Consensual Qualitative Research for Simple Qualitative Data An Introduction to CQR-M

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Consensual Qualitative Research for Simple Qualitative Data

An Introduction to CQR-M

17

Imagine that you are conducting a large online quantitative survey of countertransference management strategies used by therapists in training. In addition to the quantitative measures included in the survey, you decide to add a single open-ended question asking participants to describe components of their unique clinical experiences that were not captured by the measures in the survey (e.g., "How do specific client characteristics or presenting issues relate to your unresolved issues?"). The written responses obtained from your 300 participants contain three or four sentences each and are relatively straightforward and easy to understand. Constructing core ideas as you would for a traditional consensual qualitative research (CQR) analysis seems excessive because the comments are already succinct and there is no context to consider. A briefer alternative to CQR that would produce domains and categories consensually derived from the data would be useful, but you are unsure of how to structure the coding teams, code the data, report the results, or discuss the qualitative findings within the context of the overall study. Fortunately, consensual qualitative research—modified (CQR-M) allows you to do just this task. This chapter provides a brief definition and background of CQR-M followed by a rationale for using CQR-M. We then provide a step-by-step guide to conducting CQR-M analyses.

Definition and Background

CQR-M is a qualitative research method that was adapted from CQR for use with large samples and relatively brief, simple, qualitative data. In addition to its basis in original CQR, CQR-M borrows from both discovery-oriented research (Mahrer, 1988) and exploratory research (Hill, 1990). These methods are bottom-up approaches through which researchers derive categories from the data rather than imposing a predetermined structure on the data. Once categories are developed, discovery-oriented and exploratory researchers train a new team of judges to code data into the derived categories, calculate interrater reliability, and retrain judges to code more reliably if necessary. We eschew the approach of training judges to high reliability, however, because our experience has been that focusing on reliability stifles judges' clinical judgment and inhibits discussion and thereby prevents the team from coming to the best, most comprehensively informed judgment. CQR-M merges the discovery-oriented and exploratory approaches with the consensual component of CQR to create a method that allows us to code relatively simple data directly into categories using consensus among judges.

Rationale for CQR-M

CQR-M VERSUS INTERRATER AGREEMENT

We favor CQR-M over quantitative methods that emphasize interrater agreement for several reasons. First, human communication is often nuanced and ambiguous. Being able to think and talk about shades of meaning helps researchers arrive at a more faithful representation of participants' responses than can typically be achieved by coders working independently. Relatedly, in quantitative research, judges often code data independently, and thus their unchecked biases may cause them to overlook important things. By contrast, CQR-M judges discuss their expectations, biases, and disagreements with each other at length and can thus help each other keep true to the data. Having multiple perspectives typically helps to reduce individual biases and thereby yields a better understanding of the data. Lastly, in quantitative research judges often consciously or unconsciously strive for high levels of agreement, which may cause them to constrain their clinical intuition and try to guess what other judges will say so that they can attain a specific level of agreement. In contrast, with CQR-M, judges are not required to force data into particular domains just to attain high agreement levels. Instead, they are

encouraged to use their experience and wisdom to provide thoughtful reasons for their coding.

PURPOSES OF CQR-M

CQR-M is an effective tool for exploring phenomena for new and unexpected ideas. For example, in a recently completed study (Spangler et al., 2009), we investigated specific teaching methods for training undergraduates to use the helping skill of immediacy. Through qualitative analysis of participants' written responses to questions about their experience of learning immediacy, we were able to explore participants' reactions to what they liked and disliked about training. Using CQR-M enabled discovery of two unanticipated domains in immediacy training: (a) what the students would have liked in their training and (b) how the training affected the closeness of lab group members.

