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1 CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF CONSENSUAL QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Consensual qualitative research (CQR) is a qualitative method that can be used to study inner experiences, attitudes, and beliefs, all of which are not readily observable. Although we have used CQR primarily in psychotherapy research, it has also been used to study a variety of other topics, such as culture (e.g., Tuason et al., 2007), career development (Schaefer et al., 2004), trauma (Gali Cinamon & Hason, 2009), medical and health-related areas (e.g., Brown et al., 2008), same-sex relationships (Sánchez et al., 2009), and study abroad experiences (Bikos et al., 2019). Hence, CQR is widely applicable to topics in education and the behavioral and social sciences (e.g., social justice, urban leadership development, effects of teachers on students, parenting).

We first formally presented CQR more than 20 years ago (Hill et al., 1997). We then provided an update (Hill et al., 2005) and an edited book (Hill, 2012). The time now seemed ripe for an even further-updated and clearer version with more examples. This new book is particularly suited for researchers new to CQR because we distill the most important information on the method and provide practical tips. So, if you are interested in studying such things as banter in psychotherapy, authenticity in high

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school students, burnout in medical professionals, or difficulties navigating being a mother and professor during a pandemic, CQR is an ideal method because researchers can interview people to find out in-depth information that cannot easily be found using traditional experimental and quantitative methods.

SITUATING CQR WITHIN THE QUALITATIVE TRADITION

Rather than situating CQR within all qualitative traditions (see instead McLeod, 2011), we review the approaches that most influenced us as psychotherapy researchers in developing CQR. I (Clara Hill) was trained in quantitative methods, as were most psychologists before 1980. The first movement in psychotherapy research toward more qualitative methods involved discovery-oriented or exploratory approaches (Elliott, 1984; Hill, 1990; Mahrer, 1988). Mahrer (1988), for example, highlighted the limitations of hypothesis testing (i.e., quantitative approaches) for advancing knowledge about psychotherapy and suggested instead that

> researchers adopt the rationale, aims, and methods of discovery-oriented psychotherapy research . . . [because] the whole basis for designing discovery-oriented studies is the intention to learn more; to be surprised; to find out what one does not already expect, predict, or hypothesize; to answer a question whose answer provides something one wants to know but might not have expected, predicted, or hypothesized. (p. 697)

In Mahrer's discovery-oriented method, a team of judges develops categories based on the data for that study (discovers what the data offer rather than applying an existing measure or conceptualization to the data). Once the categories are well developed, researchers train a new team of judges to independently code the same data into the categories, requiring high interrater reliability among all judges. Despite his advocacy for discovery-oriented approaches, Mahrer thus still retained many positivist elements in his emerging qualitative method, specifically in requiring high interrater reliability among judges.

The next qualitative approaches that developed within psychology and psychotherapy research were phenomenological approaches (Giorgi, 1985), comprehensive process analysis (CPA; Elliott, 1989), and grounded theory (GT; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These qualitative methods rely on judges examining data (usually words, narratives, stories) from an inductive stance (rather than a hypothesis testing stance). Although these methods have been used widely, their steps often seemed vague, difficult to understand, and difficult to implement. Given our desire to create a rigorous approach that

could be easily taught and used, we sought to integrate the best features of the existing approaches (i.e., discovery oriented, exploratory, phenomenological, CPA, GT) into CQR (Hill, 2012; Hill et al., 1997, 2005).

PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF CQR

CQR is "predominantly constructivist, with some post-positivist elements" (Hill et al., 2005, p. 197). CQR researchers rely on naturalistic and interactive methods, consistent with constructivist approaches. Thus, CQR researchers explore a phenomenon as it naturally occurs (rather than altering or manipulating it) and typically interact with participants via data-gathering interviews. They derive the meaning of the phenomenon under examination from participants' words and text and also attend to the context of participants' words (e.g., under what circumstances did the phenomenon occur?). They gather rich data by using probes and clarifications (Hill et al., 2005; Ponterotto, 2005).

Ontologically (i.e., a view of the nature of reality), CQR researchers acknowledge the existence of multiple, equally valid, socially constructed versions of the "truth" (a constructivist view). Thus, researchers embrace the uniqueness of each participant's experience while also exploring potential commonalities of experiences across participants.

CQR also has features of postpositivism in the pursuit of consensus among team members and auditors, with team members working collaboratively to co-construct the best representation of the data by integrating multiple perspectives (Ponterotto, 2005). Using these multiple perspectives, in conjunction with constantly returning to the raw data, researchers explore and try to reflect the complexity of the data. Furthermore, including auditors in the consensus process minimizes groupthink and provides an additional perspective to aid the team in hearing other views so that they can best represent the data (Hill, 2012; Hill et al., 1997). This emphasis on consensus differentiates CQR from other qualitative approaches that rely primarily on a single researcher's interpretation of the data.

