Exploring Qualitative Research

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By the end of the webinar...

❖ Characteristics of qualitative research
❖ Differences in quantitative and qualitative research approaches
❖ Understanding of different qualitative research methods
❖ Benefits and limitations of qualitative research
❖ Considerations in employing qualitative research methods
❖ Suggested Reading

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Research...some salutary advice

If I'd known they wanted me to use all this info - I would never have asked for it!

“I already wrote the paper. That's why it's so hard to get the right data.”
What is Qualitative Research?
What is Qualitative Research?

‘...empirical research where the data are not in the form of numbers’ (Punch 1998)

'is where researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to interpret or make sense of phenomena in terms of the meaning which people bring to them' (Denzin & Lincoln 1994)

‘...explores, describes and interprets the personal and social experiences of individuals’ (Smith & Osborn 2008)
Concern with the richness of description

Capturing the individual’s perspective

Examination of the constraints of everyday life

Closer to real life experiences

Generalisations less likely
Quantitative vs Qualitative
Qualitative and Quantitative

- Recognition of distinction
- Complementary roles
- Mixed methods approach
- A pragmatic approach
Why study things in ‘the field’?

The ‘Blobfish’ (*Psychrolutes marcidus*)
A deep-sea fish recently voted ‘World’s Ugliest Animal’ and adopted as the mascot of the Ugly Animal Preservation Society.
Qualitative Research Methods

• Interviews
• Focus Groups
• Participant Observation
• Ethnography
• Discourse Analysis
Qualitative Data Collection

• ‘Soft data’ words, sentences, photos, symbols
• Less reductionist than quantitative research methods
• Often takes place in a naturalistic setting
• Less researcher control
• Less chance of ‘replication’
• Greater reflection of ‘real world’ circumstances
In-depth Interview

What is it?

A verbal interaction between a researcher, who has a research topic or research question that they want to investigate, and an interviewee who has experience or knowledge of the issues being explored.
The Interview

Interviewer -> Interviewee

Interview
In-depth Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Produces detailed contextual information</td>
<td>• Risk of bias</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Prioritises the participants perspective</td>
<td>• Time-consuming</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Suited to exploratory research</td>
<td>• Requires skill</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Suited to sensitive issues and complex behaviours</td>
<td>• Difficult to analyse</td>
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Questions to Avoid

• **Over-emphatic** – I can imagine that being an asylum-seeker is awful – is that right?

• **Manipulative** – You’ve described your life as quite repetitive – is it even worse than that?

• **Leading** – So I don’t suppose you would say the asylum-seeking process has been rewarding?

• **Closed** – So you’ve been working here for five years then?
Focus Groups

What are they?

Focus groups are used to collect data through the process of group member interaction and discussion.

Members are selected because they share a particular characteristic, need or interest. The aim is to promote self-disclosure among members in order to learn more about how they think and feel, their attitudes and their opinions.
## Focus Groups

<table>
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<td>• Participants have the opportunity to develop and refine their ideas through discussion and interactions with others</td>
<td>• Group dynamics can bias the discussion and findings</td>
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<td>• Engage disadvantaged and marginalised groups and those who may feel they have nothing to say</td>
<td>• Results cannot be generalised</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Can be relatively quick and cheap to undertake</td>
<td>• Requires an experienced moderator with good interpersonal skills</td>
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Participant Observation

What is it?

An observational research method which involves the researcher participating in the activities of the group being studied.

It emphasises the part played by the researcher in the production of data, with the researcher and data considered inextricably connected.
## Participant Observation

<table>
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<th>Weaknesses</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Valuable in studying the social contexts of behaviour and processes.</td>
<td>• Risk of researcher bias</td>
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<td>• Generates rich data</td>
<td>• Time consuming</td>
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<td>• Does not rely on memory or honesty of participants</td>
<td>• Some settings may pose risk to the researcher</td>
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<tr>
<td>• May uncover actions and relationships the participants are unaware of</td>
<td>• Extra care must be taken to protect participants' identities</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Flexible design that allows the researcher to respond to changing circumstances</td>
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Ethnography

What is it?

