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“It Requires Interest, Time, Patience and Struggle”: Novice Researchers’ Perspectives on and Experiences of the Qualitative Research Journey

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Date of publication: October 28th, 2019

Edition period: October 2019 – February 2020

To cite this article: Kalman, M. (2019). “It requires interest, time, patience and struggle”: novice researchers’ perspectives on and experiences of the qualitative research journey. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 8(3), 341-377. doi:10.17583/qre.2019.4483

To link this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/qre.2019.4483>

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“It Requires Interest, Time, Patience and Struggle”: Novice Researchers’ Perspectives on and Experiences of the Qualitative Research Journey

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(Received: 13 July 2019; Accepted: 25 October 2019; Published: 28 October 2019)

Abstract

This study aimed at exploring novice researchers’ experiences of and perspectives on the qualitative research journey and determining the difficulties tackled and strategies developed while conducting qualitative research. The study was an interview-based qualitative case study involving nine graduate students in education as the participants. The data were collected between 2017 and 2019 at a state university located in Southeastern Turkey. The content-analyzed data revealed several findings about the research topic, indicating that the novice researchers considered the qualitative research journey as daunting and overwhelming, but pleasurable and satisfying. Despite scholarly development and lessons learned in the process, the researchers confronted with several difficulties concerning data collection, analysis and interpretation, recruitment and developing rapport, representation of findings, and the research process as a whole. They developed personal and external support strategies during the research journey. The metaphorical perceptions portrayed the elusive and distinctive nature of qualitative research.

Keywords: challenges, experiences, novice researchers, qualitative research

"Requiere Interés, Tiempo, Paciencia y Lucha": Perspectivas de los Investigadores Noveles y Experiencias del Viaje con la Investigación Cualitativa

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*(Recibido: 13 de julio de 2019; Aceptado: 25 de octubre de 2019;
Publicado: 28 de octubre de 2019)*

Resumen

Este estudio tuvo como objetivo explorar las experiencias y perspectivas de los investigadores novatos sobre el viaje con la investigación cualitativa y determinar las dificultades abordadas y las estrategias desarrolladas durante la realización de la investigación cualitativa. El estudio fue una investigación de caso cualitativo basada en entrevistas que involucró a nueve estudiantes graduados en educación. Los datos se recopilieron entre 2017 y 2019 en una universidad estatal ubicada en el sureste de Turquía. Los datos fueron analizados por el contenido y revelaron varios hallazgos sobre el tema de investigación, que indican que los investigadores noveles consideraron el viaje con la investigación cualitativa como desalentador y abrumador, pero placentero y satisfactorio. A pesar del desarrollo académico y las lecciones aprendidas en el proceso, los investigadores se enfrentaron a varias dificultades relacionadas con la recopilación, el análisis y la interpretación de datos, el reclutamiento y el desarrollo de la relación, la representación de los hallazgos y el proceso de investigación en general. Además, desarrollaron estrategias de apoyo personal y externo durante el viaje de investigación. Las percepciones metafóricas retratan la naturaleza evasiva y distintiva de la investigación cualitativa.

Palabras clave: desafíos, experiencias, investigadores novatos, investigación cualitativa

Qualitative research resembles an archeological excavation that requires careful and subtle delineation, consideration, exploration, interpretation, and meaning-making. From this perspective, qualitative researchers take the role of archeologists who try not to miss the smallest piece of an antique bowl, and more importantly have the expertise, sensitivity and understanding to differentiate the antique piece from a piece of a bowl of no artistic or historical value left on the archeological site by a visitor or a neighboring resident. Qualitative inquiry, in nature, bears a number of difficulties and complications which make it hard for novice researchers, in particular, to conduct qualitative research. This study was set out to gain insight into the first qualitative research experiences of novice researchers. The researcher hoped to reflect on the challenges and complications that novice researchers faced during qualitative research, along with the strategies and practices they employed. The study also attempted to reveal the emotional dimensions of conducting qualitative research and portray the qualitative journey with ups and downs based on hands-on experiences of a group of novice researchers conducting qualitative research for the first time.

Literature Review

Qualitative research, as a never-ending journey, concentrates on understanding the nature of social phenomena which are complex, historically situated, multi-vocal and subjective by following an iterative process of knowledge production (Gaudet & Robert, 2018). Similarly, Aspers and Corte (2019) define qualitative research as an iterative process that leads to improved understanding of the phenomenon under study by making new significant distinctions that result from the researcher's getting closer to it. Qualitative research is "an emergent, inductive, interpretive and naturalistic approach to the study of people, cases, phenomena, social situations and processes in their natural settings in order to reveal in descriptive terms the meanings that people attach to their experiences of the world" (Yilmaz, 2013, p.312). It is particularly useful to conduct qualitative research to explore or identify concepts or views, explore implementability and real-life contexts, and examine sensitive topics for which flexibility is needed to avoid causing distress (Hancock, Ockleford, & Windridge, 2009). The main orientation of qualitative research is to develop an understanding

of the meaning and experience dimensions of human lives and their social worlds (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002).

