can be no neutral researcher or "fly on the wall"—instead, we are "co-constructors of knowledge" through the ways we shape data collection with our interactions and with our positioning in the research and in relation to the participants more broadly.

Using the language of emergence

In a landmark paper, Varpio et al. (2017) critiqued what may be described as "god-terms" in qualitative research, those that are used uncritically and that are so powerful that they are not questioned. This is seen, for example, in claims that knowledge was discovered or that themes emerged. This is such a common problem (or myth) that you can purchase a badge that says "themes do not emerge"—Google it! Clarke, of Braun and Clarke fame (their paper on thematic analysis has been cited 56,397 times at the time of writing this paper), wrote multiple Twitter threads on why she and Braun "bang on about themes not emerging". One can be found here: https://twitter.com/drvicclarke/status/1433501650526867456?s=20&t=5fZhEmXxguYvcnCkxuMI8g. To summarise briefly, the language of emergence would suggest that themes can be found in the data fully formed and that the researcher's job (which then is very technical) is to merely extract or discover them. Instead, themes are generated by the researcher through their engagement with the data.

The idea that the researcher is passive and objective is "outdated and implausible" (Watling & Lingard, 2012, p. 857). The risk of this practice is that it maintains data analysis as a black box shrouded in mystery. The hours of coding, negotiation, discussion, interpretation, feeling lost in the morass of data and slow iterative meaning making are reduced to reading transcripts, a manual process of coding and then sudden emergence of themes fully formed. Perhaps because data analysis happens over such an extended period of time and requires tacit knowledge, it might seem that the themes appear and so obscure researchers' perceptions of their own involvement in the analytical process (Tesch, 1987). However, this does the credibility of qualitative research a disservice. It is best to avoid the language of emergence and instead use active voice and words such as *constructing* or *interpreting* rather than *emerging*, for example, "I/we developed themes …" or "I/we identified the following themes …".

Suppressing one's voice

Qualitative researchers commonly suppress their own voice by using objective or third-person passive language, thus seeming to transport the researcher out of the text. This veil of objectivity is just that—illusory. Plus, it can be boring to read. Many scholars might come to qualitative research having been socialised into the "silent" authorial voice. Researchers' prejudices and traditions are important for understanding and cannot be removed but need to be made obvious to allow comparison with those of the research participants. My advice here is to use active, first-person voice, but make sure that the journal guidelines allow this. If not, it's worth asking why and checking if they publish many qualitative studies. I recommend reading the chapter "From Silent to Audible Voice: Adjusting Register, Stance & Engagement in Your Writing," in Lingard and Watling (2021), if you are interested in learning about how to craft your own voice in scientific writing to be heard.

Strategies that acknowledge and work with complexity

In this section, I present strategies for working with complexities of voice. Common to the practices I describe above is that they conflict with the theoretical/paradigmatic underpinning of qualitative research—that of constructivism (constructionism and post-structural paradigms would also not align with these practices). Briefly, to reiterate, knowledge and reality are constructed by people. This is the basis of (most) qualitative research.

Take care of the knowledge claims made

Qualitative research is unapologetically subjective and complex. Every decision we make in relation to designing and enacting the research is a decision that shapes the knowledge that is constructed through qualitative research. Issues of subjectivity matter in the way the research is conceptualised; the data is collected, analysed and interpreted; and how participants are represented. As researchers we are *always already* shaping those "exact words" in the data through the unequal power relationships present and by our own research agendas and timelines (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012). Thus, we decide who gets heard and who doesn't, and in what ways people get listened to. This speaks to issues of power, which cannot be ignored. Power between the researcher and the researched distorts "authentic" notions of voice as truth (McLeod, 2011).

Therefore, the first step is to acknowledge the complexity of voice and how to represent it. Layers of voice are entangled in any analysis: the participants', our own, the team's, the theory and the field. Care is needed in terms of how we represent different voices and the claims we make about this. McLeod (2011) speaks of the "ethical and epistemological dangers of speaking for, or on behalf of, others: this includes questions not only about the violence of speaking for others and but also about whose voice speaks loudest" (p. 183). The ask, here, is to own our subjectivities, recognising that as researchers we are always tools

of the research. Therefore, the best researchers can hope for is to endeavour to recognise and make explicit the understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions and theories that they bring to the research (van Manen, 1997). Varpio et al. (2017) explain that to do this requires:

- learning about paradigms, reading about methodologies and being clear about the traditions of the approach

- taking care of how you are representing the participants' and your own voice and the claims that are or can be made

- taking care to specify who was involved in constructing themes

- clearly describing the questions asked of the data and the processes used by the researcher(s) to identify themes

- reflexively considering the points of view brought to bear on the research and alternative readings of the data

- considering the boundaries and limitations of the research.

