A New Generation of Qualitative Research

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Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Identify the key debates in qualitative research from both a global and generational perspective
- Discuss the place of mixed methods in the future of qualitative research
- Outline the impact of generational difference on qualitative researchers' perceptions of key debates
- Define realist causality and its relationship to qualitative research
- Construct qualitative research findings to increase their impact

Introduction

In this final chapter, key debates in qualitative research are discussed using generational theory as an analytical heuristic. The predominance of an ethnocentric North American generational unit on qualitative research is identified, and its focus on the politics of evidence as the most important issue facing researchers worldwide is explored. An alternative view on the key debates and issues facing qualitative research is provided, largely from the perspectives of Generation X (Gen X) and Generation Y (Gen Y). In particular, questions regarding the assessment of research impact are examined in depth. Potential strategies to employ in the planning, implementation and reporting of qualitative research findings to improve potential impact are provided. Possible impact measures are identified, and methods for elucidating evidence to support claims are considered. For Gen Y qualitative researchers, concerns about the false homogenization of their generational grouping are acknowledged. In particular, the assumption that all people of this generation are digital natives is examined and debunked.

The Politics of Evidence

Current debates, largely conducted within the dominant North American qualitative research community, constitute a backlash against what is conceived as the growing dominance of positivistic science in major western countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States,
What motivates this cohort of distinguished researchers to fight a losing war in the politics of evidence? As Denzin (2009), one of the global leaders of qualitative research states, the significance of the politics of evidence lies not in the notion of evidence itself, but rather in the ‘question of who has the power to control the definition of evidence, who defines the kinds of materials that count as evidence, who determines what methods best produce the best forms of evidence, whose criteria and standards are used to evaluate quality evidence?’ (p. 142).

While some of the elder statesmen of qualitative research rage against the ‘right’ of governments, bureaucrats and funders to define what constitutes valid science, others engage in a more moderate and pragmatic approach to debates about the politics of evidence, albeit uneasily. Cheek (2011) speaks of her search for ‘the middle ground … a place from which to engage the politics and practices of funding qualitative inquiry and the research marketplace on my terms, not someone else’s’ (p. 266), a place where academics can ‘sell’ research, while at the same time not selling out; while others (Morse and Niehaus, 2009; Morse, 2011) have turned to mixed methods as a way to raise an appetite for funding qualitative research. Creswell in particular is noteworthy in leading a team to develop the US Government commissioned report on Best Practice for Mixed Methods Research in the Health Sciences (Creswell, Klassen, Plano Clark and Clegg Smith, 2011).

There will always be critics of such guidelines for the conduct of qualitative research, or in this case the conduct of mixed methods research with a qualitative component. When Giddings (2006) wrote of concerns that mixed methods studies were ‘positivism dressed in drag’, she foretold of a funding scenario where qualitative research would be marginalized by this new movement, saying: “‘How many?’ renders the individual invisible, squashes metaphorical and emergent understandings and strips away context. The unique, the contradictory and the contestable need words not numbers to hold their place among the “many”’ (p. 202). It is this sentiment that answers the question of why the North American vanguard keep fighting a good fight in the war about evidence, however in countries around the world they and their acolytes are losing many battles.

The reality of the world in which we live means that we have to make a space for compliance that balances the risk of selling out, with the demands that funders and, by default, universities are placing upon us. Lincoln (2012) provides an insightful thesis on the transformation of higher education to now operate as a new political economy. Compellingly, she argues that academic work has become a short-term commodity traded two ways both for promotion of self and the institution. Fostered by a culture of audit and a regime of rankings, the role of the academic
and by association in relation to this argument, qualitative research is being contained and consciously discouraged. For Lincoln, future strategies for the survival and growth of qualitative research will have to centre on ‘at least partially dismantling the Master's house with at least some of the Master's tools’ (p. 1458). It is in this tentatively stated reference to the essay of Audre Loude (Academy of American Poets, n.d.) that the financial imperative towards mixed methods as a compromise position for qualitative researchers begins to shape as a viable alternative for survival.