In addition to exploration and discovery, CQR-M can be used for describing little-studied phenomena; results can help to expand the knowledge base and can serve as the basis for further research. Such newly described phenomena can also be combined with quantitative data to gain a fuller understanding of the topic under investigation. For example, in a study of interpersonal patterns in dreams (Hill, Spangler, Sim, & Baumann, 2007), written descriptions of dreams were taken from 67 participants. One purpose of the study was to identify and describe interpersonal themes in dreams and another was to examine the associations between these relational themes and the quantitative data on session process and outcome. CQR-M was used to derive five basic relational themes: positive, negative, interpersonal nightmare, interpersonal agency, and noninterpersonal. In addition to describing the patterns, quantitative analyses were used to determine whether different patterns of process and outcome occurred in dream sessions for the five different types of dreams.

Triangulation—another rationale for using CQR-M—refers to the notion that multiple views of a phenomenon provide a better understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 1999). Denzin (1978) described methodological triangulation as using multiple methods to examine a phenomenon. CQR-M can be used in combination with quantitative methods for the purpose of methodological triangulation. For example, in the aforementioned study on immediacy training (Spangler et al., 2009), the overall purpose of the study was to investigate how specific instructional components contributed to students' self-efficacy for using immediacy. After each component of training (e.g., reading, lecture, practice), participants were asked to rate their self-efficacy for using immediacy using a four-item scale. We triangulated quantitative results from these items with CQR-M-analyzed results of participants' responses to four open-ended questions: What

was difficult about learning to do immediacy? What was most helpful about the training? What was least helpful? How do you think your culture affected your ability (either positively or negatively) to learn immediacy? Comparison of qualitative and quantitative results revealed that students' perception of their immediacy training experience was very different in retrospect (the open questions were asked at the end of training) than it was during the process of training, when the quantitative measures were completed. CQR-M analyses indicated that 72% of the sample believed that practicing immediacy was the most effective part of the training, whereas quantitative results showed that the greatest increase in immediacy self-efficacy occurred after the lecture component. The varying results illustrate the benefit of triangulating perspectives from multiple time points.

Clearly, then, the qualitative component in this study raised interesting questions about the comparative effectiveness of teaching components and supported our thinking that the quantitative measure was subject to a ceiling effect (i.e., additional benefits of practice cannot be captured on the quantitative measure when ratings after lecture were already extremely high). In addition, the exploratory questions shed new light on culture as a factor in helping skills training, in particular, specific cultural variables unknown to the investigators that thus could not be preconceived and incorporated into the quantitative measure.

