

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative is a diverse field. Not a unified set of methods/philosophy like surveys and experiments.

Grew out of many disciplines: sociology, anthropology, education, linguistics, history

Theories which match well with qualitative research: SI, ethnomethodology, postmodernism, critical theories

These disciplines and theories have different philosophies on human behavior and different methods for applying qualitative principles/techniques.

Types of Qualitative Research

interviewing

participant and nonparticipant observation

documents

content analysis - written, visual

discourse analysis

case studies

informal, structured or unstructured interviews

correspondence

Characteristics of Qualitative Research

1. With these methods we try to answer the general RQ "What is going on here?"

To do that you focus is on people's perceptions and experiences. How they make sense of their lives. Data = what they say they believe, what they do, feelings expressed, explanations given.

Assumption: "People make sense out of their experiences and in doing so create their own reality. They can share those experiences and that reality. What people say is valid and reliable. It is meaningful.

2. Qualitative is primarily interpretivist, rather than positivist like surveys and experiments. Not seeking to verify some "truth". Multiple truths, realities, meanings, etc... Look for patterns to build explanations. Try to understand how participants understand themselves or their world.

3. Research design steps in Qualitative Research are not linear (unlike surveys and experiments). Come up with an initial game plan, but it can unravel in multiple ways. Always go back and forth between steps/research issues. Each influences each. Need to be flexible, open to change.

More so than in surveys and experiments, every decision the researcher makes (explicit or implicit) about research design influences every aspect of research.

4. Two general ways to conduct qualitative research:

a. Don't develop hypotheses apriori. Let the data do the explaining. Theory is created from the data. Don't test hypotheses or theory.

Or,

b. Develop preliminary conceptual hypotheses, and gather evidence to support/refute them. (more positivist approach)

5. Can't anticipate all issues/problems apriori. Have to deal with them "in the field" (unlike surveys and experiments, where you deal with them ahead of time or afterwards, statistically).

6. Researcher is the main data collection instrument. Researcher's beliefs, values, predispositions influence the entire process. So there is a potential for bias here, and replication of findings is more difficult than in quantitative research. Hence, more so than in surveys and experiments, researchers make their values/biases explicit in the research. They share their motivations for doing the study up front (intro). In the Methods section they say how their beliefs/values influenced the research.

Example: Gay Friendships study and my ideas on masculinity, inequality, sexuality

7. Goal is to produce an understanding/explanation that is true to all the data. No error. Different from experiments and surveys. Inductive rather than deductive.

8. Not a standardized data collection.

Debates within Qualitative Research:

1. Degrees of Interpretivism.

Example: Some qualitative researchers use the term “data generation” rather than “data collection.”

Some qualitative researchers would never state conceptual hypotheses ahead of time.

Grounded vs. Not grounded

2. Not always strategic. Some people don't have strong initial designs.

3. Not always systematic and rigorous in data collection or analysis. (Without this explanations produced can be biased.)

4. Degrees of reflexivity.

5. Boundaries of research. Do you set limits on what is inside or outside the limits of the research? Or do you use all info revealed or observed? Whose definition of “relevant” do you use --- researchers' or participants?

Debates between Qualitative and Quantitative Researchers

Quantitative researchers don't think qualitative is science. Qualitative not accepted by all journals or grant agencies.

Qualitative researchers think quantitative doesn't reflect reality. Doesn't tell whole story.

When to Use Qualitative Methods

1. Theory doesn't lend itself to surveys or experiments (SI, ethnomethodology, postmodernism)
2. Concepts/theory not developed enough to develop hypotheses to test
3. No concepts/theory to build questions or design from
4. Your beliefs/values on human nature/behavior fits qualitative
- *5. RQ not suited to for surveys or experiments (suicide, sexual identity)
- *6. Need to learn about meanings, feelings, why's, lives

Don't do qualitative because:

1. You fear math or numbers
2. Because you think it is easier. It is not.

Steps in Qualitative Designs

1. Identify RQ. Make sub RQs. Decide which ones are necessary.
2. Determine what type of data is needed to provide evidence for sub RQs. Choose main methods.
2. Choose unit of analysis: who, where, obtrusive/unobtrusive
3. Decide what you will collect data on: questions, behaviors to observe, issues to look for in documents (interview/observation guide), how much (# of questions, # of interviews/observation)

Usually continue collecting until you repeat info

4. Documentation: audio or video taped, type of notes, when you will write notes, collection of documents, etc..
5. Role of researcher: gaining access, personality, participant/non participant
6. Ethics: IRB, confidentiality, sensitive issues, what do participants get out of study
7. Data verification

Whole process often takes 2-3 years. Several months to design study. 1-2 years in data collection. 1 year to analyze data and write findings.

