

Capítulo 30

Scientific Integrity Qualitative Research in a Virtual Setting

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Resumen

La investigación es un paso fundamental en la vida académica de cualquier estudiante universitario, y conlleva un proceso en el que se siguen diversos procedimientos, se reflexiona sobre lo hecho y se ponen en práctica conocimientos y capacidades. También significa aprender a investigar. Esto implica que el investigador debe demostrar integridad científica. Este estudio explora cómo los investigadores primerizos adoptan y siguen consideraciones éticas mientras realizan un estudio de investigación durante la pandemia de Covid-19. Ciertamente, existen cuestiones éticas que ellos deben tener en cuenta al momento de desarrollar un estudio en un contexto virtual. Este estudio aborda entonces el tema de las consideraciones y principios éticos y cómo los participantes los ponen en práctica o no en los diversos procesos que los conllevan a la finalización de una investigación y a la presentación de los resultados a la comunidad académica. Los

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resultados de este estudio se analizaron y presentaron mediante un análisis de contenido. También incluye una muestra de 11 personas de estudiantes de cuarto año pertenecientes a un programa de lenguas extranjeras. El propósito de este artículo es descubrir y luego debatir algunas consideraciones éticas subyacentes, los procedimientos éticos y la integridad científica mientras se realiza una investigación educativa. Esta investigación es relevante para el contexto educativo en la universidad porque podría brindar a profesores y estudiantes la oportunidad de reflexionar sobre lo que hacen los investigadores primerizos al realizar una investigación, por lo tanto, esto podría llegar a una discusión sobre los procesos de investigación que se están llevando a cabo, y eventualmente mejorarlos.

Palabras clave: integridad científica, investigación cualitativa, ética, educación superior, investigadores primerizos

Abstract

Conducting research is a major step in the academic life of any university student, and it entails a process of following various procedures, reflecting upon what has been done, and putting into practice knowledge and capabilities. It also means learning how to do research. This implies that the researcher needs to demonstrate scientific integrity. This study explores how first-time researchers adopt and follow ethical considerations while conducting a research study during the Covid-19 pandemic. There are certainly ethical issues that they need to take into consideration when developing a study in a virtual context. So, this study addresses the topic of ethical considerations, and principles and how participants put them into practice or not in the various processes leading to the completion of a research and to the presentation of the results in the academic community. The findings of this study were analyzed and presented using content analysis. It also includes an 11-person sample of 4th-year students belonging to a foreign language program. The purpose of this paper is to uncover and then debate some underlying ethical considerations, ethical procedures, and scientific integrity while conducting an educational study. This research is relevant for the educational context in the university because it could provide professors and students with the opportunity to

reflect upon what first-time researchers do when conducting research, so this could lead to discussing the research processes taking place, and eventually improve them.

Keywords: scientific integrity, qualitative research, ethics, higher education, first-time researchers

Introduction

This research addresses a recent issue related to the place of scientific integrity and the adoption of ethical frameworks while conducting educational qualitative research in the Colombian context. Having scientific integrity implies possessing a series of ethical values and adhering to ethical conducts before, during and after doing research. In recent years, there have been scandals in the American academic context (Kelley & Chang, 2007) related to falsifying research, violations, among others, and the Colombian context is not an exception. In 2019, a major scandal was all over the news when a professor from a university located in Atlántico region was accused of plagiarizing 23 research articles. Consequently, they were excluded from IOP Publishing. Taking into consideration this context, it is vital to say that scientific integrity and ethical considerations are key foundations when conducting research at any institution.

Qualitative research in the educational setting implies going to the field to observe, talk, and interact with the participants in their natural setting. Depending on the type of qualitative research, sometimes the researcher just observes the participants, and utilizes a number of instruments to collect data. In other types of research, he can have a more active role by having meetings and talks with the participants to obtain a series of data that will serve to the understanding of the phenomenon under study. In these encounters, the participants are seen as information providers and tellers of experiences about the topic of the study. They are not seen as objects that can be used to present a series of results that increase scientific knowledge (Connolly, 2003).