Be reflexive

Because of the subjective nature of qualitative research, few would argue against reflexivity. Even methodologies that once would have subscribed to pure induction from the data (e.g., traditional grounded theory) or notions of bracketing of the researcher (e.g., phenomenology) have evolved to acknowledge the embeddedness of the researcher in the work. Analysis cannot happen in an epistemological vacuum (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reflexivity is one way to notice how we influence the research. Pillow (2003) defines reflexivity as "involving an ongoing self-awareness during the research process which aids in making visible the practice and construction of knowledge within research" (p. 178)—ultimately, to produce better research. Reflexivity itself is challenging and does not yield truth. It is more akin to an ongoing critique of our research attempts, an orientation towards discomfort knowing that we can never truthfully represent ourselves or our participants (Pillow, 2003).

One way forward is to understand the complex dynamics at play during qualitative research. Roulston and Shelton (2015) propose three techniques: 1) interrogation of relationship between theory and method seeking coherence, 2) examination of researcher roles throughout the research and 3) analyses of the researcher's work through critique and considering alternatives. Keeping a reflective research journal to document changing thoughts and reflections across each of these three dimensions and, then, discussing these among the research team can be beneficial to surfacing hidden assumptions and reconceptualising notions of bias in the conduct of qualitative research. This conversation is taken up in more depth in Varpio et al. (2021).

Beyond enacting reflexive research, representing reflexivity (or writing reflexively) within the word limit of a journal article is also challenging. Reflexivity might be allocated one section. In Bearman et al. (2019), the authors declare their dual roles as educators and researchers, their pre-existing positive stance towards simulation, their surprise at the data and resultant shift in thinking, and their relationality to the participants. Alternatively, reflexive writing might be woven into different sections of a manuscript. For example, in Ajjawi et al. (2022), we declare our roles in the methods section, and in the limitations section, we reflect on some of the challenges and how our stance towards emotions informed the decisions made, e.g., "In our analyses, we noted how slippery the discourses were, requiring multiple conversations interpreting authors' words" (p. 485). We, then, called for the field to adopt discourses of emotions that are reflexive and sociocultural. Both approaches are sound.

Attend to emotions

It is natural that, as researchers, we attend to our participants' emotions. We act ethically by carefully considering their levels of distress and, perhaps, being careful not to elicit any negative reactions even when these may be perfectly natural given the topics at hand. Olson (2021) critiques the ways in which ethical principles attune us mostly to emotions as negative occurrences that should halt research—emotions such as distress are pathologised and cast as problematic. This particular focus on emotions detracts from the broader work of emotions in research. Emotional reflexivity invites us to tune into our and others' emotions as cultural and socially surrounding us and to chart a path forward based on how we are affected, noting the influence of our affect on others (Olson et al., 2020). Therefore, emotions do not reside in the participants alone; they are shared during an interview or by listening to an audio diary, for example. Here, participant and researcher emotions inform analysis. Emotions signal that more attention and thought are needed in relation to a particular interaction or some aspect of the research or researcher relationships. Field notes and reflexive journals are good places to record the role of emotions in the research, and research teams or a trusted colleague can act as a good sounding board.

Conclusion

As with everything in qualitative research, there are no hard answers to the question of whose voice is being represented; there are multiple layers of voice. This paper presents common practices when it comes to only privileging participant voice and sanitising the role of the researcher. Participant quotes and voice do not speak for themselves. There is danger in speaking for and on behalf of others. In the opening quote of the paper, EB White is referring to the American free press reporting on politics. He goes on to say that the reader must sift, sort and check, and countercheck, to find out what the score is—to identify the twists and distortions in the writing. Our job is to make this easier for the reader to do through contextualising the research and revealing researcher subjectivity. As researchers, we should acknowledge that we are fundamentally entangled in the

research and that our voices and the participants' cannot be disentangled. The data and a researcher's interpretations are always co-constructed. Being reflexive creates conditions of trust with the participants and readers of the research.

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