CQR-M: A Step-by-Step Guide

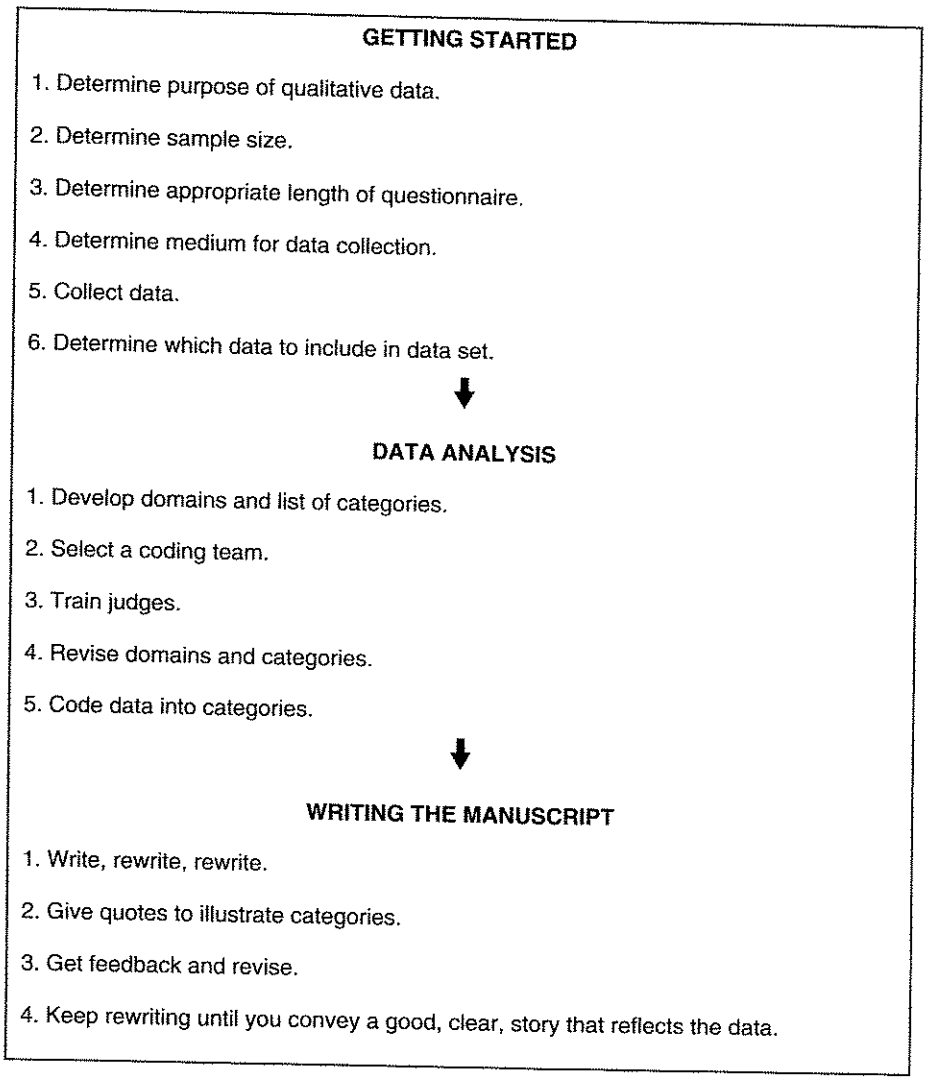
In this section we provide a detailed description of how to conduct CQR-M analyses. We begin with design considerations, including determining the purpose of the qualitative data and the issue of sample size. Next are steps for data collection, followed by steps for recruiting and training judges. We then describe the procedures for analyzing brief qualitative data, including development of domains and categories, and the consensual coding process. Finally, we provide some guidance for writing up CQR-M results and discussion sections. The steps of the CQR-M process are shown graphically in Figure 17.1. To compare the CQR-M process with that of CQR as originally conceived, compare Figure 17.1 with Figure 1.1 in Chapter 1 (see p. 13).

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Purposes of the Qualitative Data

A key consideration in deciding whether CQR-M is appropriate is how the qualitative data will be used. Whether the data will be used for

FIGURE 17.1



Steps involved in consensual qualitative research—modified.

exploration and description of phenomena or for triangulation with quantitative data will help determine how much data to collect and which topics should be the focus of inquiry. For example, for the immediacy training study (Spangler et al., 2009), we began by speculating about variables that might relate to students gaining immediacy self-efficacy. Among those variables were specific training components, student aptitude and prior experience with helping, and lab group climate. Specific training components were quantitatively tested, as were help-

ing aptitude and group climate. However, we were concerned that our quantitative measures might not capture the complexity of the students' experience of learning such an advanced and socially uncomfortable helping skill. We were interested in triangulating the quantitative data with qualitative analyses that provided a more participant-constructed view of the experience. However, given the large sample size, we wanted to limit their written responses to a length that could capture their individual experience and that could be analyzed in a reasonable length of time, which could not be done with full CQR interview-based data.