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Gen X: The View from here is of a Different Landscape

When considering the idea that the politics of evidence constitutes the key issue in contemporary debates (as demonstrated in Denzin and Lincoln's (2011) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, which is the most popular contemporary text globally), we asked ourselves, is this our ‘big ticket’ issue too, or are the arguments those of louder voices than ours? Reading through the often passionate, angry, complex and multi-layered dialogue about who has the power to control what is evidence, the contrast between these voices and those in the preceding chapters of this book is striking. No such emotive undertones are evident in the contributions of these authors in spite of there being opportunity to address what they thought was important for a new or novice qualitative researcher to know in relation to concepts of evidence in their field.

So where are the voices of our generation in this hotly contested debate? Largely silent, possibly because our concerns are not nearly as rarefied as our seniors, possibly because ‘we take for granted what early generations fought to establish’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011: 681), but most likely because we are so-called traditional right pole methodologists (Eisenhart and Jurow, 2011). We take the position that securing a future in the academy enables us to continue to make a difference and that this can be achieved. The loudest noise does not necessarily reflect the greatest contribution. This is not to say that we don't care about issues of social justice (Birks and Mills, 2011). Our commitment to this end is demonstrated by the authors who have contributed chapters and ‘windows’ in this book, however the focus of this commitment is different. The way we instigate change is through the conduct of qualitative research that is rigorous, local and careful, with the aim of discerning and demonstrating the impact this might have on individuals, communities, policy and practice. Let's think about why this might be so.

Mannheim's (1952 [1923]) essay *The Problem of Generations* is considered a seminal text on generational theory (Herrera, 2012; Pilcher, 1994), much of which resonates for us as we consider the tangled web of debates both within and outside of qualitative research.
The problem of generations is important enough to merit serious consideration. It is one of the indispensable guides to an understanding of the structure of social and intellectual movements. Its practical importance becomes clear as soon as one tries to obtain a more exact understanding of the accelerated pace of social change characteristic of our time. (p. 163)

Any two generations following one another always fight different opponents, both within and without. While the older people may still be combating something in themselves or in the external world in such fashion that all their feeling and efforts and even their concepts and categories of thought are determined by that adversary, for the younger people this adversary may be simply non-existent: Their primary orientation is an entirely different one. (Mannheim 1952: 178)

Since the publication of this essay in the mid-twentieth century, the idea of generational difference has captured popular imagination as a way of explaining the actions of individuals and collectives in relation to others in society. In 1965, for example, The Who released one of the most popular songs of all time (Rolling Stone Magazine, 2011) *My Generation* – Pete Townshend’s anthem to youth resistance, which typifies pop culture’s conceptualization of push and pull between different generations who co-exist in the same time and place.

Broad classifications of current generational cohorts are represented by the following images (Unknown, 1968; Suau, 1989; Jorgensen, 1945) depicting ‘historical events and cultural phenomena’ (Costanza, Badger, Fraser, Severt and Gade, 2012: 377) said to have provided the context for a new generation to form. The end of the Second World War, a man landing on the moon, the fall of the Berlin Wall symbolizing the end of the Cold War, and the internet as our main method of global communication (Figure 14.1) are all significant world events that triggered social and cultural change. Other images we could have chosen include those relating to the ‘rupture of 1968’ such as the death of Martin Luther King, or the student riots that occurred around the world, and clearly 9/11 profoundly shook the western world.