Choosing Main Method

see pg 150-151 Research Design: types of methods and limitations
See Table pg 22-23 Qualitative Researching

What is feasible given your resources. What method best allows you to answer your research question(s).

INTERVIEWING

Why use qualitative interviews? Why not survey?

1. Complex topic that can't be "molded" into a set of standard questions with response sets

Complicated answers. Complicated questions.

Need respondent to guide questions/topics . Need them to help direct research.

2. Sensitive topic. Need trained interviewer to probe.

3. Need to ask many questions. Too long for a survey.

4. No documents are available, no setting to observe. Or they do exist but can't get access.

Ex. Study on children and delinquency. Could get school records, but can't get access. Could observe kids after school, but not plausible or ethical. So you interview kids and parents.

5. You want to:

- a. understand meanings people give to their life;
- b. identify pivotal moments across life;
- c. explore the influences of such pivotal moments on people's identities and lives;
- d. look for similarities and differences across cases in meanings and pivotal moments;
- e. explore explanations for these similarities and differences.

Examples of Qualitative Interview Study

- Friendships between gay and straight men
- Egalitarian Families Study
- Dr. Covan's life history studies

Types of Qualitative Interviews

1. all are in-depth, about 1-2 hours.

2. structured, semi-structured, or unstructured interviews

Structured is similar to a survey but without response sets. Semi is a "conversation with a goal." Unstructured has no clear goal.

3. 1 on 1, group, focus

Interview Data Collection

Develop Interview guide:

questions need to flow from RQs.
look at literature
talk to experts
talk to people who have or do experience the topic

How many questions to ask? Which ones are essential? How to ask them?

Do questions provide scope and depth needed to answer sub RQs? What questions go to what RQs?

What is the tentative order of the questions? Add Intro and conclusion

Put interview guide on paper or note cards

Interview Documentation

1. Interview notes (speak into tape recorder, write directly following interview)
 - a. Description of setting, interviewee, researcher (setting influences the interview)
 - b. Comments on interviewee and researcher behavior during interview (the behavior of interviewees and your interaction with them sometimes reveals more information about your research question. Example: egalitarian families study)
 - c. Reflective comments on interview
 - d. Explanation/understanding of RQ thus far in project (note patterns)
2. Transcribed Interviews

Researcher Role

Presentation of self. Example: Your dress

Your persona:

- need to be friendly but not overtly friendly.
- need to be taken seriously.
- trustworthy

Interviewer Skills

listening

memory/focus on what's been said/being said

talking and participating in conversation without removing focus on interviewee

aware of nonverbals (yours and interviewees)

document during all this

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Problems with Qualitative Interviewing

1. Researcher presence can bias participants' accounts
2. Accounts/recounts have error in finding out what people did/do, believe/believed
3. Setting can influence Researcher presence and accounts/recounts
4. Exhausting. Requires excellent interpersonal skills: conversation, focus, listening

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Documents exist prior to research

Read page 71 Qualitative Researching

Types of Documents

Written

Visual

Examples: meetings minutes, family pictures, diaries

Why do Document Analysis

Documents reveal what people do or did and what they value. This behavior occurred in a natural setting, so the data is strong validity

When to do Document Analysis

1. Because documents exist that are relevant to your RQ. Not analyzing them would leave hole in your research. Example: Dr. Myers' study
2. Can't observe or do interviews with your population

Data Collection

Need to develop an observation guide that will direct you through each document.

Documentation

Actual documents or copies of them

Notes on documents (like with interviews and observation)

See the Observation PDF File for the Following Additional Topics in Qualitative Interviewing:

Pre-Tests and Pilots

Data Verification

Ethics

Combining Qualitative Methods

Evaluating Qualitative Research

Analysis