Epistemologically, CQR researchers are predominantly constructivist in their acknowledgment of the mutual influence of researcher and participant. In CQR, interviewers learn about the phenomenon from the participants and also help the participants explore their experiences of that phenomenon more deeply. The postpositivist component of CQR's epistemology lies in the use of a standard, semistructured interview protocol to obtain consistent information across participants, thus ensuring that the same set of foundational questions is asked of all participants. Interviewers, however,

also probe participants' responses deeply during interviews to gain in-depth, unique data about the individual participant's experiences. This type of interview protocol differs from more constructivist methods, where protocols evolve as the research progresses. We consider such evolving protocols problematic because participants may not be responding to the same foundational questions, thereby leading to inconsistent data collection across participants.

In terms of the researcher's values (axiology), the CQR approach again includes elements of both constructivism and postpositivism. In CQR, we acknowledge that researchers' biases are inevitable and should be discussed and acknowledged openly (a constructivist approach); we also assert that these biases can be bracketed (i.e., set aside) somewhat to minimize the influence of biases on the results. In CQR, we aim to represent how participants (not researchers) view the world, and the assumption is that with bracketing, different teams would understand the data similarly as they discern the meaning of the data themselves rather than their perspective on the data. As we analyze the data, we seek to become aware of our biases and are transparent in presenting them to readers so that they can evaluate the results on the basis of knowing our biases. Furthermore, CQR researchers all use the same interview protocol to reduce the potential effect of individual interviewers (a postpositivistic approach), but we duly recognize that biases nevertheless influence how we conduct interviews (e.g., researchers may pursue some topics more or less deeply depending on their interests or experiences) and interpret the data (e.g., researchers may see different things in the data depending on their perspectives). These potential influences are also minimized by an open discussion of the researchers' biases and expectations.

Finally, CQR's rhetorical structure (i.e., writing style) has postpositivist elements, given that we try to present results as objectively as possible (their findings can be traced directly to the raw data), avoid broad interpretations, and report findings in the third person. Furthermore, the goal is to discover themes across participants so that results can be transferred to a larger population (Hill et al., 2005; Ponterotto, 2005). Constructivist features, however, are found in the use of quotations to illustrate the lived experience (Ponterotto, 2005).

RATIONALE FOR USING CQR

CQR is ideal for studying in depth the experiences (e.g., misunderstandings), attitudes (e.g., attitudes about racism), and beliefs (e.g., beliefs about social justice) of individuals because it allows researchers to gain a rich, detailed

understanding that is not usually possible with quantitative methods (e.g., such measures often constrain participants' responses). CQR is also particularly useful for investigations of inner events (e.g., secrets, internal responses to an intervention) about which participants may have ambivalent or suppressed feelings that cannot easily be observed by outsiders. People often need time and an interested listener to be able to delve into their thoughts and feelings about such complex and emotionally charged topics. In addition, CQR can be used to study events that occur infrequently (e.g., weeping) or at variable time points (e.g., changes in mood) because these are often hard for researchers to find and examine quantitatively. Perhaps most important, CQR is useful for topics that have not been studied previously and thus for which there are no psychometrically sound measures available.

Although we are admitted advocates for CQR, we do not argue that researchers should use only qualitative approaches in their investigations, but rather that researchers should choose the approach that best fits their research question. For example, if the researcher's intent is to investigate the outcomes of two different psychotherapeutic approaches, a quantitative clinical trials method involving standardized measures and statistical analyses is better suited than a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach, however, would be better suited to answering questions about how participants experienced the two different approaches because it would allow the participants to think deeply about their experiences. Furthermore, it is often useful to include a qualitative component in largely quantitative studies to provide a richer understanding of the phenomenon. Furthermore, mixed methods (i.e., combining quantitative and qualitative) approaches often provide valuable data about the same phenomenon from different perspectives.

KEY FEATURES OF CQR

Exhibit 1.1 shows the key features of CQR. In this book, we focus on CQR as applied through interviews, although we describe variations of CQR in Chapter 8.

The following is a quick overview of CQR. Researchers first organize interview data within cases (i.e., participants) into domains (topic areas). For each case, they then summarize data within domains into core ideas (which restate the interview data in clearer, simpler terms). Finally, they conduct a cross-analysis in which they construct categories and subcategories (representing themes) within domains across cases to characterize the common patterns in the findings.

EXHIBIT 1.1. Key Features of CQR

1. Assumption: Data are constructed (there is no objective truth).
2. Underlying principles
   a. The method is inductive (bottom-up data analysis) rather than deductive.
   b. We use open-ended questions (i.e., opening up the interviewee to explore and think) rather than closed questions (i.e., ask for specific information or facts).
   c. Data involve words, narratives, and stories rather than numbers.
   d. Context is important to understand the data.
   e. We gather rich in-depth data on a small number of participants.
   f. We use multiple perspectives (i.e., research team, auditor[s]) to understand the data.
   g. We try to be aware of and bracket (set aside) our biases and expectations.
   h. We use consensus among team members to resolve differences of opinion.
   i. We continually return to the raw data to check our understandings.
3. Data analysis method
   a. Within cases, the research team divides data into domains (topic areas).
   b. Within cases, the research team develops core ideas (summaries) for all ideas.
   c. Auditors check the domains and core ideas for each case.
   d. Across cases, we look for themes and patterns (conduct a cross analysis).
   e. Auditors check the cross-analysis.

