

**Qualitative research on mental health service volunteers' experiences:
A methodological assessment of three studies by Gilat & Rosenau (2011), Rath (2008), and
Thornton & Novak (2010)**

by Patricia Karsten

Focusing on the perspectives of volunteers in mental health service provision, three recent qualitative research articles were chosen because they appeared to address relevant aspects of volunteers' experiences, and therefore merited a closer methodological examination to assess in how far further research might build on the findings. Aiming to do justice to the specificities of qualitative research strategies, the assessment employs the criteria of trustworthiness and integrity (Bryman 2008), drawing out strengths and limitations of the selected articles. It will be shown how not only the quality of implementation, but also the coherence between methods, methodology and underlying philosophical assumptions about appropriate ways to conduct research contributed to the overall quality of the selected articles.

According to Bryman (2008), the trustworthiness of research can be assessed by considering its credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These criteria will be addressed in turn. The credibility criterion, which parallels the idea of internal validity in quantitative research, demands the research to be conducted according to good research practices (Bryman 2008). This criterion can thus be operationalized by evaluating whether design choices were appropriate and coherent, how well the chosen methods have been implemented, whether ethical issues have been adequately addressed, and whether techniques like respondent validation or triangulation were employed to verify the findings.

All studies were conducted at a single research site, and can be classified as cross-sectional designs because the analyses focused on volunteer accounts which were treated as cases (Bryman 2008). Gilat & Rosenau (2011) investigated the effectiveness of crisisline conversations by analysing volunteers' written responses to two questions. They employed a grounded theory approach and developed dimensions and categories from their textual data. These were verified in a two-step analytic process: after individual analyses were performed, a group discussion between analysts led to consensual categories and codings. Ethical issues were not explicitly addressed, but as no identifying information was included in the report, the minimum standards of confidentiality and anonymity of participants towards a broader public appeared to have been assured.

The studies by Rath (2008) and Thornton & Novak (2010) explored volunteers' experiences related to rape crisis intervention. Rath focused on volunteers' experiences during their training and conducted unstructured person-to-person interviews and group discussion sessions. Like Gilat & Rosenau, Rath employed a grounded theory approach to analysis following Strauss and Corbin (1990; as cited in Rath, 2008), but did so in a more profound way by interweaving data collection and analysis and by sharing emerging theoretical ideas with participants in follow-up interviews and group sessions, which also helped to verify her findings through respondent validation. She explicitly addressed ethical issues by mentioning that she had changed participants' names and omitted some information from interviews, and attempted to decrease power differentials in the research relationship by giving participants control over the interview situation, pointing to an important aspect of feminist research practice (Bryman 2008).

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Contrasting to Rath's interview-centred approach, Thornton and Novak conducted an ethnographic study which combined participant observation and semi-structured interviewing to gain insight into volunteers' emotions related to rape crisis intervention. They employed the Glaser and Strauss constant comparative method (1967; as cited in Thornton & Novak, 2010) and followed up theoretical ideas by adapting their interview guide between interviews. Their approach was thus particularly strong on the aspect of verification of findings, because the chosen ethnographic method enabled them to triangulate data from different participants as well as different data collection methods. The report states that approval from an institutional board was obtained, establishing confidence that ethical issues related to their full participant method had been appropriately addressed, even if they were not further mentioned in the research report.

All three studies appear to have employed their methods according to good research practices, addressed basic ethical issues, and the chosen research design was able to hold together research question, data collection and data analysis. All studies employed techniques to verify their findings. Therefore, all three studies are considered to have established their credibility. Furthermore, all three studies provide some information about the chosen site and participants. This information helps to assess the transferability of findings, a criterion which corresponds to the demand for external validity or generalizability of findings in quantitative research (Bryman 2008). Due to typically small sample sizes, qualitative research generally assumes no statistical generalizability, but the technique of thick description of settings, participants and events (Geertz 1973; as cited in Bryman 2008) provides a basis for an assessment in how far findings might be applicable to other contexts.

Gilat & Rosenau included brief general information about the type of service, training and experience of participating volunteers, which permit a basic assessment of comparability to other crisis helplines. Rath was especially strong in putting her research into a broader context by expanding on the historical development of the rape crisis movement, and also included extended information about the specific site, training procedures and characteristics of volunteers. Thornton & Novak described their research site and participant characteristics in sufficient detail, while not expanding on the broader context of rape crisis counselling. Overall, both Rath and Thornton & Novak outmatch Gilat & Rosenau in the degree to which they enable the reader to assess the transferability of the research.