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research inheres in a long-time investigation requiring ambitious data analysis and results in lengthy reports without firm guidelines to direct researchers (Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, it does not have standardized methods of data analysis (Saldaña, 2011). Researchers must have relevant knowledge and technical skills besides some other abilities and attributes such as creativity, flexibility, and inquisitiveness in order to successfully conduct a qualitative research study (Hunt, 2010). Sandelowski (1995) argues that developing expertise in qualitative research means experimenting with approaches that meet the aesthetic needs of researchers as inquirers and fit the purposes of the research studies and refining them in accordance with the rules or spirit of qualitative research. In this sense, it is the experience of researchers in collecting and analyzing the data which shapes the qualitative research process (Creswell, 2007). Hence, experience and expertise are essential to conducting high-quality qualitative research; and these two issues make qualitative research demanding for those interested in this type of research, especially novice researchers. This is because previous studies on the first qualitative research experiences of novice researchers or classes of students have indicated that the qualitative research process requires them to cultivate some competencies and expertise over time. Waite (2004), for example, states that novice researchers must be knowledgeable and develop expertise in three broad domains of qualitative research which consists of a) *fieldwork methods or data gathering techniques*, b) *thinking*, and c) *writing*. Developing expertise and being knowledgeable about qualitative research necessitate confronting with qualitative research and becoming entangled in the research process. With this in mind, the research was centered on the practice approach of experiential learning suggested by Bartels and Wagenaar (2018). Experiential learning is the most widely used practice in teaching qualitative research (Wagner, Kawulich, & Garner, 2019). Viewing experiential learning as performative, indexical, reflective, and holistic, Bartels and Wagenaar (2018) argue that experiences of students and instructors are pivotal in learning and teaching qualitative research and that learning to do qualitative research means more than acquiring knowledge about varying methodologies and skills required for applying certain methods. This, as they proposed, requires a period of apprenticeship that encompasses learning how

to advance in terms of constructing feasible research questions, practicing interviews and observations, making sense of the collected data and linking them to the extant literature and framing compelling arguments. This approach can offer valuable insights about the conduct of qualitative research as it is learned by doing as previous research has indicated. For example, Hein (2004) revealed that students can have a fuller understanding of qualitative research and related concepts and practices by experiencing qualitative research first-hand. According to Kalpokaite and Radivojevic (2019), qualitative research is best learned by doing, involving making decisions, mistakes, and having the patience for understanding to clarify with time and practice. Consistently, Ersoy (2015) uncovered that graduate students discovered their identities as qualitative researchers by doing and experiencing, focusing on being open-minded, striving to understand the phenomena and being patient during the research process.

Planning qualitative research for the first time can be a daunting undertaking for novice researchers (McCaslin & Wilson Scott, 2003). Qualitative research provides too much liberty for researchers, and having too much liberty in the research process may be frustrating for students and put them in a problematic situation when not knowing well how to go further (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019). It may also be problematic for novice researchers to know “how to determine the appropriate research tradition and how to construct a canvas and frame upon which a study can be effectively and artistically painted” (McCaslin & Wilson Scott, 2003, p.447). Therefore, examining the experiences of novice researchers about qualitative inquiry may help both instructors and supervisors of qualitative research raise awareness of their students’ reflexivity, which is significant for developing a reflexive mindset and culture required for high-quality qualitative research (Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013). In a similar vein, the experiences of students’ learning qualitative research can offer new insights for developing effective curricula, improving instructional methods, and enhancing qualitative research-related pedagogical theory (Cooper, Fleischer, & Cotton, 2012). Although making sense of students’ experiences related to learning qualitative research can provide significant insights for the issues mentioned by Cooper et al. (2012) and Peredaryenko and Krauss (2013), revealing novice researchers’ first-hand experiences may help see the interplay between theory and practice based on their concrete actions during the qualitative research journey. Delving into students’ experiences of

learning research methods may delineate how the methods happen in planned and unplanned ways, together with student emotions based on the authentic experiences of them and their peers (Nind, Holmes, Insenga, Lewthwaite, & Sutton, 2019). Furthermore, this kind of investigation can reveal support strategies to advance the transition from student to scholar (De Marrais, Moret, & Pope, 2018). In this study, therefore, it was aimed at revealing and understanding novice researchers’ perspectives on and experiences of qualitative research within their first qualitative research projects in a Turkish context. Providing information about novice researchers’ first-hand experiences and perspectives may help gain insights into the qualitative research journey in terms of finding and diffusing new ways or strategies which may be fruitful for conducting rigorous and high-quality qualitative research without being mentally and emotionally drained. In line with the purpose of the study, the research questions guiding the study were: *How do novice researchers portray qualitative research as a journey? What are the wider implications of novice researchers’ hands-on experiences for learning and teaching qualitative research?*

Method

As the researcher attempted to reveal novice researchers’ perspectives and experiences in the qualitative research process, the intrinsic case study (Stake, 1995) was utilized. The case study research allows an in-depth investigation of a bounded system which can be a program, event, policy, process, concept or activity via a set of qualitative procedures (VanWynsberghe & Khan, 2007). Accordingly, the thesis writing process was accepted as a case. The main purpose of case study research is to collect comprehensive, systematic and in-depth information about the events or phenomena under study (Luck, Jackson, & Usher, 2006; Patton, 2002; Saldaña, 2011).

Participants

Nine graduate students who completed their master’s theses prior to the present research were selected as the participants. The researcher preferred purposive sampling by paying attention to including novice researchers/graduate students from different fields of study in education to

reflect the varying perspectives on the qualitative research journey in a broader spectrum. Table 1 displays demographic information concerning the participants.

Table 1.

The demographic information concerning the participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Field of study	Position	Research topic and design
Nehir	Female	32	English language	English teacher	Learner autonomy in language learning/mixed research/a qualitative strand including interviews
Bade	Female	28	Primary education	Classroom teacher	Children’s rights/qualitative/interviews with the members of a group on Facebook
Baran	Male	27	Primary education	Research assistant	Children’s rights in life sciences curricula/qualitative/document analysis
Berrin	Female	27	Mathematics education	Research assistant	Quality of mathematics instruction in elementary schools/qualitative/video analysis

Continue

Table 1.

