# Why qualitative research isn’t biased

## Transcript

There are two key take-away messages:

* Qualitative research isn’t biased just because data collection and analysis is not standardised.
* And qualitative research isn’t biased just because it can’t be generalised in the quantitative sense.

This is a quote from a researcher, Gayle Letherby, from a book that she co-authored on objectivity and subjectivity in social research. Gayle is saying that her students often misuse or overuse the terms bias, value-free and objective when they’re talking about qualitative research. She’s indicating that she’s fed up with the unthinking assumptions being made. It’s a really important point that she’s making.

Bias is often used as a term in social research to cover any form of influence that’s felt to provide some form of distortion of research data and findings. Mainly, it’s used in a quantitative paradigm.

In qualitative research, the researcher is an integral part of the process and the final product. Separating the research out from this just isn’t possible. And it’s also not desirable. The concern for qualitative research is whether the researcher has been critically self-reflective about their own preconceptions, relationship dynamics, and analytic focus. ‘Reflexivity’ and ‘transparency’ are central to rigour in the qualitative paradigm. So good qualitative research doesn’t even try to achieve depersonalised, opinion-free neutrality. Rather, it articulates the unique value that qualitatively derived knowledge can provide.

I’m going delve into these issues to explain why qualitative research isn’t biased, taking each of the two key messages in turn.

First, qualitative research is not biased just because data collection and analysis is not standardised. There’s no such thing as a ‘view from nowhere’. In this sense, some sort of ‘bias’ is inherent in all research and it can’t be eradicated or controlled.

That’s because we’re human beings and ‘insiders’ with perspectives on the social worlds that we study. And both quantitative and qualitative data are produced through some form of social methods interaction (even remotely) between the researcher and research participants.

All research involves subjectivity and interpretation, both qualitative and quantitative. Facts aren’t self-generating or self-interpreting. In quantitative research, different research teams may choose to apply equally defensible but different statistical methods of analysis to the same data set to address the same research question. In one study, 29 different teams of quantitative researchers separately analysed a shared data set to answer a simple research question. The statistical analytic approaches they chose to apply varied and so did the answers they produced. Neither the researchers’ prior beliefs about the topic, nor their level of expertise, explained the variation in outcomes. And the team processes were all peer rated for quality of the statistical analysis. So subjective analytic choices influence analysis of representative datasets.

But more than this, steps to eliminate all bias and values in research can create bias of its own. Michael Kelly and clinician colleagues discuss evidence-based approaches to medicine to argue that, like all science, it’s value laden. Trying to remove values from scientific method is impossible and further, researchers who try to do this introduce new hidden biases. The clinicians point to the way that the values held by researchers and funders play a role in deciding which questions to ask. They look at the role of values in the way clinical researchers select methods for identifying and appraising research evidence, and how that determines the nature of knowledge that’s generated. Kelly and colleagues provide the example of evidence-based medicine. Clinical efficacy and cost effectiveness need to be demonstrated before new treatments are publicly funded. But as they point out, preferences for efficiency and value for money are *value* preferences. They’re not scientifically neutral and dispassionately observed matters of fact. So an unacknowledged bias towards utilitarian values is hidden away in the effort to have supposedly objective decision-making criteria.

Moving on to the second key message. Qualitative research isn’t biased just because it can’t be generalised in the quantitative sense.

Qualitative research explores processes and meanings. It generates generalisable in-depth insights, not facts and figures that are generalisable. It’s a misunderstanding to claim that qualitative research lacks generalizability. The statistical types of generalisability that inform quantitative research aren’t applicable to judge qualitative research. Generalisations can be made from qualitative research, but just not in the same way as quantitative results.

Brett Smith suggests four different types of qualitative generalizability. One is Naturalistic, where people recognise the research results as capturing their own or others’ experiences. Another type is Transferability, which is the extent that results are transferable to other settings and contexts. There’s also Analytic generalisability, where the concepts generated through the research are useful for understanding more widely. It’s the theories that are generalizable, not the specific context or populations. And finally there’s intersectional generalisability, which applies to research that records the particulars of historically oppressed and/or colonised peoples/communities and their social movements of resistance.

And as I said at the start, rigour in qualitative research is being reflexive and making clear the how and why of your research processes.

So here [see below] are some references where you can follow up further on the two key messages about why qualitative research isn’t biased. Qualitative research isn’t biased because it’s not standardised. There’s no such thing as a ‘view from nowhere’. And it isn’t biased because it’s not generalisable in the quantitative sense. It’s generalisable in terms of recognition, transferability, conceptualisation and purpose, within the qualitative paradigm.

References:

Galdas, P. (2017) Revisiting bias in qualitative research: reflections on its relationship with funding and impact, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16: 1-2.

Kelly, M.P., Heath, I., Howick, J. and Greenhalgh, T. (2015) The importance of values in evidence-based medicine, *BMC Medical Ethics*: https://bmcmedethics.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12910-015-0063-3

Letherby, G., Scott, J. and Williams, M. (2013) *Objectivity and Subjectivity in Social Research*, London: Sage.

Mason, J. (2017, 3rd edn) *Qualitative Researching*, London: Sage.

Silberzahn, R., Uhlmann, E.L., Martin, P. et al. (2018) Many analysts, one data set: making transparent how variations in analytic choices affect results, *Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science*, 1: 337-356.

Smith, B. (2018) Generalisability in qualitative research: misunderstandings, opportunities and recommendations of the sport and exercise sciences, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 10(1): 137-149.

Varpio, L., O'Brien, B., Rees, C.E., Monrouxe, L., Ajjawi, R. and Paradis, E.

(2020) The applicability of generalisability and bias to health professions

education's research, *Medical Education*, 55: 167-173.

Full resource: https://www.ncrm.ac.uk/resources/online/all/?id= 20810

National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM)  
Social Sciences  
Murray Building (Bldg 58)  
University of Southampton  
Southampton SO17 1BJ  
United Kingdom

**Web** www.ncrm.ac.uk   
**Email** info@ncrm.ac.uk  
**Tel** +44 23 8059 4539  
**Twitter** @NCRMUK