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ENSURING RIGOUR AND TRUSTWORTHINESS IN A QUALITATIVE STUDY: A REFLECTIVE ACCOUNT

Summary

The reflections reported on here are based on a study that investigated social workers' perceptions of key influences to effective collaborative child protection decision making and practice. The study drew on evidence from a constructivist-interpretivist qualitative research design; involving semi-structured interviews with qualified and experienced social workers and from direct, non-participant, observations of child protection meetings. In line with the focus of this reflective account, a number of strategies were adopted to ensure rigor and trustworthiness throughout this qualitative study. Evidence from the study suggests that, apart from the multilevel relationship, organisational, and external influences, child protection decision-making does not rely entirely on the threshold criterion of the likelihood and significance of risk of harm. Instead, professionals use a combination of discretionary intuition and analytical judgement when making decisions. Conclusions drawn from the study include that, existing guidance on decision-making is inadequate. This study, contributed to considerable conceptual clarity regarding the complex child protection decision-making process.

Key words: bias and subjectivity, rigour and trustworthiness, reflection, reflexivity, saturation, triangulation

Introduction

Rigour and trustworthiness are to qualitative research what reliability and validity are to quantitative research (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). Ensuring rigour and trustworthiness is a criterion for achieving quality in a qualitative study by reducing biases

and subjectivity. One of the distinguishing characteristic of constructivist-interpretivist qualitative studies is the epistemological relationship between the knower and the known (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998); which relates to the close interactive dialogue between the investigator and research participants who are the object of the investigation (Schwandt, 1994). Yet, this inseparable close relationship between the researcher and what is being researched is also its main source of criticism with regard to the perceived inherent biases and subjectivity in the overall quality of the study (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). This reflective account explores how a number of strategies that were adopted to ensure rigor and trustworthiness throughout a qualitative study.

Strategies employed to ensure rigour and trustworthiness

Owing to the concerns associated with bias and subjectivity in qualitative research, a number of strategies were employed to ensure rigour and trustworthiness throughout the research process, namely:

- Ethical considerations
- Reflection and reflexivity:
- Principle of saturation
- Member checking
- Triangulation
- Lincoln and Guba (1985) criteria for ensuring rigour and trustworthiness

Ethical considerations

Crucially, all research involving human participants, should have research ethics approval and research ethics approvals remain an important responsibility since the publication of Nuremburg code and the Helsinki declaration (World Medical Association, 2013). The first step to ensuring rigour and trustworthiness in this study was the ethical considerations which began with enabling access to the research sites and participants through gate keepers (Creswell, 2009). This involved a protracted process of completing various forms including the ethics application form; insurance and indemnity cover forms; information sheets and consent forms. The process was long-drawn-out but ultimately, after fulfilling all

the requirements for this rigorous process, ethics approval was granted by Local Authority's Research Ethics Governance Committee.

Use of reflection and reflexivity

Reflection involves taking a step back in order to make meaning, understand and learn from experience (Fook, 2002; Gibbs, 1988), while being reflexive is self-introspective and enhances self-awareness (Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Savage, 2007). Throughout the study, reflection and reflexivity were employed to minimise subjectivity and biases (Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Long and Johnson, 2000; Peshkin, 1988; Savage, 2007). Reflection and reflexivity were employed throughout the research process with aid of two main frameworks, namely;

- Peshkin 'I's, model of reflection
- Insider-outsider perspective.

Peshkin 'I's, model of reflection

Employing the Peshkin (1988) model of reflection involves actively seeking out and maintaining reflective and reflexive attentiveness to biases and subjectivity throughout the research process from different vantage points. Rather than subjectivity being an accidental discovery or occurrence, using this Peshkin 'I's model requires meaningful attentiveness to one's own subjectivity, while also acknowledging that subjectivity is ever present in the entire research process (Peshkin, 1988). In this regard, the Peshkin 'I's, model of reflection was used to reduce the influence of what was already known from learning, teaching and practice, to keep the passion under control, and to filter assumptions and interpretations already held, for example, from three levels of:

- 'I' as an experienced social worker,
- 'I' as a social work academic, and
- 'I' as a former child protection conference chairperson

In short, the Peshkin's model enabled constant reflection and reflexivity to be made throughout the research process and at different vantage points.