The demographic information concerning the participants (continuation)

Participant	Gender	Age	Field of study	Position	Research topic and design
Erhan	Male	30	Curriculum and instruction	Research assistant	Acceptance standards and procedures of teacher training institutions from the Tanzimat period to the Republican period/qualitative/document analysis
İnci	Female	30	Curriculum and instruction	Research assistant	Investigating a Facebook group as a professional development tool/qualitative/analysis of the posts
Ozan	Male	41	Educational administration	Turkish teacher	Enhancing workplace spirituality in schools/qualitative/case study including interviews
Yelda	Female	29	Primary education	Classroom teacher	Children's literature/qualitative/document analysis of a book
Sedat	Male	38	Educational administration	Assistant principal	Principal, teacher and student perceptions of how to enhance social justice at schools/qualitative/case study

As can be seen in Table 1, five participants were female, and four participants were male. Their ages ranged between 27-41 years. Four of them were research assistants, while others were teachers (n=4) and an assistant principal. The departments they studied were English language education, primary education, Mathematics education, educational administration, and curriculum and instruction. Pseudonyms were used to assure confidentiality.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected over two years (2017-2019) just after the participants completed their theses in order to reveal their actual perspectives and hands-on experiences in the research process. The researcher collected data by using a semi-structured interview protocol including five open-ended questions. After the questions were written, they were examined by an independent researcher specialized in qualitative research. Of the interview questions, four questions inquired about graduate students' perceptions of the first qualitative research experience, the main difficulties faced, the strategies used, and the lessons learned. The fifth question asked them to use a metaphor for qualitative research to gain insights into their deeper perceptions regarding the qualitative research journey. The last question was added to help participants better reflect their perceptions by utilizing metaphors because metaphors can be used as tools for constructing realities and producing new meanings in the post-modern world (Koro-Ljungberg, 2001), and they cast light on the meanings of experiences and evoke emotions (Carpenter, 2008).

The researcher collected the data through eight face-to-face interviews in Turkish and an email interview in English. The data were tape-recorded during the face-to-face interviews which lasted 160 min in duration, and the researcher content-analyzed the data after transcribing all of the data verbatim and translating them into English. The researcher first chunked the data into small units (codes), combined the similar ones into bigger units (sub-themes) and then incorporated them into meta units (themes) to form meaningful patterns and to show the coherence between the codes, sub-themes, and themes.

Findings

The research revealed the novice researchers’ experiences of and perspectives on the qualitative research and its nature, the main difficulties encountered, the strategies appealed to or developed in the process, suggestions for novice researchers, the lessons learned, and the metaphorical perceptions of qualitative research. The findings are presented in detail below.

Perspectives on the Nature of Qualitative Research

The novice researchers articulated the distinctive features of qualitative research by elaborating general considerations about the whole process of conducting a qualitative study or a qualitative strand. In their personal expressions, some participants underscored the difficulty of conducting qualitative research together with the satisfaction felt during the research journey, while others made comparisons between qualitative and quantitative research approaches in the favor of qualitative research or vice versa. By making comparisons between qualitative and quantitative research, the participants attempted to mention the challenging aspects of qualitative research and its relevance for their research topics, treating quantitative research as a reference point. The following quotations illustrate two participants’ views explicitly with regard to both the difficulty and pleasure of conducting qualitative research:

Conducting qualitative research was laborious, yet really pleasurable for me. (Nehir)

Qualitative research is a hard but pleasurable research method. (Bade)

Another one focused on the difficulty of the qualitative research process:

“I knew that it was a process, a long and demanding process but I was able to get through it. I believed in and trusted myself. As I believed that it must quality, I was aware that the process could be a challenging one when I examined previous qualitative research studies.” (Baran)

Other researchers opined that qualitative research is more challenging in practice due to approaches to qualitative research in Turkey, its requiring more effort than quantitative research and its being a satisfying and appealing research method that is more intimate and genuine. The quotations below exemplify their views:

I and my supervisor collaboratively decided upon employing qualitative research because we believe that this method is more substantial, intimate and genuine; and in today's world or the society we live in, it is critical and a must to utilize this method... (Ozan)

Sharing similar ideas with Ozan, Baran focused on the suitability of qualitative research for the social sciences:

"I believe that qualitative research is more suitable for us given the topics of the social sciences. In other words, in other methods, there are certain things, but here we mostly deal with human and human behavior... When I looked at the curriculum, people were there, because people wrote them. What did they think while writing it? This is a product of people... more sense-making in the process."

Yelda focused on the general approach to qualitative research in Turkish textbooks:

"Qualitative research is not clear-cut, and our concern to reach out to international resources forced me. International books published abroad explain qualitative case research more freely, but in Turkish books, we expect a straightforward judgment. There is a totally different study in international books, and they freely elucidate qualitative case study. We certainly restrict it and look at it in a way we will take it and put it into our theses." (Yelda)

The participants' quotations and related codes portrayed qualitative research as a challenging and demanding but pleasurable approach, challenging researchers in some aspects. Qualitative research was believed to provide more opportunities to gain insights into human experiences and behaviors when compared to quantitative research.

The Main Difficulties Faced in Qualitative Research

The main difficulties the researchers had to overcome were associated with the data analysis process; particularly coding, transcribing videos, data reduction, the research process (demanding and blurry), finding voluntary participants and communicating with them, collecting documents, constructing a framework for data analysis, looking for evidence about the research topic, and presenting findings plainly. These codes may be compiled under overarching themes such as *recruitment and developing rapport*, *data collection, analysis and interpretation*, *representation of findings*, and *the research process*.

Recruitment and developing rapport

Some researchers confronted with the difficulty of finding or reaching out to voluntary participants and developing rapport with them. Ozan, Nehir, and Sedat stressed this difficulty. Ozan commented:

“The most challenging issue I faced was that: the participants who wanted to participate in an interview with me but then changed their mind prior to interviewing or the ones who totally rejected to participate when I contacted them or those who did not answer some questions during interviews. These were the most difficult points that I experienced. Not being efficient in getting information from them...”