Sample Size

Although CQR traditionally has been used to analyze small samples (eight to 15 participants), larger samples can be accommodated with CQR-M. To date, two studies (Hill et al., 2007; Spangler et al., 2009) have used the CQR-M approach with samples sizes of 67 and 132, respectively. There are benefits and costs of studying a large sample using CQR-M. Obviously, studying a large number of cases with the amount of rich data that are collected with traditional CQR would be unrealistic because of the time and effort it would require. CQR-M sacrifices depth and richness in analyzing a small amount of qualitative data collected from a large number of cases, but it allows for a more complete description of the population (assuming the sample has been selected randomly). Thus, when the focus of research is not a thorough, contextual understanding of individual cases but rather a more comprehensive understanding of the population, CQR-M can be used. For instance, for the immediacy training study (Spangler et al., 2009), the qualitative component was an essential piece of the study, but our sample size ($N = 132$) made the use of traditional CQR unfeasible. Thus, we determined that we would ask a small set of structured questions that focused on attaining a fuller description of the participants' experience of learning this skill than could be captured by our quantitative measures alone.

In addition, a large sample allows researchers to divide the sample into subgroups when there is unexpected variability in cases that makes it difficult to analyze the sample as a whole. For example, having 67 participants in the Hill et al. (2007) study enabled us to examine quantitative process and outcome variables for the six subgroups of qualitatively derived patterns of interpersonal dreams.

DATA COLLECTION

In approaching data collection with CQR-M, it is helpful to think about balancing the desired richness of content with the practical concerns presented by sample size. Traditional CQR analysis is a rather labor-intensive

process: The interview transcript for each participant is read by the group of judges word by word, domains and core ideas are derived from the data, feedback between auditor and coding groups may go through several iterations, and cross-analysis of core ideas across all cases is also done consensually. The process for the recommended eight to 15 participants typically takes from 6 to 18 months. Clearly, then, for a large sample, analyzing such lengthy and detailed data would not be feasible. Thus, when larger samples are involved, it is recommended that researchers collect relatively brief and simple qualitative data.

One major departure of CQR-M is that researcher relationship to participant is much less of a factor than it is with CQR. Because a large sample size typically precludes the use of interviews, there is no direct interpersonal contact. The researcher's impact on the participant thus is typically solely through indirect means, and their coconstruction of the participant's reality is not influenced by follow-up probes that can be asked when there is direct contact between researcher and participant. Data typically is collected in written form, and questionnaires are the typical mode of communication between researcher and participant.

Developing the Questionnaire

In developing the questionnaire for CQR-M, it is crucial to have a clear idea of the purpose of the qualitative investigation. Depending on the purpose, steering a course between specificity and openness will inform construction of the items. For example, in Hill et al. (2007), the purpose of analyzing the qualitative data was to explore interpersonal themes of dreams and relate them to quantitative process and outcome results. Thus, the question was very open and simply asked participants to describe a recent dream. Participants were given no indication as to how much or how little to write, which encouraged openness in their responses.

If control over the scope and length of responses is desired, a set amount of space can be indicated, as was done for Spangler et al.'s (2009) investigation of immediacy training. For that study, participants were given half a page in which to type their responses to each question, thus indicating to them the length of their expected responses and providing a degree of consistency in the scope of responses. In addition to controlling length of response, one goal of collecting the qualitative responses was to triangulate with the immediacy self-efficacy measures as to effectiveness of specific teaching components. Thus, two of the questions corresponded to the quantitative immediacy self-efficacy measure. Specifically, we asked "What was most helpful about the training?" and "What was least helpful about the training?" The other two questions were more exploratory: "What was difficult about learning to do immediacy?" and "How did your culture affect your ability (either positively or negatively) to learn immediacy?"

The medium of data collection is also an important practical point for large samples, and we strongly encourage researchers to use electronic data collection methods. Electronic collection is less costly and more environmentally friendly than paper-and-pencil collection, facilitates anonymity, and generally streamlines data management with the added advantage of not having to transcribe the data. For the immediacy training study, the questionnaire was either posted on the class website or emailed to participants. To gather impressions of the experience while it was still fresh, participants were required to submit their response papers to their instructors via e-mail prior to the start of the next lecture class. Because the questions asked were not likely to elicit responses that required keeping a high level of confidentiality, e-mail was deemed an acceptable medium for collecting the responses. We did, however, ask students to use only their student ID numbers on their responses. We wanted to maintain the participants' anonymity because judges for the study were recruited from among the helping skills instructors and teaching assistants, and we wanted to minimize instructor bias or expectations of their students' responses.