In the public university where this study takes place, the students of a foreign language program used to conduct qualitative research in education in different settings such as classrooms, learning groups, schools, institutions, and universities with an in-

person approach. But due to a number of measures taken in order to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus, now, they conduct research in virtual settings. This implies that they establish a research methodology that includes a procedure to be developed in a virtual context and at the same time it implies applying instruments adapted to virtual settings.

Ethics is fundamental and crucial in any research, and it corresponds to a series of norms and standards that guide the researcher's behavior and conduct while interacting with the participants and analyzing the data coming from the settings and participants (Martineau, 2007). Ethics can be considered as a roadmap that guides the researcher's while conducting a study.

Ethics allows the researcher to determine and distinguish when something is right or wrong. Besides it comes into play when analyzing and reflecting upon the ways to behave and act throughout the process of conducting research. In this sense, the researcher determines when his behavior or conduct is acceptable or unacceptable during the data collection and analysis process, as well as the presentation of the findings (Finlay, 1998). According to Elshafie (2013) ethics should be a key guiding aspect in every qualitative research since the validity, reliability and trustworthiness of the findings established by the researcher have to follow a series of conduct codes and protocols.

In the same line, Dooly, M., Moore, M., and Vallejo, C. (2017) state that when doing qualitative research, mainly in educational contexts, it frequently raises ethical concerns. This is certainly not a simple task for young researchers, especially because anticipating ethical difficulties as they plan their research involves addressing several aspects. In doing so they may neglect certain aspects. In this regard, the preliminary stages are critical and fundamental in terms of foreseen and anticipating any ethical difficulties or negative consequences the study may have. This process addresses elements of great importance such as participants' protection and privacy, confidentiality, informed, voluntary consent without coercion and ability to withdraw from the study.

According to Creswell "research does involve collecting data from people, about people" (Punch, 2005). It requires much more than following a set of static norms since it also entails the resolution of any ethical issues that may occur throughout the study; that



is to say that researchers must safeguard research participants, build trust with them, promote research integrity, guard against misbehavior and impropriety that could reflect negatively on their organizations or institutions, and deal with new, difficult situations (Isreal & Hay, 2006).

For Finlay (1998) the main objective of the research done by qualitative researchers is to understand people's experience based on the complexity and richness coming from the data.

Ethics is a central tenet that allows research to be developed effectively. So, every researcher has the responsibility to adopt and follow ethical considerations and protocols. In doing so, he protects the participants of the study, conducts the data collection and data analysis following proper procedures, and ensures that his conduct is always correct. This leads us to establish the themes for the literature review of this study: qualitative research and ethics.

Research problem and justification

Taking into account that the ethical consideration, ethical standards, protocols and codes are present in every research field, universities and institutions have adopted a series of ethical standards that guide the development of research studies. This implies that first-time researchers follow and adopt ethical guidelines while conducting research, nevertheless it is relevant to investigate if the ethical guidelines and protocols are put into practice. First-time researchers are currently carrying out their research in a virtual setting which could be an opportunity to further adopt and follow ethical considerations or not.

With this research problem and context, we establish the following research questions:

Research question and objectives

- What are the ethical considerations that guide first-time researchers while conducting research in education?

- How do first-time researchers put into practice the different ethical considerations during the development of their qualitative research in a virtual context?
- Are there any ethical lapses present in the first-time researchers' research that could put in jeopardy the reliability and validity of their research?

Literature review

Qualitative educational research

Qualitative educational research allows the researcher to focus his attention on exploring, examining, and understanding a particular group of individuals in their natural setting. Then the researcher describes the different meanings those individuals attribute to a social problem (Creswell, 2009; Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). Additionally, qualitative research implies a process in which the researcher understands and interprets a phenomenon belonging to a natural setting by means of applying a series of procedures and instruments such as the observation, the journal, interviews, among others (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Scotland, 2012). Furthermore, qualitative educational research is intertwined with every ethical aspect since the researcher interacts with humans (Jeffrey, 2004).