The insider-outsider perspective

As with the Peshkin's model, the insider-outsider perspectives involved adopting different vantage points, at one level: as a passionate insider, with knowledge and experience, and at another: as an outsider undertaking the study. These different perspectives introduced tensions and dilemmas which had to be balanced and managed reflexively (Allen, 2004). For example, reflexivity ensured that the knowledge, experience and passion about the research topic was consciously separated from what social workers were describing and looked at more objectively as evidence (Allen, 2004; Rouf, Larkin and Lowe, 2011).

The principle of saturation

The principle of saturation was applied to enhance rigour and trustworthiness in this study. The principle was used within purposive sampling to achieve the sample sizes of sixteen (16) research interview participants and twenty (20) direct, non-participant observed child protection meetings. Saturation is a point of diminishing returns when applied to sampling in a qualitative study (Mason, 2010; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003) or the point at which the collection of new data does not shed any further light on the issues under investigation (Glaser, and Strauss, 1967). With both samples, the sixteenth interview and twentieth observed meeting were the points at which the collection of new data from either of the two sources did not shed any new insights on the issues under investigation. At this point the decision was made that there was nothing to be gained from any further interviews or observations. Saturation is often considered to be the most important factor to think about when mulling over sample size decisions in qualitative research (Charmaz, 2006; Dworkin, 2012; Mason, 2010). While saturation is rooted in the theoretical sampling in grounded theory studies (Glasser and Strauss, 1967), in this instance it was used to ensure robustness of the data. For example, both samples were purposively selected through saturation process (Brown, et al, 2006; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). The saturation point was therefore reached when additional interviews or observations did not seem to bring about any changes to the emerging themes and the conceptual framework.

Saturation was also interwoven throughout sampling, data collection and data analysis.

Member checking

Member checking involves allowing research participants to review their audio recording or going through their transcripts. Member checking is considered to be the single most important activity for bolstering a study's credibility (Creswell 2009; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In this study, although some declined, all research participants were given the opportunity to verify the data before it was analysed.

Triangulation

Findings from both data strands were compared through triangulation in order to establish either, convergence and divergence, thus ensuring rigour and trustworthiness in the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; O'Cathain, Murphy and Nicholl, 2010; Ponterotto, 2005). Triangulation also enabled the development of comprehensive understanding of the issues under investigation (Patton, 1999) as well as provided a greater perspective about the data (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013; O'Cathain, Murphy and Nicholl, 2010). Figure 1 below provides an illustration on how triangulation was applied this study.

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW FINDINGS		TRIANGULATION PROTOCOL	QUALITATIVE OBSERVATION FINDINGS	QUALITATIVE COMMENTS
Super ordinate Themes	Main Themes		Collaborative influences that were observed	
Multi-level relationship influences	Professionals' relationship influences (Barriers and enablers)	AG	Professionals influences	There was convergence hence agreement, between what social workers perceived and what was observed about professionals', lead social workers' and family members' influences that were observed.
	Lead social workers' relationship influences: (Barriers and enablers)		Lead social workers influences	Evidence of the presence of multi-level relationship influences at professionals', lead social workers' and family members' levels was established during both interviews and observations. The systemic relationship between multi-level relationship influences was evident in both interviews and observations in with the conceptual framework.
	Family members' relationship influences: (Barriers and enablers)		Family members influences	
Multi-level organisational influences	Professionals' organisational influences (Barriers and enablers)	PA	Organisational influences were not specifically included in the observation sheet	Although organisational influences were not specifically included in the observation sheet, evidence of multi-level organisational influences at professionals', lead social workers' and family members' levels was established during both interviews and observations. However during observations for example C5CP1and C3CP2 meetings organisational influences were observed due to absence or change of social worker and the line manager stepping in.
	Lead social workers' organisational influences (Barriers and enablers)	PA		
	Family members' organisational influences (Barriers and enablers)	PA		
External influences (Barriers and enablers)		AG	External influences	There was agreement, hence convergence in what participants said and what was observed about external influences. Similar external influences were identified in both interviews and observations.
Decision-making Influences (Barriers and enablers)		AG	Decision-making prioritisation influences	There was agreement, hence, convergence about the lack of clarity of the decision making criteria. Instead there was evidence of discretionary and intuitive multiple and professional judgement criteria being used during interviews and observations.
		AG	Child protection outcomes influences	There was evidence that child protection outcomes being due to collaboration in what was observed although participants were not specifically asked about child protection outcomes e.g. during C1CP2 and C3CP2 as cited in Chapter 6

