sample of one

What determines quality in qualitative research?
Lawrence F Bailey, Chairman, Catalyst Research Ltd

Over the last year or so, and most particularly over the last six months, we have enjoyed an abundance of tales and papers intended to present authoritative assessment of what qualitative research is all about. It is striking that although these assessments are substantially different in their odour, content and tone, each author is clearly writing from an assumption, which no doubt exists at a formidably deep level, to say I know that I do a good job!

We have now arrived at the challenge of finding absolutes by which to defend such fundamental self-assessment. And so it happens that all that has been said so far, it is clear that a good job for Gerald de Groot may not be a good job for Wendy Gordon; a Mike Owen 'good job' may not be so for Mary Goodyear, and so on. The perception is that several separate groups of people are reviewing the situation from quite different perspectives. Worse still, some groups are beginning to use a different language in discussing the objectives of qualitative research, or using some familiar terms to mean unfamiliar things.

There is in this discussion a down the blurred icon of quality into more manageable concepts. Before this can be done, we must all be obliged to accept that there is such a thing as methodology in qualitative research. Assuming we set aside various extended and specialised uses of the term 'research' (the story of history and the Ugandan secret police are examples), this point is non-negotiable. In seeking to declare that concepts such as 'reliability and validity' are 'inappropriate for qualitative research', Mike Owen is simply wrong, since research by definition implies the admittance of concepts such as reliability and validity. But those whose hearts are firmly in quantitative research are also wrong to assume that these concepts can only be interpreted in the ways that are appropriate for quantitative studies. To be fair to Gerald de Groot, I cannot actually consider that he is saying this explicitly as much, but the flavour of his recent writing is that of the effect that qualitative research studies should be interpretable to the same criteria in quantitative research – namely that the findings should be replicable across researchers and within techniques. But a qualitative researcher, or a group of qualitative researchers, may very reasonably be perfectly satisfied to claim that their research findings could be replicated within researchers (and very probably) across techniques.

There is logically one other course available for the dissident qualitative researcher who is unwilling to submit to all the use of

senseable things (ref Claude R Hart), but so much of her May Newsletter paper is tinged with an evident nostalgia for the good old days. I cannot really believe that Mary Goodyear wants clients to buy her services as a good typist, or recruiter, or even as a person who is good at transcribing tapes. These tasks can safely be left to others who are good at them. It is important for a project to be cost-effective without loss of quality, and who could doubt that Mary Goodyear, and other senior researchers, should be served for those parts of a project at which they uniquely excel, and be costed appropriately. This is not, of course, to say that rigour is unnecessary. But I am sure that it is not the least well-served to offer them as a researcher is less likely to gain valid insight without a measure of rigour, it is very easy indeed to have rigour with producing insight.

One other dilemma of research, which is a formidably controversial nor, perhaps, allotted sufficient importance, is the use of a good oral or written presentation style. A very individualistic thing. Let's have more of this.

So much for an analysis of what determines quality; but to complete the chapter we must ask a question that is, what evokes on the heretical. The question is whether clients actually want quality research at all?

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happenings

The story so far... Survey Research Associates (SRA) held a challenging competition at Brighton (MRS Conference). Over 400 researchers took part, and either by skil or by good dealing, nearly everyone didn't win. The prize, a day trip for two on the Orient Express, went to Julian Brown (Pioneer Assurance) who won the biggest prize. The winner received a champagne and went with (from left to right) Lexley Malligan (SRA), Simon Gale (Avis), Debbie Kears (SRA) and Steffan Carroll (SRA).

The statistical challenge from SRA in the May MRS Newsletter on the same subject was won jointly by the only two entries received: both gave the same answer (so it must be right). Robert Beachy (Usher Marketing Surveys) and Susan Giles (Stats MR) each received a limited edition Ledo model omnibus complete with SRA logo. For those interested there was evidence that not everyone was guessing the answers. Using a Binomial distribution respondents were able to calculate the expected number of people getting various numbers of answers right can be calculated. Comparing actual with expected results using the Chi-squared test gave a highly significant result: entrants were not guessing.

Call for contributions

There will be an MRS Seminar in January 1988 entitled 'Advances in data collection technology'. If you think you know of any specific examples which would fit this description, or would like to know more about topics which you have heard of. Please write to the Convenor of WH3 Seminar, c/o the MRS, 175 Oxford Street, London W1R 1TA, clearly indicating whether you wish to be considered as a contributor or wish to know more about a topic at the Seminar.

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44

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45