In this sense, thanks to qualitative educational research, the researcher explores, understands and describes a social phenomenon by means of interacting and communicating with the participants as well as observing them in their natural setting.

Ethics

According to Resnik (2015) for most people the term ethics refers to norms of conduct that distinguish what is acceptable or unacceptable. Nevertheless, when talking about disciplines the term ethics makes reference to standards of conduct, norms, methods, procedures and even perspectives that come into action when facing and analyzing complex problems inherent to a specific field. The adoption of the standards by

the researcher leads to the prevention of the manufacture or falsification of data and the search for knowledge.

As claimed by Drew, Hardman & Hosp (2008) ethics is a cornerstone if any researcher wants to conduct meaningful and effective research. Guillemin & Gillam (2004) view ethics as a framework for thinking in which we can differentiate two types of ethics: procedural ethics and “ethics in practice”. The authors indicate that procedural ethics is normally associated with the different protocols that are vital and a requisite before starting doing research. And ethics in practice implies the everyday ethical situations the researcher has to deal with when being in the fieldwork, collecting and handling data, among others. They also express that when addressing the issue of ethics, reflexivity is a paramount element. Although reflection is a well-known concept in the qualitative research domain, it is worthwhile to make it visible. According to Rodriguez-Ruedas (2020) reflection is a cognitive process that allows a person to think about a situation he is living or that he lived, and based on his conclusions and understandings, he can make the right decisions. For Finlay (1998) being reflexive involves a thoughtful analysis. This means adopting reflexivity provides rich understanding.

For Drew, Hardman & Hosp (2008), Jeffrey (2004), and Elshafie (2013) one of the main ethical elements is to ensure the protection and respect of human participants which implies following and adhering to certain procedures and aspects such as consent. This means that the potential participant has the right to participate or not in the study. Nevertheless, consent entails that the researcher provides enough clear information, so the participant understands each part of the study and eventually s/he provides a written and oral consent (Roberts, & Allen, 2015).

Drew, Hardman & Hosp (2008) indicate that the researcher has to commit to not causing any harm (psychological or physical) to participants. This means taking into consideration how to treat vulnerable populations and ensuring confidentiality.

Another important ethical aspect to follow is privacy which is related to not unveiling any private information that can be sensitive. This can even be linked to not

revealing where the data was collected or any information that could help identify a participant (Elshafie, 2013).

From the research standpoint, this study centers its attention on ethics while conducting qualitative research in a virtual setting. Ethics in this sense is related to standards and norms that guide researchers and that serve the objectives of the research. Furthermore, ethical norms help the researcher have clear guidelines about how to conduct their studies so reliability, trustworthiness and validity of the different procedures are ensured. It is relevant to mention that ethics is also related to integrity (Head, 2018). The latter relates to outright falsification of the data, plagiarism, and alteration of data.

West (2019) defines integrity as, “An internal system of principles which guides our behavior. The rewards are intrinsic. Integrity is a choice rather than an obligation. Even though influenced by upbringing and exposure, integrity cannot be forced by outside sources. Integrity conveys a sense of wholeness and strength. When we are acting with integrity, we do what is right – even when no one is watching. When following codes of ethics, we do what is right, however, integrity is something more. It suggests that doing what is right is, in fact, more than following rules or codes. (West, 2019 as cited in Ethics and Integrity in Nursing Research, 2019).

On the other hand, in terms of ethical writing, plagiarism has typically been characterized as presenting someone else's words, images, methods, structure and design components, ideas, and so on as one's own. It's frequently associated with terms like “word kidnapping”, “thought kidnapping”, “fraud”, and “literary theft” (Roigh, M. 2006).