Handling Missing and Unsuitable Data

If the goal of a study is to use CQR-M to describe and explore events, then missing data is not so much of a problem. If, however, the intent of a study is to triangulate qualitative and quantitative results on a particular phenomenon, then researchers must decide whether a participant's missing qualitative or quantitative data necessitates omitting all of that participant's data. For the immediacy training study (Spangler et al., 2009), because we wanted to compare qualitative responses with quantitative results, we omitted all data from any participant who did not complete both qualitative and quantitative measures.

CQR-M researchers also may be faced with the dilemma of having collected data that are unsuitable for addressing the research questions at hand. The data may not work for either theoretical or methodological reasons. For example, in the interpersonal dream study (Hill et al., 2007), deriving very simple relational patterns for the categories was essential to investigating how interpersonal patterns related to process and outcome data; theoretically, it was important to have pure categories to conduct the analysis. However, many of the dreams were relationally complex, with multiple scenes and images that made it impossible for the judges to come to consensus on which pattern the dream fit. Thus, these complex dreams, as well as the quantitative data for these participants, were eliminated from the final analysis of the particular questions in the study (although they may have provided important data for a different study).

RECRUITING AND TRAINING JUDGES

When assembling coding teams for CQR-M analyses, researchers should consider the amount of data to be coded and any constraints on time or availability of judges. For very large samples, it is helpful to have two or more teams working simultaneously (but trained together to ensure a shared understanding of the domains and categories). Another consideration is judges' prior coding experience and familiarity with the phenomena of interest. Although training novice coders can serve to minimize biases and expectations, some qualitative data require that judges have a more sophisticated understanding of the topics being investigated. Finally, because biases and expectations are as likely to influence judges' interpretation of phenomena in CQR-M as they are in CQR, it is important that prior to coding, members of the coding teams discuss their biases and expectations as they pertain to the material being reviewed.

When recruiting judges for the coding team for the immediacy training study (Spangler et al., 2009), we determined that it would be helpful to have coders who were familiar with the processes of both teaching and learning immediacy and who had some understanding of the theoretical bases and clinical uses of this helping skill. We thus decided to ask the course instructors and teaching assistants to serve as judges (and authors), and we were able to recruit six individuals to work on coding. The combination of judges making up the team varied from session to session, but because the categories and subcategories were clearly defined and the data were simple (and all judges were trained), shifting the composition of the teams did not seem to be problematic. The judges met as a large group during the early stages of domain development to discuss their expectations and biases about immediacy training in general, their own experiences of both teaching and learning the skill, and how they thought culture might affect immediacy self-efficacy. For training, we talked as a group about each of the domains and categories and tried to reach a common understanding of the meaning of each. We then practiced on several transcripts to ensure a common understanding of each category. Only after reaching high agreement did we separate into smaller subgroups.

THE CODING PROCESS

Developing Domains and Categories

Domains and categories in CQR-M are directly derived from the data, making this a bottom-up process. Typically, we have two people read through perhaps 30 or so transcripts and develop domains. We then write out the list of domains and edit it and put similar items close together on the list. In the next step, we meet with the larger team and work together

to apply the domains and categories to a different set of 30 or so transcripts, modifying the system until everyone feels comfortable that we have captured all the relevant ideas in the most elegant structure. Again, we draw up the list and edit it for clarity. Once the list is fairly well developed, we start the coding.