Nehir argued that:

“Conducting my first qualitative research was a demanding work as the participants were from another culture. They were Syrian refugees. Creating effective communication without making them disturbed by the questions was a bit challenging. Reducing their anxiety became possible by means of a calm intonation, eye contact, mutual understanding...”

Sedat opined that:

“The most challenging part of my research was to find participants. School principals did not want to participate in the study because the topic was social justice at schools.”

Data collection, analysis, and interpretation

To begin with, data collection and analysis was the main difficulty for the researchers. Some participants asserted that they had difficulty in data analysis, reduction and/or coding to form meaningful patterns. They were in a quandary about the coding process. Two researchers asserted that:

“We attempt to make meaning in qualitative research. What is said here, what is said there? We try to form codes on what is said. Indeed, we think of that: we are faced with a dilemma in figuring out “did he mean this, did she mean that?”. When I content-analyzed the documents, I felt like I was abstracted from the scientific world. There were times when I could not get through the research process.”
(Baran)

Similar to what Baran highlighted, Berrin articulated the difficulty of video transcription and meaning-making:

“There were points that I missed while transcribing the videos. For instance, as we could not ask the readers to watch the video recorded in the classroom, we were unable to present the dialogues in the classroom to the readers literally during the transcription. In some places, there was noise, so we had to put dots there. We wrote down in the parenthesis that the dialogue was not heard due to noise.”

Another researcher stated the challenge of obtaining archived documents:

“Obtaining documents in the field of history caused great difficulty for me. For historical documents, you go to İstanbul and Ankara, and the places you go are unfortunately outdated institutions, Turkey’s most outdated institutions... You ask for one document and wait for two days for that document... The documents were in Ottoman

Turkish, translating and analyzing them were the parts of the research which made me tired.” (Erhan)

The challenges faced in data collection, analysis and interpretation caused the novices to feel uncertainty, vulnerability, and a sense of hitting a brick wall, which in turn triggered them to engage in a struggle to get out of the knots in which they were tied up.

Representation of findings

Compiling and reporting the findings was another challenging issue. Erhan’s experience depicts the challenge of compiling and reporting the findings:

“In the content analysis... it was certainly hard to express what I’ve formed in my mind in writing plainly; in a way that everyone can understand. In fact, on some nights I sat on the table for one hour... and eventually wrote only one sentence.”

Yelda felt a sense of not being sure in the coding, with referrals to representation of the findings. Her reflections were:

“...It was hard to ensure consistency. There was a state of being uncertain... For one subtheme that we constructed at the beginning of the research, we said ‘it is not a suitable one’ one and a half months later. Or just the opposite situation occurred... No matter how much we talked about the themes, in the findings everything changed... The analysis part challenged me.”

Yelda’s and Erhan’s reflections implied that representation of the findings may be confusing and daunting as writing up the findings required consistency in coding and a plain presentation. Those experiencing difficulties in coding had similar challenges in representation of the findings too, which may denote the interconnection between the coding and reporting the findings.

The research process

Another issue articulated was related to the research process. İnci stated her temporary repentance for choosing a qualitative method:

“In quantitative research, it is not me who does the job. You enter the data, the program does the job. You only use it. However, everything is done by me here. I personally analyze the data manually... By using my mind... I did not choose the other method (quantitative research) as I found it easy. But later, I said I wish I could have chosen it when this process compelled me and it lasted long...”

The main difficulties expressed were linked with data collection, analysis, and interpretation covering collecting documents, transcribing videos, reducing data, and coding. Amongst these difficulties, the researchers mostly emphasized coding the data and forming meaningful patterns and reducing large data especially in the research examining documents (e.g. archived historical documents) and posts on social media. These challenges resulted in diverse emotions of uncertainty, vulnerability and a sense of being stuck. The issue of recruitment and building rapport with participants effectively was another difficulty. Furthermore, the researchers who were challenged in compiling and analyzing the data had difficulties in reporting the findings. Finally, the relentless quest for forming meaningful codes resulted in perplexedness and temporary regret for some researchers.

Strategies to Tackle the Difficulties

The findings demonstrated the strategies to overcome the difficulties emerged in the research process. The strategies used depicted various self-explored and external support strategies. Amongst the strategies were: getting support from the supervisor, friends, and colleagues, being knowledgeable and well-organized, a self-explored coding approach, getting an online training, watching videos on the web, applying to related resources, presenting a proposal, and taking an extra course.

The most frequently mentioned strategy was to get support from the supervisor. The researchers stated their supervisors' contributions,

appreciating their help and spending time with them. İnci found her supervisor’s attitude informative:

“He said, ‘Codes cannot be so many, combine them’, I did that task... by saying to me, ‘... You can incorporate these two codes into one’... ‘This can be a code, search it, do not combine it with another one, OK?’. He used to say, ‘Search this very well.’ My supervisor was, in fact, teaching me how to fish. He used to say to me; ‘Go and learn how to fish’.”

Consistently, Ozan commented:

“It was hard at the beginning. Regulating emphases and viewpoints of the participants, in particular, became possible thanks to my supervisor. We regulated them by re-writing at least four or five times.”

Another strategy was to get colleagues’ or friends’ help. Baran sought his friend’s help for translation:

“We got help from one friend who was proficient in Ottoman Turkish for the 1924 curriculum. I called him by my phone and simultaneously recorded his voice and wrote the translation. We firstly translated it into alphabetical Turkish and then translated it into Turkish again so as to understand what was told there.”

