

ICMC 2023**The 3rd International Conference on Management and Communication****SENSITIVITIES AND ETHICS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

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Abstract

This is a qualitative research approach project of the author's dissertation as part of completing doctoral qualification. The project undertakes a multiple case study of several higher learning institutions. Mainly, the project centres around operationalising on the leadership practices in educational institutions in Malaysia. This research project aims to establish the practices of the leaders in the management process and to add to empirical understanding of the way leadership practices affect followership. A better understanding of this phenomena serves valuable insight, which evaluates both the process and the outcome of the leadership practices on followers' commitment. During the research, it was discovered that qualitative methodology does present quite a few challenges generally in regards to collecting data and analysing data concurrently. This is especially true during ethical considerations and prevention of biasness throughout the research progress in general. The article presents valuable insights on underlying fundamental issues on qualitative research. It is hoped to provide a basic understanding and may serve as guidance for novice researchers and students alike on qualitative research approach.

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1. Introduction

One of the most significant scholarly discussions on research endeavour is the strive for an ethical research conduct. In recent years, there has been an increasing interest for righteous demeanour of conducting research right from the beginning. For a research results to be trustworthy, it is highly imperative that the researcher reduce and eliminate all sorts of biases in the research process throughout (Carter & Little, 2007; Flick, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2002; Saldana, 2011; Saldana, 2018; Silverman, 2004; Yin, 2016). Among the first things central to this concept are ethical considerations and prevention of biases in conducting research. This is so the research is far from generating misleading interpretations and deviates from the truth that the research is seeking. Lack of ethical research conduct has, among many things; brought us the announcement of an awareness towards predatory journals, the news of certain journals being revoked from certain highly esteemed indexing volume; and many others. This essay seeks to remedy this problem by analysing the literature on guidelines for ethical qualitative research. This paper seeks to examine the foundation of conducting ethical research. The purpose of this paper is to highlight sensitivities and areas to be deliberated in reducing and eliminating biases in qualitative research approaches. In the pages that follows, this paper contemplates scholars' findings on predisposition aspects to be aware of for ethical research to prevail. It highlights some of the known ethical considerations for a social science researcher in qualitative research approach from Malaysian perspective.

1.1. Background of fundamental reference for ethical research conduct

The pursuit of research worldwide and the outcome of the research pursuit are accountable to be reporting the truth to the public at large. Therefore, it is imperative that research activities are well-guided using documents that are upright and well-established in congruent with the rest of the scientific community (Creswell, 2017). Globally, ethical research conducts follow the codes outlined by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Malaysia since the year 2017 has been referring to Malaysia Code of Responsible Conduct in Research (MCRCR) (National Science Council, 2020) which is a comprehensive document integral to serve as a guideline for the conduct and pursuit of research activities in Malaysia. MCRCR is in line with the best research practices, in congruent with the other well-established codes of research conduct around the world. It is developed by drawing guidance from other international standards and practices.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. Differences between the two research paradigms

The essay to date has been much focused on ethical research considerations. A considerable number of scholarly discussions centred on the philosophical grounds of research approaches (Creswell, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 2016; Silverman, 2004; Yin, 2016). However, before the discussion proceeds to that account, of equal importance is being able to differentiate the philosophical grounds of worldview or paradigms of the researcher. Both qualitative and quantitative research approaches use different research

paradigms (Creswell, 2017; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). As the two most popular research approaches, researchers embracing these two research pursuits need to be aware that both have competing paradigms between the two. The two paradigms are constructivist research paradigm grounded in qualitative research, and objectivist research paradigm; grounded in quantitative research (Creswell, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 2016).

2.2. Qualitative research paradigm

Qualitative research is grounded in based on a constructivist epistemology, explores what it assumes to be a socially constructed dynamic reality through a framework. It is value-laden; flexible; descriptive; holistic; and context sensitive; i.e., an in-depth description of the phenomenon from the perspectives of the people involved are presented in the research data (Flick, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Maxwell, 2013).