As an example, when determining the categories for the interpersonal dream content study (Hill et al., 2007), two of the authors derived the categories of interpersonal content of dreams by reading through a sample of approximately 50 dreams and identifying four types of interpersonal dreams and one type of dream that was devoid of interpersonal content. The first author had many years of dream research and CQR experience, and the second author had detailed knowledge of the dream descriptions because she had worked with the data at many steps in the process. In the immediacy training study (Spangler et al, 2009), deriving domains and categories was more complicated and required developing a fairly complex list (see Exhibit 17.1 for part of the list). The two initial coders began by using the questions asked to derive domains and

EXHIBIT 17.1

Example List of Coding Categories and Subcategories for CQR-M

Domain: Most Helpful Component of Training (He)
1. Video vignettes
2. Lecture/didactic
3. Readings
   a. Textbook
   b. Extra article
   c. Reading quiz
4. Practice
   a. Chain exercise (e.g., feedback chain, feedback loop, first lab exercise)
      i. normalizing
      ii. fact that it was compulsory
      iii. liked positive feedback
      iv. playing both client and helper roles
   b. Disclosure to classmates
   c. Practice was real and immediate (not artificial)
   d. Lab leader
      i. role-play/model (demonstration)
      ii. supportiveness
   e. Lab group members
      i. watching them (modeling)
      ii. supportive presence (group climate, respect)
   f. Feedback
      i. from lab leaders
      ii. from peers/classmates
   g. Mindfulness/relaxation exercise
5. Sequence of training components (getting didactic before practice)
6. Other

then reviewed a sample of cases to derive categories and subcategories. They also created a coding table (see Exhibit 17.2) to track the responses of each participant, which facilitated determining frequencies. In addition, if coders came upon a particularly descriptive response, they marked that response number with an asterisk so that the text could be considered later as an illustrative quotation.

EXHIBIT 17.2

Example Coding Sheet for CQR-M

Judge: _____

Instructions: Write last 4 # of ID at top of column; asterisk if well-articulated good example.

Domain/Category	ID# 1234	ID# 5678	ID#	ID#	ID#
Most Helpful					
He1	√ *	√			
He2		√			
He3					
He3a					
He3b					
He3c					
He4					
He4a					
I					
Ii	√				
Iii					
He4b					
He4c					
He4d					
I	√	√ *			
Ii		√			
He4e					
I					
Ii	√				
He4f					
He4g					
He5					
He6					

A major departure from CQR is that in CQR-M, we do not construct core ideas. Because CQR-M data typically are not as detailed, complex, or lengthy and do not have much context, it is not necessary to make sure we have interpreted the data within the context; rather, we simply place the data directly into the categories (the step that is similar to the cross-analysis in CQR). For example, for the interpersonal dream study (Hill et al., 2007), dream descriptions were simply placed into one of the six types (positive, negative, interpersonal agency, interpersonal nightmares, noninterpersonal dreams, other).

Written CQR-M responses are especially prone to ambiguity because there is no opportunity for researchers to ask clarifying questions. Although the data are comparatively simple, the fact that no follow-up questions are asked of participants makes the judges' ability to clarify ambiguous data a key factor in the analysis. For this reason, the consensual analytical process is particularly beneficial; rather than one person coding unclear data, the judges offer their interpretations of any ambiguities and come to a consensus about the participant's intent.

The judges rotate reading the responses and offering their opinion of the appropriate categories. Differences of opinion are discussed until consensus is reached. In Spangler et al. (2009), the judges read the responses to all four questions and considered them for all categories because participants' responses did not necessarily correspond to the question asked. Using this very thorough process, an entirely new domain (Outcomes of Training) emerged during the final coding, and judges went back over all papers to code this domain.

The next step in CQR-M analyses is to determine the response frequency, which we typically do by presenting the proportion of each category (the frequency of each category divided by the total number of responses). This step represents another departure from CQR as originally conceived in which frequencies are reported as *general, typical,* or *variant* rather than as proportions. For example, in the immediacy training study (Spangler et al., 2009), 72% of the sample indicated that practice was a helpful component of the immediacy training, whereas only 14% indicted that lecture was helpful. Using an a priori determined criterion of a 30% difference being the threshold for an "important" difference (see justification for this criterion in Chapter 12 in this volume), we could thus say that practice was considered to be more helpful than lecture.