Plagiarism may not always result from a conscious attempt to deceive. When taking notes, students may forget to write down citation information, or they may be completely unaware of referencing conventions. These justifications, however, are no guarantee that the person will not be accused of copying. Even if the plagiarism was neither deliberate or reckless, an academic punishment for bad practice may be imposed.

Kelley & Chang (2007) conducted a study where they established a typology of university ethical lapses and their impact on American universities, stakeholders, and the

society. Their study is relevant to this research because they suggested a series of solutions to ensure that university employees engage in moral behavior. They proposed two major solutions. The first one is to create university codes of conduct and the second is to develop university codes built around professional codes. In their words, universities must model the ethical behaviors they expect from their students.

In the African continent, Pillay (2014) conducted a research study to explore ethical considerations in educational research involving South African children. His study included participants who were experts with sufficient knowledge about ethical concerns surrounding children. His findings highlighted ethical principles such as the need for child participation in research activities, as well as a research ethics committee to safeguard child participation in the research. Since this research centered its attention on children, another finding made evident the need to promote no harm to children, especially when interviewing them because depending on the phenomenon under study, it could provoke a psychological trauma. Pillay (2014) expressed that researchers should include a plan to make explicit how findings are going to be released and what follow-up mechanisms are to take place since in some cases researchers come to the field to conduct research but leave without addressing what will happen with the study made and what will happen afterward.

Caruana's (2015) study is relevant for this research because it is related to conducting research in one's own academic institution, and we know some of our participants carried out their research at their affiliated institution. Caruana (2015) explains that because of the relationship with academic personnel, there could be biases towards conducting research that goes in favor with those academic people. She goes on to indicate that researchers should be aware of their own values and biases in order to increase the validity of the research they conduct.

Methodology

We adopted the descriptive research approach in the current study because in Ethridge's (2004) words "the researcher merely seeks to collect data with regards to the

status quo or present situation of things. The core of descriptive research lies in defining the state and characteristics of the research subject being understudied” (p. 24).

Descriptive research can be termed as an observational research method because it emphasizes on the “what”. In descriptive educational research, the researcher makes use of quantitative research methods including surveys and questionnaires to gather the required data.

In the next section, the researchers present the methodology employed in the study in terms of the participants and context, data collection, and data analysis in the light of Taylor-Powell, E., & Renner, M. (2003) approach for analyzing and interpreting narrative data.

Participants and context

This study is conducted at a foreign languages program belonging to a public university located in Colombia. In this university students undertake a research process that implies writing a research proposal and then conducting the research. They become first-time researchers while conducting their own studies. In this process, they are guided by a professor who is an expert in the field of research in education. So, the participants of this study are those students. In order to select the sample of this study a purposive sampling was used. The sample are participants that are first-time researchers. To select them we established the following criteria: the participants must be first-time researchers conducting qualitative research in a virtual setting; they must have written the research proposal in English. They must be in the fourth year to obtain their bachelor’s degree. The sample comprised a total of 11 participants.

Data collection

The data was collected through document analysis which included the participants’ research reports.

The data collection process started by contacting the professors that guide the research processes of the first-time researchers. We explained what the study was about,

and they gave us access to the participants' research reports. These reports include all the procedures and processes followed when conducting research. They are the culminating document of the research learning process that took place virtually due to the remote learning imposed by the COVID19 pandemic.

Data analysis

The process of the data analysis started with a content analysis method (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). The first stage was centered on the first-time researchers' research reports. Here we identified the ethical considerations they stipulated in the documents. We also identified any words used that implied ethical considerations. We also identified and coded any words or phrases related to their scientific integrity and how they adhered to ethics while conducting their studies.

This data analysis process followed a series of steps related to getting ourselves familiarized with the data we collected. Then, we generated initial themes and we searched for the themes we established. After that, we reviewed the themes. Subsequently we defined and named themes. Our final step was to produce a report.