It is the study of people in their living or working environments.

The goal is to achieve a rich and detailed understanding of the actions, beliefs, constructions and meanings associated with that group.

It involves participant observation, interviews and analysis of documents conducted over prolonged periods of time.
## Ethnography

### Strength
- ‘Thick descriptions’ help to achieve a rich understanding of actions, beliefs, constructions and meanings
- Helps to get at implicit and tacit issues that are problematic to measure
- Access to groups that are hard to engage

### Weaknesses
- Risk of subjectivity
- Relies on interpretations of researcher
- Findings are not considered generalisable
- Time-consuming
- Can be costly
Discourse Analysis

What is it?

A research method concerned with how our experiences are socially and historically constructed through language.

The focus is on texts, including books, diaries, journal articles, newspaper articles, policies, strategy documents, service protocols, advertisements and interview transcripts.

These texts are understood as cultural representations of the discourses that frame normal practices as opposed to being seen as representative of the ‘truth’.
Discourse Analysis

Newspaper headlines on female alcohol consumption:

Wild new ways of girls who love to be lads. (The Express, July 9, 1998)

Girls are boozing harder than ever and are almost matching blokes pint for pint, a report revealed yesterday. (The Sun, April 19, 2000)

Women are matching men drink for drink. (The Observer, December 12, 1999)

The typical new woman will drink beer out of pint glasses. (The Express, July 9, 1998).
Discourse Analysis

**Strength**

- Can lead to social change by challenging dominant ways of thinking, talking and acting that discriminate or marginalise
- Holistic method for understanding complex socio-cultural phenomena
- Strong theoretical base

**Weaknesses**

- Difficult for a novice researcher
- Not replicable or generalizable
- Offers no solutions to the injustices of the dominant discourses which oppress or privilege
Benefits of Qualitative Research

• Possible to generate rich, in-depth detail
• Useful in simplifying and managing data without destroying complexity and detail
• Perceptions of participants themselves can be considered
• Appropriate for situations in which detailed understanding is required
• Events can be seen in their proper context - more holistically
Limitations of Qualitative Research

• Not always generalizable
• **Conclusions** need to be carefully formed
• Accusations of **unreliability** common
• Some methods are **time consuming**
• **Researcher bias** must be carefully monitored
Strengthening the Validity of Qualitative Methods

1. Triangulation

2. Respondent validation

3. Seek alternative explanations for research results

4. Review findings with moderator/mentor
Research Design Framework

- Purpose
- Sampling strategy
- Research questions
- Theory
- Methods

(Robson, 2002)
Should I use qualitative research?

What exactly am I trying to find out?

Is study trying to explain, describe or understand something?

Why is it being carried out?

Have other researchers dealt with this topic – How?

What kind of focus do I want to achieve - detailed study or standardised and systematic comparison?

Are you seeking solutions to a problem/issue?

What do you need to know to achieve purpose of study?

From whom are you seeking data? Where, when?

Will I learn more about the topic using qualitative methods?

Do I have a gut feeling about what good research into this is?

What practical considerations will impact study – time, resources, data availability?

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Role of the Researcher

- Awareness of bias
- Active listening
- Role conflict

I'll start with a few basic questions, leading you to my own preconceived responses. Then I'll interrupt you and go into a long unrelated personal anecdote. Finally, when the interview is over, I'll attribute the lack of substantive feedback on you being quiet and uncooperative.
Relationship with Research Participants

- Privileged position
- Boundaries
- Researcher vs counsellor
Researcher Safety

- Types of potential risk
- Take sensible precautions
- Seek advice
Child Protection Issues

- Adherence to ethical procedures
- Recognising children’s rights and value in research
- Identifying potential risks of harm
Final Tip….Research Diary

• Interesting things heard or read
• Thoughts about your project
• Planning and organising activities
• Regular review of progress

Useful for planning, organising, reflecting, evaluating, describing…
Suggested Reading


Thank You