It was observed that some participants developed some strategies. These strategies included finding practical ways to coding and transcription, searching the Internet and working systematically.

Berrin tried to divide the videos into shorter segments to more practically transcribe and code:

“Listening to the video and transcribing it was the point in which I had difficulty most because in one minute one person can speak about forty or fifty words, and this is reciprocal. The teacher interrupts... students’ answers... this becomes longer. You need to stop every minute or thirty seconds. After some time, this tries your patience naturally. One can get bored due to listening to the same

video... We divided a video of a 35/40-minute course into 7-minute segments. Thus, we divided each video into 5-minute segments.”

Yelda also explored a practical way of reporting her research:

“I, first of all, read the books. I took notes on subjective sensitivity in general and placed them in a file. Some things emerged while doing this in the Word file. You understand in the process. Categorizing in this way, filing in that way... It was not clear at the beginning of the study. The process got easier as time passed. I myself found some things, for example, ‘if I do this in this way, I will feel relaxed’... I reread the books after a while. This time I made citations. I put the findings I revealed...”

The beginning of the research process was perceived to be hard in qualitative research as Berrin and Yelda mentioned. After closer examination and focused investigations, the process was believed to get easier. Different from others, Nehir stressed the importance of working systematically:

“...That process required knowledge, time, a well-organized manner of work, and patience. With all those steps, I tackled its difficulties.”

Lastly, Erhan had to appeal to different ways and sources to complete his research. He commented:

“I began to see my study in my dreams a lot... my research process, those documents, words, and writings were flying in my mind... In the beginning, I wanted to deal with my difficulties by looking at books, articles, and the Internet. It was my attitude to do whatever I could without bothering anyone... for example, when I had difficulty in some points in the content analysis or did not construe what it meant; I tried to complete this from books and the Internet. I attempted to remove my lack of knowledge and interpretation... I benefitted from research methods books. There were some points I could not get. I benefitted from my colleagues and officemates a lot.”

Overall, the participants’ views indicated that they strived to complete their research by trying different ways/strategies such as getting support, reading sources, searching on the Internet, and working systematically,

implying that the research process unfolds over time and the plots become less intricate. Undertaking an active role in their main research compelled the novices to learn how to stand on their own feet and develop strategies, which is important for their development as scholars.

Suggestions for Novice Researchers

Based on their personal experiences, the researchers made some suggestions for future qualitative researchers. Their suggestions reflected various aspects of the researchers and the core issues in the research process. Table 2 demonstrates the suggestions for doing qualitative research.

Table 2.
Suggestions for future qualitative researchers

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Codes</i>	<i>f</i>
<i>Suggestions for novice researchers</i>	Examining/reading similar research	5
	Ensuring reliability and validity	3
	Constructing /understanding the theoretical framework	3
	Constructing data set carefully	1
	Careful analysis	1
	Continuity in coding	1
	Knowing the analysis framework	1
	Setting the method soundly	1
	Learning qualitative methods/techniques	1
	Working with experienced supervisors	1
	Following web-based academic forums	1
	Being careful with subjectivity	1
	Being self-confident	1
	Preparing detailed files	1
	Interaction with the supervisor	1
Steeping the constructed codes	1	

As demonstrated in Table 2, the participants made recommendations for novice researchers to help them conduct high-quality qualitative research in

a manageable way. Although they considered diverse aspects to this end; *examining/reading similar research* ($n=5$), *ensuring reliability and validity* ($n=3$) and *constructing and understanding the theoretical framework* ($n=3$) were highlighted. Examining or reading similar research was considered as important for seeing the right path in the research process and understanding how to frame the research. During the interviews, most of the researchers reported a sense of uncertainty about what they were doing in the process. İnci suggested that:

“They must read a similar study, a study with the same method very well to better understand their method.”

Ensuring validity and reliability was another issue suggested. Regarding this issue, Berrin opined that:

“The issues of reliability and validity in qualitative research must be taught to master's students properly. Students must be careful about reliability... they must pay attention to it. Because qualitative research has such a feature; in quantitative research, you enter the data into packet programs, and they give you whatever you want in tables. In qualitative research... the reader trusts what you have written or has to trust.”

Consistently, Erhan commented on validity and reliability issues:

“In my thesis, I could not state reliability and validity as required. I did what was needed but could not report it properly... I think it is very important to carry out what is needed in this sense.”

Constructing and understanding the theoretical framework was also emphasized. Some researchers regarded the framework as the backbone of the research process. Yelda, İnci, and Berrin stressed this issue. To illustrate, Yelda argued that:

“The theoretical framework is very important. It must be clear before passing into the research process. I had thought that it was easy, but I understood it was a process that I needed to take more seriously.”

The other suggestions for novice researchers were related to *method and analysis* (e.g. constructing data set carefully.), *learning qualitative research* (e.g. learning qualitative research methods), *the supervision process* (e.g. working with experienced supervisors) and *personal and practical issues* (e.g. being self-confident, steeping the codes, etc.). Their suggestions may indicate that the participants gained important insights into the qualitative research process and the issues that are likely to make the research process more manageable.

Lessons Learned about Qualitative Research

The participants' hands-on experiences offered some opportunities to learn lessons from their first qualitative journey. Regarding the lessons learned, the participants focused on the importance of having competencies and being knowledgeable about qualitative research, understanding the contributions of qualitative research, learning qualitative research, and seeing the approaches to qualitative research in Turkey. Two researchers felt the need to support qualitative findings with quantitative ones due to their research topics. These were the benefits of the learned lessons in the process. To illustrate, Nehir explained what the process taught her:

“I have learned that one must have enough knowledge of the details of qualitative research, one must be well-organized, patient, target-oriented, diligent in his research.”