The next steps (figure 1) will walk you through the fundamentals of narrative data analysis and interpretation proposed by Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003. Because this is a fluid process, switching back and forth between steps is likely.

Figure 1. Approach for analyzing and interpreting narrative data Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003



After conducting the coding and analysis process we run the documents through a web-based plagiarism prevention system called Turnitin in order to determine if the first-time researchers had committed any type of plagiarism. This is done through the establishment of a series of similarities which can be related to websites, research articles and papers. Based on that process, we conducted an analysis on the report that the system projected. Since these types of programs and systems can make mistakes, we reviewed and verified the research reports and corrected any mistakes. Finally, we presented the overall percentage of the similarities in the participants' research documents.

Findings

While conducting the data analysis the following major themes emerged:

- Ethical considerations that first-time researchers follow.
- The inclusion of ethical considerations.
- The need for a research ethics committee to accompany first-time researchers.

- The need for feedback and follow-ups with participants.

The first-time researchers adhered to some ethical considerations in order to conduct qualitative educational research

Considering the participants' ethical procedures used for the first time in their research study, and in terms of gathering the data correctly, they employed the appropriate protocols established for this purpose. In this sense, a letter of consent with the participants' approval, using of pseudonyms, asking permission to conduct observations were the ones applied to gaining access to the field and conduct their study appropriately.

The data expresses that the first-time researchers at the public university are aware of the ethical implications that conducting research implies. In the research reports, it is evident that they committed to ensuring the protection of the participants. They are aware of the importance of protecting their participants' identities and privacy. This is visible when first-time researchers protect the participants' identity by using pseudonyms. In the research reports they used pseudonyms and research-related names (teacher, assistant, student, participants, among others) or tags to refer or to talk about their participants. In addition, talking about ethical implications also addresses the people who have access and handle the data, that is why they indicated in their research reports that they are the only ones who can have direct access to it.

The letter of consent is an important element in conducting research. The data shows that first-time researchers formally asked for their participants' consent to participate in their studies. In this letter they also expressed that their participants had the right to withdraw from their studies at any time. Additionally, they also formally asked for the right to access the field where the research took place.

Another ethical aspect that first-time researchers made visible is clearly stating that they have made certain decisions while handling the data. For example, they expressed in the research report that they translated into English what the Spanish-speaker

participants had said in the interviews. Another aspect is indicating the type of research paradigm and approach that guide their study.

Ethical lapses while conducting educational research

Although the first-time researchers understand and follow ethical considerations, some of them had ethical lapses that may put in jeopardy the validity of their studies. Participants 8 and 9 stated that they would use pseudonyms to protect the privacy of their participant. Nevertheless, on several occasions they revealed personal, geographical, and job-related information which could easily help identify the participant and his location.

Participants 10 and 11 protected throughout the research report the place where their research took place. They always indicated that it took place at a public university, however, in one instance they mentioned the actual name of the university.

The data allow us to express that the research processes that first-time researchers conduct while being at the public university are ethically correct and follow ethical standards, norms, and procedures. This is particularly important since ethics is related to what the researcher does and what s/he should do. In this sense, being ethically correct and having scientific integrity imply reflecting upon a possible ethical problem, so the researcher takes responsibility and is aware of the implications.

Putting into practice the ethical standards in educational qualitative research

The aforementioned ethical considerations were taken into consideration by the first-time researchers. We understand that the tutor in charge of guiding the students introduced them to ethics and prepared them before conducting the study. This process comprises explaining and proposing them some guiding readings dealing with ethical aspects. First-time researchers were aware of the importance of including ethical considerations before embarking in a research study. The data allows to determine that the first-time researchers put into practice ethical standards and these guided them throughout the completion of their research studies.

There is a need for a research ethics committee or a review board that guides and supervises the first-time researchers research processes.