As a final step we look at all categories to determine if there are categories that occur infrequently, that seem minor, or that overlap, and we edit them as needed. We try to combine small categories into larger, more abstract categories (e.g., Reading First and Modeling Before Practice were subsumed into the category Sequence of Training), or we might drop miscellaneous, small, less relevant categories that occur infrequently (< 1%).

No Auditing

Auditing is not done with CQR-M because discrepancies among judges in interpreting relatively brief responses are easily resolved through discussion and consensus among members of the coding team. Given the lack of context and the simplicity of the data, the multiple perspectives of the team members typically seem sufficient. If, however, judges have concerns about the quality of the codings, they might submit a subset of the data to an auditor to provide a check on their coding.

WRITING UP CQR-M

Writing Up Results

Because of the richness and complexity of qualitative data, it can be particularly challenging to present qualitative results in a clear, succinct manner. One suggestion to facilitate clarity is to organize results on the basis of the research questions. Specifically, researchers may restate the research question and then follow it with the results for that question. For example, in the immediacy training study (Spangler et al., 2009), one purpose of the study was to explore specific components and events that influenced undergraduate participants' experiences of learning immediacy. Four domains related to this research question were presented in Results section: difficulties involved in learning immediacy, effects of culture on learning immediacy, most helpful components of training, and least helpful components of training.

As described earlier, we report the proportion of each category in the Results section. For example, in Spangler et al. (2009), under the domain Difficulties of Learning Immediacy, the authors started with the most frequently described difficulty (i.e., it can feel awkward, uncomfortable, and socially inappropriate to use immediacy) and noted that 55% of the sample reported experiencing this difficulty in their responses. We then reported the results for the remainder of the categories. Following Hill et al.'s (2005) suggestion that CQR researchers report all data in tables and present only general and typical results in the text, we recommend that CQR-M researchers report all of the data in tables and present only the most frequent categories in the text of the Results section. Finally, just as it is helpful in traditional CQR studies, we strongly advocate the use of quotations to illustrate domains and categories when presenting CQR-M results. Participants' actual words can give the reader a vivid feel of the data and help the reader understand what the categories mean (Hill et al., 2005).

Writing the Discussion

In their article updating the use of CQR, Hill et al. (2005) stated that authors should not simply repeat the results in the Discussion section. We share this view and recommend that authors using CQR-M use the Discussion section to elaborate on the full richness of their findings in describing new or unexpected phenomena and to provide a sense of how the data fit with the literature. In addition, we recommend that authors discuss how their qualitative findings triangulate with quantitative results. Points of particular interest are consistencies and inconsistencies between qualitative and quantitative results and consideration of how these results inform our understanding of the phenomena of interest. For example, in Spangler et al. (2009), both quantitative and qualitative results indicated that immediacy training was effective, which provided stronger evidence for the effectiveness of immediacy training than if our support had been from only quantitative or only qualitative data. However, qualitative and quantitative results diverged in terms of the relative importance of each component of the training. Specifically, quantitative results suggested that lecture was the most effective component of training, whereas qualitative results indicated that practice was the most helpful component. The difference between quantitative and qualitative results posed an interesting question that we addressed in the Discussion.

Conclusions

CQR-M can be a particularly useful approach for dealing with simple data taken from large samples. It is an adaptation that retains the practice of consensus among multiple judges while integrating components of discovery-oriented and exploratory methods. By eliminating components of traditional CQR that would make its use with large samples impracticable, CQR-M provides researchers a means to explore and describe phenomena and to triangulate their qualitative findings with quantitative results. It is our hope that the preceding CQR-M primer has elucidated the method sufficiently to enable interested readers to make use of this practical and efficient means for coding qualitative data.

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