Baran commented on learning qualitative research better:

“We have learned quantitative research from statistics courses; we know it to some degree. I had the chance to learn qualitative research better in my research and to see different research models and designs.”

Yelda underscored the approach to qualitative research in Turkey:

“There is something like that qualitative research tries to include the research in a boundary whose framework is clearly specified. This situation bothered me.

Furthermore, Berrin felt the need for adding a quantitative aspect to her research:

“I do not advocate that qualitative research is much better. Due to the nature of the research, conducting a qualitative study may make it sounder; however, sometimes there must be a quantitative aspect. A quantitative part could have been in my research. I could have given a test to the teachers to evaluate their content knowledge.”

Despite finding qualitative research to be sounder, Berrin underlined the need for supporting qualitative data with quantitative data in her research. Her standpoint pointed out the significance of choosing the right research method and the unfolding nature of the qualitative research process as she felt this need at the end of the process.

Taken together, the novice researchers were seen to have cultivated an enhanced understanding of qualitative research, the benefits of using qualitative research, and the significance of choosing the right research method in the process.

Metaphorical Perceptions of Qualitative Research

The novice researchers developed metaphors to better reveal their perspectives about the qualitative research journey. The metaphors implied that they viewed qualitative research as demanding, a rather detailed and long journey. The participants used living assets (a growing organism, a sapling, and a human body) and non-living things (a well, diving, weaving a carpet, a ball of yarn, an event of unknown situations and a vacuum cleaner) as metaphors. The metaphors are presented in Table 3.

Table 3.

The metaphors for qualitative research

<i>Metaphor</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Sample statements</i>
Well	A long-run process	I can liken qualitative research to a bottomless well. It is an endless but enjoyable endeavor. You need to revise data analysis and look for meaning repeatedly. (Bade)
Weaving a carpet	An intricate task	It is like weaving a carpet. The participants are colorful ropes. While weaving the ropes, we should focus on not disfiguring the planned design... When we change the ropes, we should be careful at not skipping any space between two tie knots... (Nehir)
A ball of yarn	A recurring cycle	It is a scattered ball of yarn. I rewrapped that ball one by one. It was left scattered. Think of a sweater and its thread was scattered and was intricate. I turned it into a new ball of yarn. And I knitted a muffler... (İnci)
Vacuum cleaner	Detailed and comprehensive	... A vacuum cleaner. We firstly absorb information and theoretical framework into its bag constantly. Then we make a choice from among the things in this bag. (Yelda)
Sapling	Careful nurturing	I can liken qualitative research to a sapling... We don't know whether it will live or not when we first plant it. There is hope. In fact, qualitative research is hope at the beginning. When one has zest, love, hope, and faith, s/he will observe that it is growing gradually... S/he, however, does not lose her/his struggle in that way, but the sapling will not grow instantly. (Ozan)

Continue

Table 3.

The metaphors for qualitative research (continuation)

<i>Metaphor</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Sample statements</i>
Diving	Sensitivity and meaning-making	... Diving in the bottom of the sea like underwater research teams who investigate historical archeological works under the water; they are diving archeologists. They have small bodies in that huge sea. They have to look for something in that massive sea; like the ruins of a sunken ship. (Erhan)
Human body	Synergy and interconnectedness	... Like a human body. There are some aspects of quality mathematics instruction. I consider them as organs in the human body. The heart is to teach Math in a quality way. Depending on this, lungs are significant at a medium level, while kidneys are critical at a lower level... We take the lid off a bit more in qualitative research. Because it provides us with more sound information. (Berrin)
Growing organism	A developing process	We can say that is an organism that grows in the process. We can liken it a living thing as it takes its shape in the process and then it grows. (Baran)
An event of unknown situations	Blurry and elusive	... An event of unknown situations... For example, I am a teacher of Turkish language and get prepared for my lesson, but when I enter the classroom, I confront a different thing there. (Sedat)

Table 3 demonstrates that the participants preferred to use some living and non-living things to symbolize the qualitative research process and its distinctive nature. Using the metaphors “well” and “diving” may indicate that the qualitative research process is a demanding and overwhelming process

that requires recurring attempts to reach out to what is looked for. These metaphors may point out the need for the researcher's struggle for surviving and finding a way out. In addition, the metaphors "carpet", "vacuum cleaner" and "a ball of yarn" may refer to an intricate process featured with the collection of diffused information and the formation of a meaningful pattern using that information. They may refer to the pivotal role of the researcher as well as his/her agency, skills and development in meaning-making. The metaphors of "sapling" and "growing organism" may symbolize an onerous task characterized by patience, hope, and struggle, pointing out how significant working assiduously is in the research process to attain the ultimate goal. While the metaphor "human body" refers to the wholeness or interconnectedness and inductive nature of qualitative research, "an event of unknown situations" stands for the non-linearity of the research process and the impossibility of arriving at the end of qualitative research journey before taking all necessary steps and walking all the way to the end.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed at revealing novice researchers' perspectives on and experiences of the qualitative research journey with regard to the nature of the qualitative research process, its stages, the difficulties, lessons learned, recommendations for novice researchers and metaphors about qualitative research. How a group of novice researchers came to learn to do qualitative research was the main focus of the study. It was found that most of the researchers experienced a mixture of emotions such as feeling perplexed, uncertain, and overwhelmed in the beginning and during the process and developed more positive emotions such as happiness, feelings of agency and success as the research process unfolded. Drawing on the findings, it was unearthed that most of the participants considered qualitative research as a challenging and demanding approach with some thorny aspects, but more pleasurable and satisfying when compared to quantitative research. This conception may have resulted from the non-standardized processes in qualitative research, data analysis in particular as mentioned by Saldaña (2011), and the interconnectedness of all the phases of the research, personal mastery, skills, and experience. This finding is consistent with what Koro-Ljungberg, Cavalleri, Covert, and Bustam (2012) found. Koro-Ljungberg et al. (2012) revealed that the participants did not feel entirely comfortable with