The labels, including biological years, attached to each of the images are indicative of ‘generations’ both popularized in the media (Gordinier, 2008; Howe and Strauss, 1992; Coupland, 1991) and investigated by researchers mainly concerned with questions of workplace relations (Costanza et al., 2012; Lyons, Schweitzer, Ng and Kuron, 2012; Twenge, 2010), and education (Wilson and Gerber, 2008). Such classifications come with an important caveat however; generational thinking and perceptions are not limited by years and decades, but rather, ‘contemporaneity is conceived … as a subjective condition of having experienced the same dominant influences’ (Pilcher, 1994: 486). While we may be accused of hedging our bets
on the idea of defining generations for the purpose of this chapter, this is a premise borne out by dialogue we initiated with our contributory group and colleagues in order to get a sense of how they positioned themselves with regard to generational difference. When asked in a personal communication (27/12/2012) ‘what generation do you belong to?’ Bob Dick (b. 1935) responded *I’m 77, but that may not be a reliable guide.*

**Figure 14.1 Images Depicting Triggers for Generational Change**

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<th>Traditionalists 1922-1945</th>
<th>Baby Boomers 1946-1960</th>
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**Generational Positioning**

Take a moment to think about what you know about the different generations listed. Do you know which generational grouping you could belong to? Are pop culture representations of your generation a good fit with how you perceive yourself?

While mindful of its limitations, generational difference can still provide a useful heuristic with which to theorize competing priorities in qualitative research. In summary: generations are formed by a combination of location, including time and place, and exposure to the dynamic destabilization of society and culture at a formative age when individuals are first capable of
independent, critical, reflective thought (around 17 years) (Mannheim, 1952 [1923]; Pilcher, 1994). Each generation is stratified, which results in units that experience a concrete bond (Mannheim, 1952 [1923]) as they share common experiences determined by particular characteristics, for example, gender, politics, education, and nationality. It is these generational units that provide the material expression of a new generation.

Across the range of qualitative researchers world wide, traditionalist and baby boomers by far hold the most prestigious positions within universities. As baby boomers reach what has been a traditional retirement age, there are beginning trends around the world to abolish mandatory retirement ages in workplace agreements, with people staying in the workplace longer. Reasons for delaying retirement include: dedication to work, status, structured time, opportunities for social interactions and a sense of accomplishment (Frieze, Olson and Murrell, 2011). As well, the global financial crisis (2007–2008) has placed extra pressure on older academics to stay in the workforce due to the impact of this event on superannuation funds. Words used to describe baby boomers more generally include: ‘optimistic’, ‘idealistic’, ‘driven’, they are hard workers, work long hours, and want to have it all – career, family and material possessions (Glass, 2007; Favero and Heath, 2012).

Within the traditionalist/baby boomer elite of qualitative research is a generational unit committed to resistance, methodological revolution, epistemological commitment, and social justice. This group lived through the social and political ruptures of 1968, and situate themselves to the left – radical qualitative researchers under threat from the political, epistemological and ethical right (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Of course, not all of their peers are as concerned with the same issues as this generational unit, with Atkinson and Delamont (2006) stating that ‘[g]iven the size of the American research community with regard to the rest of the world … American ethnocentrism has a disproportionate effect on the field as a whole’ (p. 750). Rejecting the notion of a crisis in qualitative research, based on the politics of evidence, these and other UK based researchers in the same broader generational groupings (Hammersley, 2008) argue for a renewed focus on reducing methodological pluralism and producing exemplary qualitative research studies thereby contributing cumulative social theory with the ability to impart impact. Reinforcing the argument against the current ethnocentrism of qualitative research and a leaning too far towards the ‘art’ of qualitative research as opposed to a balance between development and rigour, German researcher Flick (2009) argues for a much stronger internationalization of qualitative research and the establishment of common criteria for when particular research designs are indicated.

So who are Gen X in the qualitative research milieu? To be cynical about it (a trait often attributed to this generation), Gen X are early and mid-career academics who make
traditionalist and baby boomer qualitative researchers look good. They are assistant and associate professors, senior lecturers, readers and research assistants who work on other people's research grants in the hope of establishing their own track records. They are members of supervisory panels of graduate students, co-authors who tackle online journal submissions, compile bibliographic databases and handle online grant submissions. Traversing the divide between so-called digital immigrants and digital natives (Bennett, Maton and Kervin, 2008), Gen X use technology with ease, and ease the path of their less 'tech savvy' bosses. They administer, teach, and do the minimum research and writing to ensure professional survival. Unlike the professoriate they don't have time to try and save the world, instead they are busy trying to save themselves and avoid banging their heads on glass ceilings created by their traditionalist and baby boomer predecessors. Descriptors used for Gen X include: cynical, independent, emphasis on outcomes not process, work/life balance, time is more important than money, focus on self improvement (Favero and Heath, 2012; Glass, 2007).

