An Introduction to Qualitative Research
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An Introduction to Qualitative Research

- Why and when?
- Choosing a methodology
- Analysing qualitative data
THEORY/THEORIES

HYPOTHESES/QUESTIONS

OBSERVATIONS/EMPIRICAL MEASURES

Existing Knowledge - The Literature

Analysis and Reflection

Curiosity – puzzles and gaps

The Wheel of Science (Adapted from Babbie 1992)
Quantitative research

• Revealing patterns and testing relationship through counting
  – More often about deductive than inductive research – hypothesis testing, supporting, ‘proving’
  – Good reliability and high levels of confidence through:
    • Large sample numbers and statistical power (observational studies)
    • Tightly controlled methodology (experimental studies) - The ‘gold standard’: double blind randomised controlled trial
  – Best suited:
    • Large, preferably random, samples
    • Availability of relatively simple objective measures
    • Questions with clear-cut answers about relatively simple relationship models with a limited number of, and/or well controlled variables
Qualitative Research

“Qualitative research takes an interpretive, naturalistic approach, . . . Attempting to make sense of, or interpret them in terms of the meanings people bring to them. . . . “ (Jones 1995:2)

• A complex and unwieldy set of theories and methodologies arising from a range of traditions and disciplines – reflecting the complexities of the phenomena and ways of knowing (epistemologies) that it seeks to deal with.

• More often about inductive research and the search for understanding than testing and proving.

• Not seeking reliability in the sense of experimental replicability but in terms of understandings that are robust across contexts.

• Complementary, not an alternative to quantitative
Qualitative Methodology: Why? and When?

- In relation to an occurrence, phenomenon, issue or situation, do you want to understand:
  - The:
    - values
    - meanings
    - taken for granted assumptions
    - agendas
    that participants (individuals and groups) bring to it?
  - Their experience and how they make sense of it?
  - The story(ies) they use to make sense of it?
  - The taken for granted assumption and norms
  - Symbolic elements including the use of language
  - The shape, content and dynamics of relationships and interactions
Qualitative Methodology: Why? and When?

• Are you doing research:
  – On complex phenomena where maintaining context and accounting for complexity is important?
  – Where holistic understanding crucial?
  – Where ‘how’ and ‘why’ are more an issue than what?
  – Where depth and richness of understanding is more important than ‘level of proof’, replicability and generalisability
  – Where only small purposive samples are feasible

• Are you looking for:
  • In-depth understanding?
  • Thick description?
  • Rich narratives?
  • Detailed examples?
Qualitative Methodology: Why? and When?

• Are you dealing with:
  – Complicated relationships?
  – Difficult to express concepts?
  – Threatening topics?
  – Clients who have low literacy, numerate and conceptual skills?
  – Hostile, vulnerable or marginalised subjects?
Rigour in Qualitative Research

• Methodological transparency
  – What methodological decisions?
    • Questions
    • Samples
    • Data collection methods
    • Analytical approaches
  – Logic of decision making
  – Implications of decisions taken

• Systematic – methodologies and analysis

• Interpretive Transparency

• Appropriate generalisations/transferability

• Face validity
A short word about epistemology and ontology

• Qualitative, much more than qualitative, methodology introduces issues about the nature of the social world (ontology) and how and what we can know (epistemology) – in respect of researcher as well as subject.

• The researcher is located firmly within the research

• The researcher need to be reflective and open about:
  – The beliefs, assumptions and values they bring to the research
  – The paradigms within which they are working
  – Underlying hypotheses (your hunch about what you will find)
  – What will constitute evidence and knowing about the subject

• These need to be accounted not discounted
Some Issues

• Not about numbers – sample or responses
• Rigour
  – Scholarly
  – Systematic
  – Transparent
  – Triangulation/Crystallisation
    • Methodological – multi-method, multiple tools
    • Case/context – across conditions
  – Validity
• Resource intensive at all stages – especially data management and analysis
• Cautious transferability rather than generalisability
Choosing a Qualitative Methodology

• Depending on:
  – The theoretical perspective underpinning the research – that is the framework to be used to interpret and explicate the results
  – The nature of the question and the sort of data needed to answer it.
  – The available resources
  – The available sample

• There is a huge range of ‘named’ methodologies:
  – Some are quite specifically suited to particular theoretical perspectives, epistemologies and questions – e.g. discourse analysis
  – Some are based on a particular philosophies of enquiry or research – e.g. grounded research, action research
  – Some are simply minor variations of a mainstream methodology
Theoretical/Methodological Approaches: a few examples of concerned with ways of knowing the social world

• **Interpretism:** starting from the position of meaning and truth as socially creations rather than objective reality (positivism)

• **Ethnography:** seeking to understand group culture, usually through immersion.

• **Phenomenology:** seeking to understand the lived experience of the individual – time, space, body and relations

• **Symbolic Interactionism:** seeking to understand the creation of meaning through social interaction

• **Critical Theory (Feminism, Marxism, Post-isms):** understanding the role of power in making society
Theoretical/Methodological Approaches: a more methodology slant

- **Grounded Theory**: inductive - building an understanding from empirical observation
- **Discourse Analysis**: building understanding through analysis of the role and use of language
- **Narrative Analysis**: building understanding through the analysis of stories.
- **Action Research**: research as a change mechanism with participants as co-researchers
- **Case Studies**: building understanding through detailed holistic analysis of a single event or phenomenon

**NOTE**: The common element to all of these is a critical analytical perspective.
Ask yourself

• What will be important in answering your questions?
  – The language participants use and how they use it?
  – The stories participants use to make sense of things?
  – Participant’s opinions and views?
  – Participant’s experience and how they make sense of it?
  – An understanding of how particular complex systems or groups function – over time or in certain situations?
  – The nature and content of particular interactions and relationships?