2.3. Quantitative research paradigm

Scholars have long highlighted the quantitative grounds are informed by objectivist epistemology (Creswell, 2017). It thus seeks to develop explanatory universal laws in social behaviours by statistically measuring what it assumes to be a static reality. Value-free, logical, reductionistic, and deterministic, which are based on priori theories.

3. Research Question

3.1. Importance of being ethical in qualitative research

Ethics is an essential component in the research process, regardless of the methodologies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 2014). Through having an ethical research clearance from the start of the process ensures ethical research conduct outlined in MCRCR. By the notion of research process, this implies from research question formulation, until the points of data collection, data analysis and data reporting (Ho et al., 2007).

4. Purpose of The Study

4.1. To understand sensitivities and issues to consider in qualitative research

What we know about the sensitivities and issues to be considered in qualitative research is largely based upon empirical studies that investigate ways on how to conduct research ethically. Renowned scholars are all in agreement in their literature on this subject matter (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 2014; Patton, 2002; Wolcott, 1994; Yin, 2016) outlined as follows; which begins with: 1) informed consent, followed by 2) interaction; 3) ethical, legal, and regulatory norms and standards; 4) anonymity and confidentiality; 5) empathy; 6) distance and proximity; 7) transparency; 8) trustworthy; 9) build relationship; 10) give full information; 11) report accordingly; 12) protection of subjects; and last but not least; 13) non-judgmental.

5. Research Methodology

5.1. Informed consent as a form of preparing research gateway

Central to the entire concept of being ethical in conducting research is to have this fundamental, founding principle of an ethical research conduct. Informed consent is essential to be obtained by all research involving human as a subject, or research dealing with human behaviour. This implies that the human subject must be informed that involvement in the research process is on a voluntary basis. He (or she) must be able to refuse participation at any point in time throughout the research process (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 2016). In addition, he (or she) must be made aware of the implications of participating in that research activities. On that note, it is his (or her) right to be given full information on the implications of the research even after the research has been concluded, and will be able to see the results thereafter. This consent must be documented with written acknowledgement from the subject and included in the research reports.

6. Findings

6.1. Interaction

Interaction proved by the scholars to be another issue in qualitative research (Carter & Little, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Lincoln & Denzin, 2003; Silverman, 2004; Saldana, 2011; Saldana, 2018). To encourage participation of and gather honest information from the subject, interaction must be there for full disclosure of the information seek. The skillful use of probing technique is helpful at this stage in the research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

6.2. Ethical, legal, and regulatory norms and standards

Within social science scientific enquiry, the research activities must be done in accordance fundamentally, adhering to and within the legal framework. Basically, the research approach and the whole process must fall within the scope of what is allowed not only by the regulatory framework, but also in accordance to the norms and standards practiced by the society contextually (Miles & Huberman, 2014).

6.3. Anonymity And confidentiality

On the account of the fundamental concept of an informed consent, further to that concern is the subject being made aware that he (or she) remains anonymous without the risk of being identified in the research report (Greene, 2014). Perhaps the more pressing on this note is to ensure confidentiality of the subjects involved in the research (Mercer, 2007). This further aligns with the first concept whereby the subject be rest assured that his (or her) participation in the research will be made confidential. Also, the research data remains confidential and only will be used solely for the purpose of reporting the research outcome only (Wolcott, 1994).

6.4. Empathy

The question of empathy comes into picture most of the time, if the data intended comes from qualitative interviewing. Empathy occurs as a result of the researcher building and having “rapport” with the subject (Maxwell, 2013). In establishing an ethical approach towards qualitative interviewing, the research must ensure empathetic instances experienced throughout the interview enabling the researcher to manage rightfully his (or her) affective stance in that situation to obtain true answers to the research questions (Brinkmann, 2013).