Figure 14.2

In universities around the world, Gen X qualitative researchers are focused on securing tenure, building track and preparing for promotion, while at the same time applying for grants to conduct their own high quality research and ensuring the quality of their research students’ studies. Cheek (2011) enunciates the reality of Gen X's world when she says:

The effect of wheeling and dealing, and the translation of research funding into other forms of funding, cascades down to the level of the individual researchers. The amount of dollars received by that researcher, and where they come from, are used as indicators of individual research performance and impact. What those dollars are used
for, or even if they are really needed is not the point. (p. 265)

The difference between Gen X, and the traditionalist/baby boomer professoriate is that the latter have ‘made it’, while Gen X is largely still on the way up. Accountability and governance aspects of research that concern government, policymakers and university administrators are not unfamiliar concepts for Gen X qualitative researchers. Graduating with undergraduate degrees in the late 1980s and early 1990s meant entering a world of employment scarcity and corporatization. As compared to the experience of traditionalists and baby boomers, opportunity was scarce on ‘… a playing field that has not only shifted beyond recognition but has also taken on shifting as its very business model’ (Gordinier, 2008: 297). Because of their experience with widespread corporatization, rationalization and change, Gen X’s response to evidence hierarchies, research performance measures, quality assurance and other points of contention in the debates around the politics of evidence is, to coin a (Gen Y) phrase, ‘whatever’. In a personal communication, Wayne Babchuk (b. 1954) writes, where battle lines were drawn in my generation, my students seem to think the whole thing is silly and advocate a more pragmatic, mixed methods agenda. They are interested in ‘what works’ more than making an epistemological stand.

**Working with ‘what Works’**

When you think about qualitative research ‘what works’ for you? List your most important considerations in planning, implementing and disseminating a qualitative research study.

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**Causality and Impact**

The notion of ‘what works’ is of major importance to many Gen X qualitative researchers, including us (Mills b.1966, Birks b.1963). ‘What works’ needs to be considered from a number of perspectives. As qualitative researchers we need a solid fit between the questions we ask, and the methodology we choose to use. At the risk of being labelled conservative fundamentalists, we agree with our traditionalist and baby boomer forerunners who argue against the proliferation of complicated methodological pluralism for its own sake (Schwandt, 2006; Atkinson and Delamont, 2006). Instead, the continued application of well-described qualitative methodologies to substantive areas of inquiry will result in a cumulative body of knowledge, which can make a significant contribution through illuminating findings that elucidate and theorize issues of social and political concern. Implicit in this agenda is the concept of causality, which has been a point of contention in qualitative research since the publication of Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) seminal text *Naturalistic Inquiry* where they reject the
application of a regularity view of causation (Maxwell, 2004) to qualitative research findings. Maxwell (2012) builds on his previous work to present a realist view of causality that he argues is well placed to serve qualitative researchers. Realist causality places identifying process at the centre of analysis, makes context intrinsic to causality and links outcome to each of these elements. Saldaña (2013) provides the qualitative researcher with a comprehensive exposition of causal coding, identifying three elements of attribution, ‘... the cause, the outcome, and the link between the cause and the outcome’ (p. 164), with the link being concerned with the process at hand.