Key to Convergence Coding Scheme: AG=agreement; PA=partial agreement; S=silence; DA=Dissonance

Figure 1: An illustration of a triangulation protocol comparing qualitative interview finding to qualitative observation findings.

Lincoln and Guba, (1985) criteria for ensuring rigor and trustworthiness

This study also adopted the Lincoln and Guba, (1985) criteria for ensuring rigor and trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness was ensured mainly, through adhering to each of the following criteria:

- Credibility;
- Transferability;
- Dependability
- Confirmability

Ensuring credibility

Ensuring credibility is used in qualitative research in preference to internal validity in quantitative research. In this study ensuring credibility involved aligning every step in the research process, paying attention to the fit of the question, data, and method, as well as, ensuring that each step in the data analysis is properly accounted for (Richards, 2005).

Ensuring transferability

Transferability in qualitative research is used in preference to external validity/generalizability in quantitative research. For example, while the qualitative findings for this study may not be generalised due to reliance on a small sample, the extent to which they can be applied to other situations may be a consideration (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011; Whittaker, 2010). The in-depth understanding of the context of study and a detailed description of what was studied may allow comparisons and transferability to be made (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013; Shenton, 2004; Whittaker, 2010). In that regard, the thick contextual information about the background to this study and its setting was provided to facilitate transferability. Similarly, studies in the literature review that employed similar research methods in comparable and different environments were also considered.

2.6.3 Ensuring dependability

Dependability, as opposed to reliability in quantitative research was also employed in this qualitative study. As with credibility, ensuring dependability in this instance involved maintaining trustworthiness throughout all steps in the research process (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

This involved the use of constant reflection and reflexivity, and detailed reporting to facilitate replicability. Figure 2 below provides a visual flowchart which illustrates the different stages and decisions made throughout the research process for this study.