In order to determine the originality and whether the participants' research reports have similarities with websites, research articles and others, we used a web-based plagiarism prevention system called Turnitin. This system was not used to prevent any time of wrongdoing but to project similarities the research reports had compared with other sources.

Why did we decide to use Turnitin software? And what does it detect? One of the aspects we considered to conduct the study in terms of answering the research questions, in particular, how do first-time researchers put into practice the different ethical considerations during the development of their qualitative research in a virtual context? And if there are any ethical lapses present in the first-time researchers' research that could put in jeopardy the reliability and validity of their research, was to use this software. It helped us with this task of checking plagiarism and or inappropriate copying.

This web-based plagiarism prevention and originality-checking system checks the submitted writing documents for citation errors and inappropriate copying. When a paper is submitted, the web-based system compares it to text in its massive database of student work, websites, books, articles, etc.

The results provided by the system indicate that 2 participants had a 7% of similarities in their research report, 2 participants had 17%, 3 participants had 20, 2 participants had 25%, and the remaining 2 participants had 48% of similarity in the reports. This information let us know how the participants conducted their studies. Besides that, it allows us to see the possible ethical lapses in the writing process that may have been caused by omitting or leaving out such considerations unintentionally or intentionally.

The following table exemplifies parts of the results obtained in the aforementioned exercise.

Table 2. Turnitin Similarity Report.

☐	AUTHOR	TITLE	SIMILARITY	GRADE	RESPONSE	FILE	PAPER ID
☐		group 3	7% 	--	--		1660979945
☐		group 4	17% 	--	--		1660979296
☐		group 1	20% 	--	--		1696698599
☐		group 5	25% 	--	--		1660958967
☐		group 2	48% 	--	--		1660981541

It is important to mention that the acceptable Turnitin percentage is 15% and below. However, there is no universally specified similarity score, because plagiarism policies vary with institutions. Some universities accept Turnitin scores of 10%, others entertain as high as 45% if the sources are well cited.

Based on the data we can indicate that there is a need for a research ethics committee or a review board that guides and supervises the first-time researchers research processes. Although this finding comes from the data, it is presented as a suggestion and as a discussion for the professors that work at the public university where this research takes place.

We claim that establishing a review board or a research committee that could generate codes of conduct, as well as supervise and guide the first-time researchers' processes and procedures while conducting educational research. Thereby, first-time researchers could seek ethical approvals for their research and be guided during the research process. In this sense, a review board or a research committee become a key element in the first-time researchers' development as researchers and their preparation to do research while being at the university and when they finish their studies.

The data suggests the need to supervise that the ethical principles are followed for three main reasons. The first one is to help first-time researchers be aware of the importance of adhering to ethics. The second is to guide first-time researchers, so the research processes they conduct are ethically correct (and ethical lapses are avoided)

and finally it is important to create a culture of ethics that can also be transferable to other spheres besides research.

First-time researchers also need ethics-related feedback throughout the research process because ethics is not a static aspect that is addressed once and it won't appear again. It is the opposite, ethics is present before, during and after conducting research. Even if first time researchers foresee ethics at one stage of the research process, it is clear that they may encounter situations where they have to address ethical aspects for example when handling the data, accessing the field, collecting data, and facing ethical dilemmas. Ethics is also related to how research helps participants, and what happens after it is done.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected a variety of researchers, students and academics and many challenges are present while conducting research and are higher in the current pandemic situation. As a result, the novice researchers had to face issues when considering ethics and the appropriate ways to conduct their studies, such as the way the data would be collected and which instruments they were going to use. Participants' selection was also a challenge as well as time limitations to collect information.

In this research, we have examined how ethics were applied while conducting research through virtual settings. We have illustrated areas of reflection and future opportunities so scientific integrity and ethical considerations are integral elements before, during and after conducting educational research. We conclude that ethics and scientific integrity can foster good research practices and improve first-time researchers' chances to publish the results of their studies.

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