‘What works’ also needs to be considered from the perspective of the public, government and policymakers. The utility of qualitative research findings is of major importance in the translation of knowledge to application in society. While there are many who would caution that the pressure of government on researchers to address national priorities constitutes a threat to qualitative research (Atkinson and Delamont, 2006), we see it as providing an opportunity to contribute to our society as a whole. It is not unreasonable for a funder to expect a positive return on investment, a principle that also applies to research dollars where there is an expected outcome of both economic growth and societal advancement (ATNU/Group of 8, 2012). As qualitative researchers, we are not above the ‘grubby’ issue of money and it behooves us to think beyond the immediate circumstance that has inspired a research question to the responsibility that we have as a member of the wider community, and to the institution that employs us. Prosaically, in many countries the main source of research funding is provided by democratically elected government, which means national priorities shape the assessment panels and processes that they use to determine success, so it is best to ‘get with the program’ if you want to succeed. In saying this, we are not advocating for research decentred from our responsibility to participants; unfounded in the ethical principles of respect for human beings, research merit and integrity, justice, and beneficence (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2009). Rather we are advocating for a reality check about where and how we can make a difference as qualitative researchers.

From the perspective of Gen X, questions about qualitative research that need to feature strongly in future debates, include:

1. How do we instigate the translation of qualitative research findings into practice?
2. How do we assess and report the impact of qualitative research findings?
3. How can we build effective impact assessment into our original qualitative research designs?
4. How do we increase the utility of qualitative research findings in a corporatized
academe that has expectations of fiscal accountability and return on investment?

The last of these questions is already a debate in progress, centring on the use of mixed methods as a way of addressing the concerns of the public, funders, governments, policymakers and universities in relation to the translation and application of research findings for greater good. Morse (2011) sees the popularity of mixed methods as positive for qualitative research pulling it ‘almost into the limelight’ (p. 1020). Taking this further, we would argue that the integration and reporting of mixed methods findings is one way of beginning to address the first three questions posed about instigating, assessing and reporting qualitative research impact. However, mixed methods is not a ‘silver bullet’, and there is still a solid case for the use of qualitative research methodologies in rigorous research studies investigating questions not amenable to measurement, we just need to figure out how to demonstrate the worth of these findings.

Bloor (2011) discusses two case studies of ethnographic research resulting in assessable impact demonstrated by positive changes in models of service provision. There are two key areas for potentiating impact suggested in this book chapter. First, choosing multiple forms of local dissemination in the field that promote reflection through: contrasting practices observed with other organizations, highlighting examples of good practice, providing personal briefings to participants on findings, and providing short written reports. Second, using participant/observer fieldwork to demonstrate the potential need for new or adapted service provision.

In Australia, the publication of a recent report (ATNU/Group of 8, 2012) on the use of case study to assess research impact, based on the United Kingdom's 2014 Research Excellence Framework, provides a number of examples of other ways researchers can assess the impact of findings. The following table contains suggested impact indicators distilled from this report that are applicable to qualitative research. We have loosely organized these indicators into general areas of concern from which different disciplines can draw.

In many ways, the table below summarizes the end product of our research aspirations – making a difference to someone or something, somewhere. Importantly though, we need to think more about how we instigate the translation of qualitative research findings into practice. In Chapter 7, we discuss contemporary ways to promote the dissemination of findings from a grounded theory study, which are relevant to all qualitative research methodologies. For people to want to read your findings though, they need to be clear, incisive and in ‘plain English’. We have written elsewhere about the problem of the masking of qualitative findings through the use of impenetrable terminology (Birks and Mills, 2011), a point reinforced by Sandelowski and Leeman (2012) who provide useful strategies for formulating thematic sentences designed to
capture segments of findings in a ‘comprehensive … highly structured but also parsimonious rendering of findings’ (p. 1407).

These authors also discuss the idea of ‘intervention talk’ as a method to increase the utility of qualitative research findings in healthcare, an idea supported by Donmoyer (2012) who states ‘any researcher who hopes her or his work will be used in the policymaking process is virtually required to speak and write in the language of causes and effect’ (p. 666). Reflecting on Table 14.1 it is clear that the need for effectively communicating the findings of a study using intervention talk and implementation frameworks (Damschroder, Aron, Keith, Kirsh, Alexander and Lowery, 2009) applies to the broader church of qualitative research. The following (Box 14.1) summarizes suggestions for translating the findings of qualitative research into the language of implementing interventions (Sandelowski and Leeman, 2012). A number of these points can be linked to strategies operationalized by Bloor in the example of ethnographic case studies previously cited.