All three studies presented their findings with ample evidence from their data, establishing the dependability of the research. Dependability relates to the reliability criterion in quantitative research and demands that findings be repeatable. In qualitative research, this amounts to adopting an auditing approach with extensive documentation of the entire research process to enable assessment whether the findings are justifiable (Bryman 2008). In the current context, it is understood as the requirement to make visible the links between data and conclusions. Gilat & Rosenau provided only short quotes, but in sufficient amount to enable the reader to understand and accept their conclusions. Rath included longer quotes from interviews to illustrate each theme, summarized the data and provided a persuasive account by identifying typical or outsider positions. Thornton & Novak's presentation was especially convincing due to the extensive use of long extracts from fieldnotes, thus lively illustrating all themes, further supported by quotes from interviews. Thus all three studies were able to establish the dependability of conclusions.

With respect to confirmability, a criterion corresponding to the demand for objectivity and value-neutrality in quantitative research (Bryman 2008), the three studies took a different approach. Gilat and Rosenau appear to have minimized researcher influence by relying on written responses rather than face-to-face interviews, but they are not reflexive about their impact throughout the research process, revealing the positivist belief in detached and objectivized

research (Bryman 2008). In contrast, both Rath and Thornton & Novak show a high degree of personal involvement in data collection and analysis, but they take a non-politized stance towards the highly emotive topic of sexual violence implicit in rape crisis counselling, and include considerable reflexivity about their own involvement. Gilat & Rosenau's approach is acceptable from a positivist perspective, but less so from an interpretivist viewpoint which requires acknowledging that researcher influence is unavoidable and must be addressed. But since Gilat & Rosenau indeed reduced researcher influence on the findings through methodological choices, compared to Rath and Thornton & Novak, all three studies are considered to display a satisfactory degree of confirmability.

Having considered credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, the discussion so far has shown that all three studies were able to establish trustworthiness in ways consistent with their different epistemological and ontological perspectives. Besides trustworthiness, integrity is seen as the second important aspect when evaluating qualitative research (Bryman 2008). In the current discussion, integrity is understood as an ethical dimension related to principles of truthfulness and accuracy in the relationship between researcher and research participants, and in the presentation of research (D849, Block 4). None of the three studies reveals signs of inaccuracy or misrepresentation of research findings, causing no doubts about truthfulness and accuracy of the accounts and researchers' behaviour vis a vis participants.

Having established trustworthiness and integrity of the selected studies, the consistency of methodologies and the knowledge claims derived will now be considered. Gilat & Rosenau employed qualitative data collection and analysis methods to address the effectiveness of helpline conversations. They aimed to isolate causal factors and outcome characteristics, an approach otherwise typical for quantitative research strategies and positivist epistemology (Bryman 2008). The attempt to derive general characteristics of effective conversations, and the researchers' non-reflective approach implied an objectivist ontology, assuming that the effectiveness of conversations can be studied independently of social actors. The research seemed to be directed towards preparing future quantitative research by operationalizing 'effectiveness' into indicators that are accessible to measurement. By attempting to narrow its meaning, this research used effectiveness as a defining concept, where qualitative approaches based in interpretivist epistemology might be using it as a sensitizing concept, concerned with exploring subtle shades of meaning (Bryman 2008). But despite the lack of coherence between qualitative methodology and the researchers' ontological, epistemological and conceptual assumptions, the knowledge claims are based on solid implementation of methods, and thus the research is considered to be of good quality.

Contrasting to Gilat & Rosenau, both other studies were more consistent in their choice of methodology and underlining philosophical and theoretical assumptions. Both used their analyses to make knowledge claims related to commonalities and variations in participants' experiences, thus using the concepts they explored in a sensitizing way. Both studies were based on constructionist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, as both acknowledge the constructed and interpretive nature of accounts, and were reflexive about researcher influence on data collection, analysis and presentation of findings. So while not only employing sound methodology and fulfilling the criteria of trustworthiness and integrity, these two studies reveal a high degree of consistency between methodology and implicit as well as explicit philosophical assumptions, and therefore outmatch the Gilat & Rosenau study in quality.

References

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