In terms of our assumptions, we first acknowledge that the data elicited in CQR are constructed. In other words, we recognize that there is no objective truth for the phenomena we are investigating. Thus, rather than striving to prove whether what someone says is accurate, we are more interested in hearing about participants' experiences and perceptions.

In CQR, data analysis is inductive or bottom-up (observing and describing a phenomenon and then drawing conclusions from these data) rather than top-down (imposing a theoretical lens on the data or setting out to confirm or disconfirm hypotheses). In other words, researchers allow the results to emerge organically from the data, imposing as few theoretical constructs on the data as possible. For example, rather than testing whether therapist self-disclosure leads to client disclosure and insight (and only measuring those potential outcomes), researchers might ask clients how they respond to therapist self-disclosure and then examine systematically the consequences that emerge. In this way, CQR researchers are open to uncovering new and unexpected findings rather than just setting out to prove what they had anticipated and measured. Thus, CQR researchers typically formulate and explore research questions rather than hypotheses.

A related key feature is the use of open-ended questions for collecting data. Researchers ask participants to say whatever comes to mind in response to open questions about the topic (e.g., "What was your experience of your supervisor at that moment?") without imposing predetermined ideas about their experiences (e.g., "Did you feel angry?").

In addition, CQR relies on words, narratives, and stories as data, rather than numbers. As noted earlier, researchers allow participants to talk about what they are thinking or feeling, asking for a full description of experiences related to the topic rather than trying to capture such experiences through a numerical rating on a scale. We also explore what words mean to the participant rather than imposing our meaning on the words (e.g., "Tell me more about the feelings of abandonment you just mentioned").

Furthermore, context is crucial for understanding the participant's experience. Thus, researchers have to be immersed (i.e., fully involved) in everything the person has said before interpreting the data. For example, knowing that the participant is divorced may provide important context for understanding the participant's attitudes toward marriage.

Yet another key feature is the reliance on small samples of participants studied in depth, rather than collecting superficial data from a large number of participants. Researchers thus attempt to recruit a small number of participants who can speak articulately and deeply about their experiences. Assuming that the sample is relatively homogeneous (i.e., similar on relevant variables), the data are likely to be saturated (i.e., reach a point where minimal further information is gained by adding participants) with a sample of 13 to 15.

Because of the inherent biases in this process of making meaning out of people's stories (it is often difficult for people to articulate their experiences, and researchers' perspectives inevitably influence their understanding of others' experiences), another key feature is the use of multiple perspectives to analyze the data. Thus, we use a primary team of three to four researchers, along with one to two auditors, all of whom listen carefully and respectfully to everyone's perspective to make sure we get a nuanced and rich understanding of the data.

In addition, we individually try to be aware of and bracket (set aside) our biases and expectations because we recognize that these can unduly influence data collection and analysis. We reflect on these biases and expectations and share them with the research team in hopes that we can be aware and accountable to each other when issues inevitably arise about our personal responses to the topic. Likewise, we write about our biases and expectations in research publications so that readers can be aware of them and evaluate results accordingly.

Next, *consensus*, which can be defined as an unforced unanimous decision (Schielke et al., 2009), is an integral part of CQR, as its name suggests. During the consensus process, researchers review the data independently and then discuss their ideas until all members of the team agree on the best representation of the data (Hill et al., 1997). Thus, researchers seek a common understanding of the data that respects individual team members' perspectives and "relies on mutual respect, equal involvement, and shared power" (Hill et al., 1997, p. 523). The consensus process is central to the credibility or trustworthiness of the data analysis because it allows us to triangulate different researchers' understanding of the data. If multiple people agree on an interpretation, researchers have more confidence that others would agree with that interpretation (Schielke et al., 2009) than they would if only one person analyzed and interpreted the data (Morrow, 2005). Furthermore, research has suggested that "unforced consensus may result in interpretations that are deeper, richer, and more thorough, precise, and realistic than one generated by a single individual" (Schielke et al., 2009, p. 559).

The final key feature of CQR is returning to the raw data to ensure that the emerging understanding of the data is grounded in participants' words. When team members disagree on how they view data, for example, they reread the participant's words, listen to a recording of the interview, and think about the context of the case to help them determine whether their interpretation of the data arises from the data or their own biases and expectations.

CONCLUSIONS

We developed CQR from our experiences with quantitatively based psychotherapy process research (e.g., discovery-oriented and exploratory methods) and also from other qualitative methods (GT, phenomenology, and CPA). It is a rigorous method oriented to helping researchers gain in-depth information about topics related to inner experiences, attitudes, and beliefs from a few carefully recruited participants. Multiple voices are encouraged to help researchers hear different perspectives and think deeply about the data.