Table 14.1 Indicators for Assessing the Impact of Qualitative Research

- Policy decisions or changes to legislation regulation or guidelines have been informed by research evidence with resultant benefits realized
- Policy implementation (for example: human rights, education, health, environment, foreign affairs or agricultural policy) has been enhanced with resultant benefits realized
- Improvement in the quality, accessibility, acceptability or cost-effectiveness of a public service
- Public benefit from public service improvements
- Provision of consultancy based on previous research findings
- Expert and legal work informed by research
- Reduced cost of treatment or healthcare services as a result of evidence-based changes in practice
- Public health and wellbeing has improved
- Clinical or lifestyle interventions demonstrate a definitive outcome
- Adoption of new diagnostic or clinical technology
- Disease prevention or markers of health have been enhanced
- Disease control has been improved
- Understanding of international relationships, including historical analysis, which enhance diplomatic relationships
- Enhancements to heritage preservations, conservation and presentation
- Production of influential cultural artifacts: fine art, theatre, film, novels, poems, dance and television
• Challenges to established norms, modes of thought or practices that have shaped public or political debate
• Shaping or informing public attitudes and values towards cultural understandings of issues and phenomena
• Contributing to processes of commemoration, memorialization and reconciliation
• Development of technologies or products including software
• Development of communications technologies or protocols
• Development of technical standards which influence policy, design or protocols with resultant benefits realized
• Improved business performance measures: turnover, products, profits, employment creation
• Improved business practices: strategy, operations, management
• Creation or protection of jobs
• Mitigation of potential future business losses
• Policy introduction with positive impact on economic growth, or incentivizing productivity
• Contributing to the quality of the tourist experience
• Improvement in educational practices
• Improvement in educational outcomes
• Improved service delivery as a result of evidence-based organizational change
• Professional standards, guidelines or training are influenced by research
• Practitioners/professionals have used research findings in conducting their work
• Improved quality and efficiency of service provision
• Productivity gains as a result of evidence based changes in practice
• Environmental improvements from the introduction or improvement of processes or services
• Environmental improvements arising from: new methods, models and monitoring techniques
• Positive influence on the management or conservation of natural resources: energy, water and food
• Planning decisions have been informed by research

Translating Qualitative Research Findings Using the Language of Interventions and Implementation

• Consider using an implementation framework to organize and present findings
• Write up findings in terms of the feasibility and compatibility of alternative interventions
Consider different types of providers in terms of how the findings of a qualitative research study could be operationalized through interventions
Consider using a systems approach to presenting findings as potential interventions for implementation at different levels of an organization
Translate findings into a guide for the development, implementation and evaluation of a particular intervention
Offer findings that theorize how to implement an existing intervention in a particular setting
Use findings to compare existing service providers with the aim of discerning best practice

Deriving impact from qualitative research is not a serendipitous process in the connected world in which we now live; ‘a woven world of distant encounters and instant connections’ (Yergin and Stanislaw, 1998: 9). Building potential impact assessment tools into the planning of a qualitative research study is a reasonable idea, and a useful strategy for making a difference not only to the individual participants in a study, but also to individuals who may be affected positively by your findings in other settings. The question then arises, how do you track the impact of your research findings post release? There are two strategies that we would suggest are possible in this quest.

The first strategy is commissioning the external evaluation of a program of research after a period of time in order to assess the impact of findings. For many of the indicators listed in Table 14.1 related to cost benefit, this is the most rigorous way of establishing what the outcome is. Establishing a program of qualitative and mixed methods research that investigates a substantive area of inquiry over time is an important strategy to building profile, track record and sustainable grant income. Aligning doctoral student research with this same area results in a constant flow of publications reporting findings, which complement larger aspirations in relation to future research and impact. When engaging in clearly-defined programs of research, individual university departments will see value in investing in outside evaluation to assist in securing future sustainability through demonstrated impact.