qualitative analysis processes. Some participants portrayed their feelings about qualitative research and analysis reflecting tentativeness, a lack of confidence, and doubt; some of them, however, expressed positive thoughts and emotions. Another point that is worthy of consideration is the cognitive burden. The issue of cognitive burden which was revealed as a challenge for novice researchers' scientific writing tasks by Shah, Shah, and Pietrobon (2009) may negatively impact researchers' writing performance. In their study, some participants viewed writing as a complex, demanding and overwhelming task, while others focused on the challenge of writing and the sense of achievement upon completing the task. Likewise, the cognitive burden may have played a role in the participants' perspectives on qualitative research in the current study because intensive intellectual labor is needed to explore varying meanings and deeper understandings about the phenomena studied.

The main difficulties revealed were corresponding to recruitment, data collection, analysis and interpretation, compiling and reporting findings, and the research process as a whole. The researchers' perspectives indicated that the difficulties confronted were about coding, transcribing videos, and data reduction; finding and building rapport with participants, collecting documents, constructing a framework for data analysis, searching for evidence about the research topic, presenting findings plainly, showing special care for the research process and the blurry and demanding nature of qualitative research, conforming previous research results. Contextually embedded findings, vague standards for data analysis, presentation of the voluminous amount of qualitative data and theoretical criteria for judging the quality of studies were uncovered as challenges in the Kapoulas and Mitic (2012) study. Sandelowski and Barroso (2002) argue that qualitative research is uniquely daunting due to its transdisciplinary nature and emphasis on representation.

The data collection and analysis process was strongly emphasized as a challenge. Because of the peculiar characteristics of qualitative research, data collection and analysis may be a challenge for new beginners. Regarding this issue, Robinson (2014) argues that the collection of in-depth data can lead to some challenges that can never be entirely predictable at the beginning of the research. The same issue can be considered for qualitative analysis as it is an endeavor to review, synthesize and interpret data in order to describe and explain the phenomenon being studied (Fossey et al., 2002), and it is learned

by doing (Blank, 2004). Qualitative coding includes uncertainty and requires slogging through the data slowly and iteratively to gain new insights (Raddon, Raby, & Sharpe, 2009). Actually, it goes on from the outset of the research based on researchers' stance, attention to and selection of what to be included in the study and the construction of the field texts (Butler-Kisber, 2018). Therefore, qualitative researchers must have strong analytical skills to derive meaning from the data (Mertens et al., 2017). Miles, Huberman & Saldaña (2019) state that data analysis consists of concurrent flows of such activities: data reduction, data display, data condensation, and conclusion drawing/verification, indicating that analysis is not an easy task. Sometimes being knowledgeable about data collection methods, theory, tips, and challenges may not prevent researchers from facing unanticipated challenges during the data collection (Rimando et al., 2015); this is a situation reflecting the non-linearity of qualitative research. The vulnerability of not knowing qualitative research in certain terms can lead students to understand qualitative research deeply (Skukauskaite, Noske, & Gonzales, 2018). Due to the variety and possibilities of qualitative data analysis, it can be daunting for novice researchers to choose the right combination of research methodologies, data collection instruments, and analysis methods (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019). Another point is related to adherence to the actual findings offered by the study material. Qualitative researchers must be careful not to exaggerate the extent of study material (Malterud, 2001).

Another challenging issue was compiling and writing the research project. Although there are some expectations and criteria for writing qualitative research, the formats to be followed when writing qualitative research reports are not so fixed (Bradley, 1993), and there is no one style qualitative researchers can use to report their findings (Sandelowski, 1998). For this reason, it may be a demanding task to compile and write qualitative reports because it requires craft and artfulness on the part of the researcher (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Additionally, some participants stressed the difficulty of finding voluntary participants and building rapport with them. Especially, for the topics which may be regarded as sensitive, the researchers face ongoing challenges during the interviews, transcribing and analyzing the data (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007). Building rapport with Syrian refugees and finding voluntary participants to be interviewed about social justice were the instances stressed. The topic and

the participant characteristics were mentioned to play significant roles regarding the study group.

Although the researchers highlighted the difficulties regarding their research journey, managing to overcome the difficulties upon successful completion of the research made them happy, and the process was regarded as contributive. De Marrais et al. (2018) found that in the process of learning about theory in qualitative research, students felt confusion, frustration, anger, but these were replaced with feelings of success in adopting theory. Consistently, Ersoy (2015) found that the first qualitative research experience was a unique opportunity for doctoral students to discover their personal abilities, raise awareness about personal biases, criticize themselves and think the limits of their abilities. Albeit challenging the researchers in certain terms, the research process helped them gain new insights in many aspects.

It was detected that the novice researchers developed self-directed and external support strategies to overcome the said difficulties. These strategies were: getting support from the supervisor, friends, and colleagues, having knowledge and well-organized manner of work, developing a personal coding approach, getting an online training, watching web-based coding- and interpretation-related videos, applying to related resources, presenting a conference proposal, and taking an extra course on qualitative research. Research has highlighted the role of the relationship between mentees and their mentors for rigorous qualitative research. Exter and Ashby (2019) argue that mentors should share their tacit knowledge with their mentees to help them develop their research skills, and they recommend extra readings, discussions, and walk-throughs of the process by a mentor for inexperienced qualitative researchers. Hunt, Mehta and Chan (2009) also find support and guidance by mentors and supervisors to be crucial for getting pacing properly. Engaging in different approaches and strategies may help them learn the research process better. Wolgemuth (2016) uncovered that students in a qualitative class learned a lot about their data by engaging in multiple approaches to research and adapting different strategies and paradigms when working with the data.