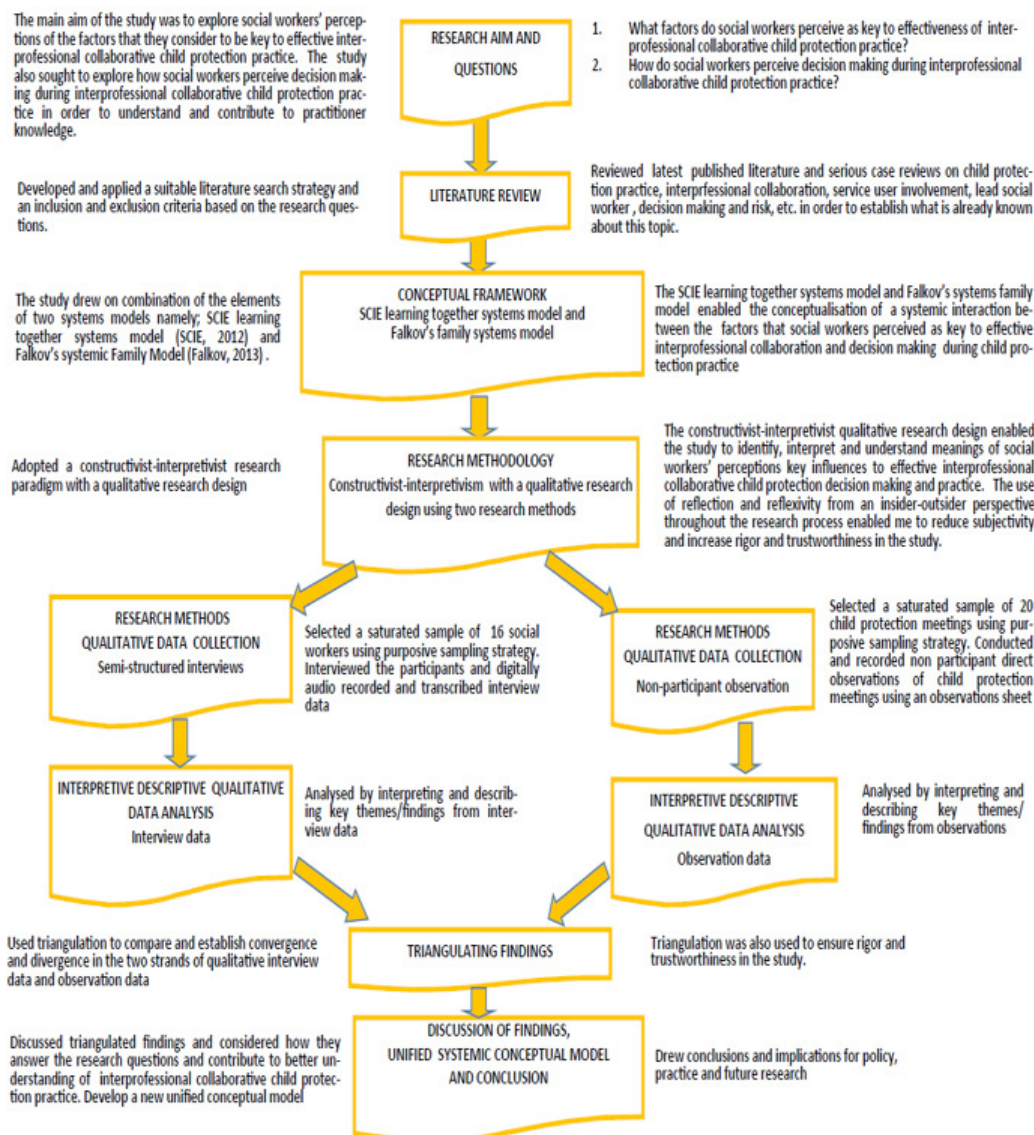


Figure 2: A visual flowchart illustration of the different stages and decisions made throughout the research process

Figure 3 below also illustrates the specific steps that were followed during the interpretive descriptive data analysis, to demonstrate transparency and dependability of the research process and the study as a whole.