• What sort of research process?
  – What balance between
    • deduction and induction/exploration and testing?
    • description and critical analysis?
  – Where do you want to sit on a dispassionate objectivity/full immersion continue in regard to the research process?
  – Is the research process directly aimed at bringing about change?
  – What role do you want your participants to play in the process
Qualitative Data Collection Methods

• **Interviews** (unstructured/semi-structured):
  – Rich data/thick description
  – Individual perspective; experience; narrative; language usage
  – Vulnerable participants
  – Resource intensive

• **Focus groups**
  – Interactive exploration of views and experiences
  – Issues with group dynamics and loss of individual perspective
  – Resource intensive

• **Surveys**
  – Primarily (semi) quantitative instruments – Likert scales
  – Qualitative: Open questions and free text responses
  – Trade-off between quantity and depth/richness
  – Lot harder to do well than they look
Qualitative Data Collection Methods

• Observation
  – Non-participant including covert (ethics)
  – Participant (disclosure)

• Diarising

• Secondary Data Sources
  – Texts
  – Audio-video
What Methodology?

• What is the impact of gang membership on the identity of young males?
• What meaning around physical activity are attached to the portrayal of older people in the media?
• Is grief experienced differently for the those who have lost loved ones to suicide compared to those who have lost loved ones via accidental death?
• What effect does proximity to the coast have on the viability and vitality of rural towns?
• How do smokers make sense of continuing in their habit in the light of evidence on health effects?
• How widespread is mortgage stress in Tasmanian regional towns?
Analysing Qualitative Data

• Aim is to delve beneath the surface of the data to uncover hidden patterns and reveal unnoticed and unexplored linkages and relationship

• Acknowledging that there are multiple ways of making sense of the data; multiple stories to tell – these have to be supportable within the data (valid) but not the only way of making sense of it.

• A wide alternative models and systems but most are based on **SYSTEMATIC INTERATIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS** via CODING:
  – **Systematic**: clearly documented and closely adhered to procedures - ‘Cherry picking’ greatest threat to rigour
  – **Interactive**: cycling around the wheel of science
  – Organising the data into **themes (and sub-themes)** that allow you to tell a coherent ‘story’ about the data
Multiple ‘Stories’ - Triangulation/Crystallisation
Qualitative Data

- Almost always some form of ‘text’
  - **Published texts**: books, reports, records, mass media (newspapers, magazines) websites, speeches, essays, poems.
  - **Unpublished texts**: diaries, letters, notes (including researcher’s field and analysis notes), minutes, web blogs.
  - **Transcripts**: Interviews, focus groups, open survey questions, speeches, film, radio and TV content.
  - **Visual media**: Film, video, photos, art
Qualitative Analysis – The Fundamental Components

1. **Thematic Analysis/Coding**: Finding the themes which link, or define the relationship of the text to:
   1. To other text within the body of primary data
   2. To other texts outside the body of primary data
   3. To (formal and informal) theoretical understandings

2. **Reporting**: Constructing a structured, coherent explanation and/or argument concerning the identified themes and their relationship to other texts and knowledge.

   *That is, the aim it to tell a ‘story’ about the data that ‘makes sense’: i.e. is logically constructed and is supportable in terms of the body of data itself and existing knowledge and understanding.*
CODING

• A structured way of thinking about, playing with, and organising your data for the purpose of saying something insightful, informed and interesting about them

• Simultaneously:
  – Simplifying the data by organising it into conceptual categories for reporting – so you can tell a ‘story’ about the data

  And

  – Complicating the data by repeatedly re-organising it in order to uncover new linkages and generate new concepts – so that you tell a ‘new story’ about those data
Noticing themes encompassed in text

- Reading and rereading
- Marking up

- Collecting and sorting fragments of text into conceptual ‘boxes’

- Analysing – organising/reorganising fragments to identify:
  - Commonalities/linkages
  - Differences/ambiguities/omissions
  - Outliers
  - Patterns/Structures

- Building and refining the conceptual tree – hierarchical structure that provides the framework for reporting
Some Tips

It’s a very different process to qualitative analysis:

– There is no one right technique or one right account of the data
– **It takes time:** allow yourself time to think, reflect, play, experiment - resist the temptation to close too quickly
– Analytical techniques and programs are only tools – they won’t do the thinking for you

• Remember there is always more than one story in the data – find your voice.
Coding techniques

There are multiple ways to identify and collect the text fragments for sorting:

• Manual marking-up using pen, coloured texta or ‘Post-it’ tags
• File cards and boxes
• Cut (or copy) and paste using Word documents and/or spreadsheets
• Word processor outline functions (for organising structure)
• Specialised qualitative software such as NVivo

The same basic processes are employed in all of these – find what suits your preferences and resources.
Reporting

• Your coding structure will provide the framework for your reporting with the levels that make up your coding hierarchy reflected in the hierarchical chapter – headed section – paragraph – sentence structure of your report.