6.5. Distance And proximity

Continuing the notion of qualitative interviewing, the researcher must be able to maintain distance during the interview process (Greene, 2014; Mercer, 2007). Mostly, sharing of life experience among the subjects could be taxing and emotionally draining for both parties. While the researcher is expected to balance between being distant and keep composure, in the same instance; must maintain proximity. This is in ensuring data is collected truthfully, directly from the life experience shared by the subject (Creswell, 2017). Also, this is done to maintain boundary so the researcher will be able to “let go” of the negative emotions resulting from the lasting experiences from the research process. The lasting experience, as highlighted by the scholars in numerous studies; contributed to high possibility of unhealthy emotional well-being on the researcher’s side (Brinkmann, 2013; Mercer, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

6.6. Transparency

Transparency ensures the empirical data generated from the research encounter with the subject, is publicised accordingly. Being transparent also implies the researcher reports the real information gathered from the original source through the research process, which are traceable and documented in a proper way (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Denzin, 2017; Wolcott, 1994).

6.7. Trustworthy

Trustworthiness has the lengthiest elaboration of all considerations in qualitative research, for which; relates to research findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Along this note, esteemed scholars have attempted significant studies which outlined trustworthiness of research findings such as follows: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Mercer, 2007; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Credibility highlights on accuracy of the data which represents the phenomenon in question. Transferability refers to thickness and the depth of the data collected through means of various data collection methods (data triangulation). Dependability further refers to rigorous means to collect data. This further implies a well-documented research activities and verified by an inquiry audit (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013).

6.8. Build relationship

While building relationships regularly associated between humans, and in most situations are assumed as human behaviour; it is applied in different context in qualitative research data analysis. The word building relationship here is unprecedented to human sciences, rather it centres on being able to “put two-and-two together” from the insights generated out of the data (Wolcott, 1994). This is consistent with majority of the scholars in alignment similarly to the concept whereby the researcher, as primary instrument to the research; need to be able to “bridge” all narrative aspects provided by the subjects of the research, so the data is rich and meaningful (Brinkmann, 2013; Maxwell, 2013).

6.9. Give full information

Previous studies have drawn to conclude that giving full information in this context means to provide an understanding to the reader on the whole contextual information in regards to the insights drawn from the subjects (Silverman, 2004; Saldana, 2011, Saldana, 2018). Major literatures have been consistently emphasising on the essence of having multiple data collection (data triangulation) for deep analysis of the research context (Carter & Little, 2007; Creswell, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 2016).

6.10. Report accordingly

To establish the truthfulness of the research outcome, the report on data findings is expected to have a comprehensive, well-written trustworthy document (Patton, 2002). There are several key expectations on a general guideline for written report presentation. Firstly, there should be detailed description of the context and the subjects. Then, readers will look for the links among the research questions, methods chosen, data collected and data analysis. Some research has strengths on methods, context or samples, so readers will expect to see elaborated details presented (Silverman, 2004). Depending on the context, some research has more emphasis on certain parts in the report presentation.

6.11. Protection of subjects

To emphasis further on a few points in the above, namely informed consent, follows within the regulatory, norms and standards of the society, and anonymity; subjects need also to be made aware that they have the rights to be protected (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). This means that participation in the research will not cause them harm physically (bodily harm) and psychologically (mental harm) (Mercer, 2007). This also furthers means that subjects cannot be threatened, abused, offended, or embarrassed.

6.12. Non-Judgemental

This point relates more to the researcher rather than the subjects. It is imperative that the researcher abstain from judging the information given by the subjects (Flick, 2007). It means that the researcher must refrain from making any judgment of right or wrong, and refrain from making any sense of the context, thoughts, feelings, actions or subjects’ behaviours. Researcher must accept the subjects

without having to agree or disagree with them in conducting research. At this point, it is important for the researcher to steer from his (or her) on perspectives, perceptions or being bias (Brinkmann, 2013).

7. Conclusion

The practice of conducting ethical research should be acculturated and embedded in research culture (Ho et al., 2007). With the saying of “start things right the first time”, similarly goes for research conduct; especially more so when dealing with human as a subject and human behaviour context.

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