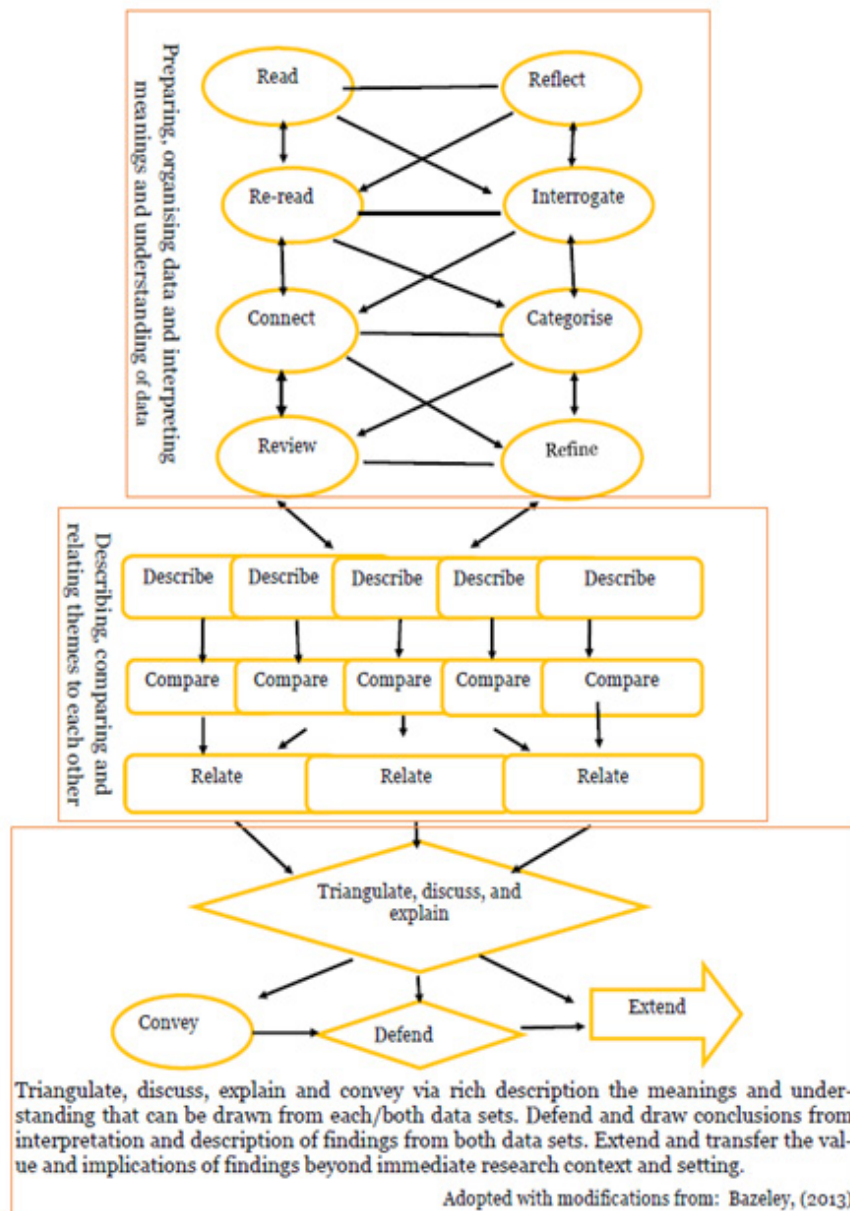


Figure 3: An illustration of the specific steps that were followed during the interpretive descriptive data analysis

In addition, both Figures 2 and 3 serve the same purpose as audit trails which is commonly used in case studies

Ensuring confirmability

The dimension of confirmability is the equivalent of objectivity in quantitative research. Confirmability in this study, with regard to rigour and trustworthiness involved ensuring that findings of the study reflect what social workers accurately described and what was observed at child protection meetings, rather than what was already known from experience. In that respect, managing and balancing the dilemmas and tensions of the insider-outsider perspective facilitated the increase in confirmability of this study (Allen, 2004). As alluded to above, both Figures 2 and 3 above provided a trail of the inductive logic of the research process in order to complement transparency, integrity and confirmability of this study (Akkerman et al, 2006; Carcary, 2009; Seale, 1999; Shenton, 2004; Yin, 2009). Key to confirmability is the open and transparent nature of the research processes and procedures, and the leaving a clear audit trail as a guarantor of the integrity and trustworthiness (Smith, 2003; Yin, 2009).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this reflective account has demonstrated how a range of strategies were employed at different stages and throughout the study to reduce biases and subjectivity and to ensure rigor and trustworthiness. These strategies included the application of the ethics approval for the study; use of reflection and reflexivity involving use of Peshkin I's model of reflection and the insider-outsider perspective; saturation during sampling; member checking during data collection; use of triangulation protocol to establish convergence or divergence as well as Lincoln and Guba, (1985) criteria for ensuring rigor and trustworthiness. Ultimately, this reflective account adds value by demonstrating that the combination of a range strategies are able to reduce biases and subjectivity as well as ensure rigour and trustworthiness of a qualitative study and its findings, hence overall quality of the study.

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