Qualitative Research

What is Qualitative Research?
Qualitative research is an inquiry process in which the researcher(s) attempt(s) to understand a human or social phenomenon by constructing a complex, holistic and contextual picture of the phenomenon using a variety of research methods and data sources. The phenomenon is examined in its natural setting.

When to Use Qualitative Research Methods
Creswell (1998) argues that many factors may inform a decision to use qualitative research methods, including:

1. The Nature of the Research Question: The design of a research project should be based upon the specific research question(s) asked. As a general rule, research questions that deal with "What" or "How" tend to lend themselves to qualitative methods. "Why" questions that deal with comparisons of individuals and/or conditions and the establishing a correlation or causal relationship between variables do not usually lend themselves to qualitative research.

2. The Exploratory Nature of the Study: Qualitative research is especially useful when a topic cannot easily be quantified and variables cannot be easily identified. Qualitative research can help to identify variables or develop theories.

3. The Need for a Detailed View: Qualitative studies are used to study situations where great detail and a close-up view are required.

4. The Importance of Context: Qualitative studies are necessary when the physical and/or social context is important and therefore the phenomenon should be studied in its natural setting. That is, if participants are removed from their natural environment the study leads to contrived findings.

5. The Researcher as Writer: Qualitative studies lend themselves to narratives and other forms of thick description that enable a complex human and/or social situation to be described in a non-trivial manner.

Types of Data
In general, quantitative studies use numerical data and qualitative studies use verbal or other forms of non-numerical data. However, these forms of data are not mutually exclusive. For example, qualitative descriptive data can be transformed into quantitative data by the use of coding schemes and then subjected to quantitative analyses. Similarly, quantitative data, such as Likert scale results can be used to inform a qualitative description or analysis.

Sources of Data in Qualitative Studies
1. Participant Observation
   - Field notes
   - Audiotapes
   - Videotapes

2. Interviews
   - Individual (could also be audio- or videotaped)
     - Structured
     - Semi-structured
     - Open-ended (unstructured)
   - Group (could also be audio- or videotaped)
     - Structured
     - Semi-structured
• Open-ended (unstructured)
• Written interviews (questionnaires)
• Phone interviews
• Internet interviews
3. Documents
• Journals
• Personal writing
• Public documents
• Pictures
• Audiotapes
• Videotapes

Triangulation
Qualitative studies recognize the interpretative nature of the data collection and data analysis process. As a result, the search for confirming and disconfirming data forms an important part of the validity claim in qualitative studies. This process is usually referred to as triangulation. Qualitative studies that summarize individual or group behavior usually include significant opportunities for the subjects to view and react to the data and the data analysis, including resulting descriptions and narratives.

Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Methodologies
One research setting may result in multiple research questions. Some of these questions may be appropriate for qualitative methods and others for quantitative methods of research. While some researchers argue that quantitative and qualitative research are set in differing research paradigms, many researchers routinely combine methodologies using different data collection and analysis methods for different questions.

Research Traditions in Qualitative Research
Creswell (1998) classifies qualitative methodologies into five groups that he identifies as research traditions. These traditions are briefly described below:

Biography: Reports the life of a single individual.

Ethnography: Provides a description and interpretation of social behavior of an entire culture or subculture.

Phenomenology: A phenomenological study attempts to examine how human beings construct and make sense of particular lived experiences. That is, the focus is particularly on determining how a particular group views some aspect of their lives.

Grounded Theory: In quantitative studies, a theoretical framework is often imposed on a social situation and then data are collected to determine the match between the theory and the data. Grounded theory is similar in that the approach attempts to develop a theory; however, the theory is seen to emerge from an examination of the social situation in which the individuals are immersed.

Case Study: A case study is the exploration, examination, and description of a case, where a case (or cases) denotes some bounded system. Some writers contend that a case study is simply the application of qualitative principles to a specific case and therefore they do not include case studies as a method or strategy.

Other Categories of Qualitative Research
Below are brief descriptions of other categories of qualitative research that are frequently cited in the literature (Charles, 1998). These often also include some quantitative aspects (usually very basic descriptive statistics such as means, percents, or numbers categorized in some way).
**Descriptive Research** is conducted in order to depict people, situations, events and conditions as they now exist. It can be either qualitative, quantitative, or a combination of the two. The major data sources are physical settings, records, documents, objects, materials, and people directly involved. Findings are presented in narrative form and are often enhanced by numerical, categorical, and graphic illustrations.

**Action Research** is research conducted by educational practitioners rather than professional researchers. It usually focuses on the development, implementation, and testing of a new product, plan, or procedure for the resolution of a specific problem in a specific educational setting without applying the findings elsewhere (isolated application). Although the findings may be shared with others, any report that did so would explain that the project was illustrative of one teacher's efforts in his/her class or school, with little certainty that the procedures would produce the same results elsewhere. It is usually qualitative, but may in part be quantitative.

**Historical Research** explores conditions, situations, events, or people of the past. It may be qualitative, quantitative, or a combination of the two. It uses as sources of data original documents, newspaper accounts, photographs and drawings, historical records, locales, objects, and people who have some knowledge of the time and place under investigation. Findings are normally presented in numerical form and occasionally accompanied by numerical data.

**References**


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