As part of a wider program of research though, it is important to establish individual impact portfolios for completed studies. While ‘[p]ublications are the hard currency of the track record needed for researchers to be able to compete for funding’ (Cheek 2011: 259), it is insufficient to rely on standard metrics such as journal impact factors, numbers of peer reviewed publications and importantly, competitive grant income to appraise your worth as a qualitative researcher. What might an individual qualitative research project’s impact portfolio contain? Box 14.2
includes some suggestions, again drawn from the recent Australian report on assessing research impact (ATNU/Group of 8, 2012) which argues that the central message of research impact is demonstrating ‘what was done, why it was done, what difference it made and how the research made it happen’ (p. 19).

### Qualitative Research Study Portfolios

- Evidence of qualitative research utilization through the implementation of findings that have *changed knowledge, behaviour and attitude* with significant, demonstrated benefit
- Evidence of qualitative research utilization through the implementation of findings that have *changed practice* with significant, demonstrated benefit
- Evidence of qualitative research utilization through the implementation of findings that have resulted in *new or improved services* with significant, demonstrated benefit
- Evidence of qualitative research utilization through the implementation of findings that have resulted in *new or amended policy* with significant, demonstrated benefit
- Evidence of the reach of qualitative findings, global, national, regional and local, in the *implementation of change* that has resulted in significant, demonstrated benefit

A qualitative research project's impact portfolio needs to be maintained over a long period of time, with the accumulation of various artifacts that provide significant, demonstrable evidence of impact. Using technology such as Google® and Google Scholar®, it is possible to set up alerts for the products of your research in order to track their utilization outside of academe. As well, taking care to formulate your findings to maximize their uptake and considering new ways of disseminating these findings, may well bring you in closer contact with the end users of your work, providing new opportunities to work with individuals in implementing qualitative findings for maximum effect.

### Gen Y: The Future of Qualitative Research

There are a number of committed, intelligent, articulate qualitative researchers in a wide range of disciplines, many of whom are Gen X and Gen Y, all of whom are working towards making a difference. When inviting contributors onto the writing team for projects such as this text and our previous publication *Grounded Theory: A practical guide*, we prioritize younger talent so as to tap into fresh ideas, while providing an opportunity for career development. Giving back through mentoring for career development is important to us because of our own experience of
being expertly guided and supported over time. In saying this, we have also welcomed some traditionalist and baby boomer researchers to write about their areas of expertise and experience, thus valuing the wisdom of our elders also.

So what of Gen Y in today's mix of qualitative researchers? The approximate biological age range of this generation means that the oldest of this group are around 30 years of age. Therefore, Gen Y qualitative researchers are predominantly lecturers, associate lecturers, research fellows, research assistants, post-doctoral fellows or doctoral/masters degree candidates. Regardless of being at the beginning of their research careers, Gen Y qualitative researchers are very present in the literature regarding methodology and methods. A contributing factor to this proliferation of publications is the introduction of models of doctoral thesis by publication, particularly in education and health (Francis, Mills, Chapman and Birks, 2009). Mixed methods, the use of secondary data for qualitative studies (Birks and Mills, 2011) and emergent influences such as critical Indigenous research methodologies are becoming mainstream for a new generation of researchers for whom ‘[s]triking a balance between methodological rigor and the creativeness of the research design is imperative for innovative research’ (Bainbridge, Whiteside and McCalman, 2013: 276). Methods of data collection and analysis including photovoice, digital storytelling and the analysis of social media are becoming more popular among Gen Y, and are effectively woven into classic research designs. An example of this is a participatory action research study using photovoice as a method of data generation conducted with young people living in socially and economically disadvantaged areas of Aberdeen, Scotland (Watson and Douglas, 2012). Photovoice provides for participants to take pictures that identify issues important to them in relation to the substantive area of enquiry, in this case the impact of neighbourhoods on adolescent mental health. Using these images as a basis for further discussion, researchers use methods of participatory action research to co-investigate issues, processes and actions in an iterative manner.