The participants made some recommendations for novice researchers based on their experiences such as examining/reading similar research, ensuring reliability and validity, and constructing and understanding the theoretical framework. As for reading published qualitative research, Saldaña (2011) and Sandelowski (1998) recommend extensive reading of qualitative

research reports in various fields to become better writers of qualitative research. Waite (2004) also underscores the significance of reading to do qualitative research. Other recommendations were related to method and analysis, learning qualitative research, the supervision process, and personal and practical issues. For the method and analysis, Twining, Heller, Nussbaum and Tsai (2017) posit that qualitative researchers must give attention to the collected data and analysis. Superficial analysis and collecting irrelevant or exhaustive data may endanger the research quality. Furthermore, it is important to ponder the issue of the researcher's subjectivity. Drisko (1997) cautions qualitative researchers about the issue of the emic perspective. The researcher must seek out and report personal bias and interpretations which differ from those of the participants studied. Accordingly, the researchers must refrain from making claims which are not supported by the research methods, the data collected and the epistemology adopted (Drisko, 2005).

The participants focused on some learned lessons in the research process. These lessons were: gaining an enhanced understanding of qualitative research, the benefits of using qualitative research, and the significance of choosing the right research method. Consistently, Chenail (2011) argues that managing choices well throughout the inquiry is the challenge of conducting a qualitative research study successfully. Therefore, developing an enhanced understanding of qualitative research and its methods can be thought of as a significant lesson learned. This is because deciding upon which qualitative methods to use may cause anxiety as reported by Çepni, Ormancı and Özen Uyar (2018). Through a personal narrative, Bowen (2005) reported the learned lessons during her qualitative research-based dissertation: the significance of reading, consulting the experts, adhering to university regulations, paying attention to rigor and trustworthiness, giving details of the methodology, not being afraid to include numerical data, and preparing to publish. Furthermore, Skukauskaitė et al. (2018) uncovered that students stated their discomfort and confusion about qualitative research by signifying the contribution of this discomfort for their development as scholars. Roulston, Preissle and Freeman (2013) found that novices developed their voices as scholars by engaging in various scholarly debates about research topics and questions during their dissertation journey.

Lastly, the metaphors used by the researchers implied certain commonalities that they expressed in relation to other issues about the

qualitative research journey. The metaphors were associated with living and non-living things. The living assets articulated were a growing organism, a sapling, and a human body; while non-living things were a well, diving, weaving a carpet, a ball of yarn, an event of unknown situations, and a vacuum cleaner. The metaphors portrayed qualitative research as a journey requiring long-term endeavor and search for meaning. Similar metaphors are revealed by other researchers. For example, Tsai (2013) views qualitative research as *poetry* to illuminate the vividness of the image and discovery of deep meanings of human experiences. Creswell (2007) uses the metaphor of *an intricate fabric* to symbolize the demanding and complicated nature of qualitative research. Saban (2007) revealed various metaphors such as solving a puzzle, knocking one’s head against a brick wall, playing dominos, hunting, and collecting nectar from flowers. Kamler and Thomson (2014) found that doctoral students used *water images*, *the puzzle/maze metaphor*, *bodily pain and discomfort imagery*, and *animal imagery* to reflect their feelings of inadequacy and lack of control over writing the literature. They underlined the importance of replacing these metaphors with more manageable and domestic metaphors for framing the task.

Although certain skills, analytical stances and propelling in uncharted waters of qualitative research are required for conducting rigorous qualitative research, qualitative research courses also play a critical role. According to Wolgemuth (2016), these courses must encourage students to engage and work with their data using different strategies. That, she opines, will help students discern the value of different paradigmatic approaches to research and adopt varying strategies and paradigms. Similarly, Kuby and Christ (2018) propose that introducing a proliferation of paradigmatic assumptions with the accompanying tensions may lead to more energy and good frustration. They may be beneficial for novices to get equipped for the conduct of qualitative research as the ones feeling ill-equipped tend to engage in some dysfunctions such overemphasizing theory, missing the saturation point in data collection and thereby collecting endless data without analyzing them, and foregrounding a selected method without a specified research question (Bartels & Wagenaar, 2018). Few participants of the current research emphasized the restricted approach to qualitative research methods such as case study in Turkey, which indicates that how qualitative research methods are taught in Turkey is worthy of further consideration in terms of teaching and learning qualitative research. Some participants’ feeling a need

for supporting their findings with a quantitative strand may imply that they foregrounded a preferred method without specifying their research questions.

The results of the current study highlighted the role of doing and experiencing qualitative research first-hand in order to conduct qualitative research successfully. The research process was regarded as demanding at the beginning, draining the novice researchers mentally and emotionally. However, as they struggled to overcome the challenges faced, they managed to find some personal and external strategies. Although the first experience in qualitative research caused most of the challenges, the researchers' interest in and prior knowledge of qualitative research and scientific research capabilities are also important. In this sense, offering various opportunities for novice researchers to conduct mini qualitative research tasks could help them cultivate actionable knowledge about the research process, which may in turn both enhance the research quality and minimize negative perceptions and feelings about qualitative research. Knowing qualitative research methods well and deciding which method to use before conducting the main research can facilitate the research process for novice researchers.

Limitations

The researcher worked with a small number of participants due to the selection criteria. Inter alia, the participants' experiences of the qualitative courses given, the quality of the courses, the interplay between theory and practice in the courses and interaction with the supervisors may have affected their perspectives. The results of the study should be used with these limitations in mind.

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