A recent discourse analysis of Gen Y university students (Sternberg, 2012) highlights issues that this group of qualitative researchers also face, mainly as a result of the proliferation of popular media images regarding their preferred ways of communicating and learning. Words used to describe Gen Y more generally include: social responsibility, volunteerism, flexible work arrangements, telecommuters, digital natives, needing constant feedback, living at home with parents, the emergence of adulthood (Glass, 2007; Favero and Heath, 2012; Sternberg, 2012). The concept of Gen Y as digital natives is particularly problematic in relation to how universities and workplaces construct their responses to younger adults. A critical review (Bennett et al., 2008) of the concept of digital natives found Gen Y’s levels of skill in using the various technologies to be very diverse as opposed to the popular myth of general capability. A later
research study supports this view with findings indicating inconsistencies between how different generational units within Gen Y sought information (Kilian, Hennigs and Langner, 2012). Sternberg (2012) builds on this argument of false homogenization, saying ‘when constructing the generation y student, issues such as gender, sexuality, class, race and national identity tend to be, at best, subordinated, or at worst, neglected’ (p. 537). In relation to other generations’ assumptions about, expectations of, and interactions with, this new group of qualitative researchers these emerging debates and discussions are important to bear in mind.

Conclusion

Qualitative researchers are in a stronger position than ever before in the quest to make a difference. As Flyvbjerg (2006) reminds us just because ‘... knowledge cannot be formally generalized does not mean that it cannot enter into the collective process of knowledge accumulation in a given field or in a society’ (p. 227). For all qualitative researchers, being cognizant of generational difference, both within and between the ages will be important in ensuring respectful and yet lively debates and discussions about the future. Assessing the impact of qualitative research is one of the most important issues to be faced in the history of this tradition. While there are many philosophical and methodological arguments against notions of causality in qualitative research, the increasing pressure to report the impact of findings requires careful consideration of realist causality as a useful analytical heuristic. Developing rigorous, strategic, cumulative bodies of evidence derived from qualitative research studies will sustain these endeavours into the future.

Key Points

- Key debates in qualitative research differ globally
- The politics of evidence is largely argued by North American qualitative researchers
- Mixed methods is becoming more popular as a research design that includes qualitative methodologies
- There has been a transformation of higher education to become more corporatized
- Generational difference is one way of explaining the origins of different debates and issues in qualitative research
- Within each generation there are generational units who have concrete bonds that give voice to particular issues of concern
- Causality is an important consideration when thinking about ‘what works’ in qualitative research
- The utility of qualitative research findings as assessed by impact is becoming an
important issue for Gen X

- Translating qualitative research findings into the language of interventions and implementation is becoming more important
- Assessing the impact of qualitative research equates to examining what was done, why it was done, what difference it made and how the research made it happen
- Popular images of Gen Y present a false homogeneity that could disadvantage particular generational units

Critical Thinking Questions

- How influential do you think the North American qualitative researchers are on the type of qualitative research undertaken in your country?
- Are there elements of the politics of evidence debate apparent in your workplace?
- What do you think of the suggestion that the impact of qualitative research is the next major challenge for qualitative researchers worldwide?
- Do you think that Gen Y is more diverse than popular culture would lead us to believe? How is this diversity played out in your workplace?

Suggested Further Reading

Journal article


References


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Watson M., and Douglas F. (2012) ‘It's making us look disgusting ... and it makes me feel like a mink ... it makes me feel depressed!: using photovoice to help “see” and understand the perspectives of disadvantaged young people about the neighbourhood determinants of their mental well-being’, *International Journal of Health Promotion and Education*, 50: 278–295.


http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781473920163.n14