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The Nature of Qualitative Research

Chapter Summary

Introduction

The chapter opens with a scenario about a homicide investigation. It lays out the problems, asks the questions, and ultimately talks about the importance of the interview. Social research is an investigative process that is a lot like detective work. Qualitative research is, like detective work, the process of interviewing individuals in order to get their in-depth knowledge about a particular activity of interest to the investigator. In-depth interview is a unique tool to uncover people's motivations and their understanding of social world.

The chapter describes the nature of qualitative research, and its goals and steps. It shows that the main goal of the qualitative research is to see the world through the eyes of the research subjects and to capture social life as a process, as something developing and changing. The chapter also explains what criteria determine quality of research in the qualitative tradition, and offers criticisms of qualitative research. It concludes with summarizing the differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches to research.

Qualitative methods focus on words and images as opposed to numbers. The following are the defining characteristics of qualitative research:

- *Inductive:* Starts with field research and then develops theory and concepts.
- *Interpretivist:* Seeks to understand the social world through people's interpretations of it.
- *Constructionist:* Believes that social life is the result of interactions and negotiations between people, and that social reality is constructed;
- *Naturalistic:* Qualitative researchers try to minimize disturbances to the social world they study.

Qualitative studies often use more than one approach to conduct a research project. The qualitative research methods include:

- *Ethnography and participant observations:* Both employ a method of becoming immersed in the social setting of interest to gain an understanding of the culture or sub-culture.
- *Qualitative interviewing:* In-depth, semi-structured, or unstructured interviewing. This is usually combined with ethnographic or participant observation techniques.
- *Focus groups:* Semi-structured interviewing of several people together.
- *Discourse and conversation analysis:* Language-based approaches to studying qualitative evidence.
- *Qualitative analysis of texts and documents*
- *Participatory action research:* Researchers collaborate with people directly affected by a social problem to understand the issue and try to resolve it.

Each of these methods will be considered in detail in later chapters. It is important to note that qualitative researchers often combine several of the above methods in their studies.

The Main Steps in Qualitative Research

Qualitative research follows a particular set of steps to complete a study project. They are as follows:

1. *Establish a general research question:* What is the social issue that is interesting to study? (e.g., high crime communities have low social control)
2. *Select a relevant site and subjects:* Where is the research being conducted and who are the research subjects? (e.g., residents in a high-crime neighbourhood)
3. *Collect the data:* Determine which methods to use. As suggested earlier, it may be more appropriate to use more than one method (e.g., ethnographic observations and interviews).
4. *Interpret the data:* Determine the meanings that the participants attribute to activities occurring in their social environment (e.g., residents don't perceive crime as a problem because there is a low incidence of violent crime, in spite of the high crime rate in other respects).
5. *Conceptual and theoretical work:* Evaluate the data in relation to the general research question you started with (e.g., Crime may not be as damaging to a community as outsiders might think, because there are cushioning factors that change this perception inside the community. Although crime is recognized as common, networks of localized support reduce the potential or at least the fear of actual violence). How do available data answer this question?
   a) Tighter specification of the research question
   b) Collection of further data: Here the interpreting and theorizing process is intermixed with data collection. Once an interpretation is made, further new data might me collected to determine the validity of this interpretation. This is an *iterative*, or repetitive, process. Data may confirm or contradict the interpretation, which may lead again to more data collection (e.g., more interviews with research participants, perhaps some new or some revisited).
6. *Writing up and findings/conclusions:* The researcher must demonstrate the credibility of the research and why the research matters (e.g., provide insight into why crime may flourish in an area essentially under the nose of residents).

Theory and Concepts in Qualitative Research

It is important to recognize how data are related to theory and concepts in qualitative research. Most qualitative researchers rely on a "grounded theory approach," wherein the data are gathered and a theory is developed from them. Thus, the theory "emerges" from the data and has to reflect the data as closely as possible. However, some qualitative researchers argue that the data can be used *to test theories*, as well. The iterative research process actually includes going back and forth between gathering data and developing the theory and gathering more data, which ultimately is the same thing as testing the theory (step 5a and 5b above). Measuring concepts is not considered important in qualitative research process, but the definition, delineation, and specification of concepts remain important.

Good qualitative research needs to begin with a broad definition of a concept and then narrow it down through the research process. This comes from the Blumer's (1954) suggestion that there is a difference between *definitive* and *sensitizing* concepts.

- "Definitive" concepts are seen as completed, finished, operational definitions, while the "sensitizing" concepts are approximate ideas used only to establish directions and guide the research.
- "Definitive" concepts tell the researcher where to go or how to get there, while "sensitizing" concepts give the researcher a sense of what might be discoverable and allow the researcher

some freedom to identify the multiple ways in which the phenomenon described by the concept may manifest itself.

- The difficulty with Blumer's view of concepts is that his "sensitizing" concepts may be too broad to give a starting point for empirical inquiry, or, conversely, they may be too narrow and suffer from the same limitations as his "definitive" concepts.

Criteria for Evaluating Qualitative Research

Many qualitative researchers argue that measurement is not their goal, and so the assessment of reliability and validity should not be their concern either. Hence different positions emerged among qualitative scholars on the issue of quality in social research. Some qualitative researchers simply adopted the same measures of reliability and validity as quantitative researchers, and used these as the criteria for research quality; others used the same notions, but adapted them to the nature of qualitative research. Yet another group of qualitative researchers argues that completely new measures are needed to assess quality in qualitative research.

LeCompte and Goetz (1982) belong to the second group of qualitative researchers, those who employed the same notions of reliability and validity as in quantitative studies but invested them with a new meaning adapted to qualitative research. They used the following terms to assess quality of qualitative projects:

- *External reliability:* The degree to which a study can be replicated. They argued that an ethnographic researcher might achieve external validity if she or he adopts a *social role* similar to that of the original researcher while conducting the research. Then the new researchers have an increased chance of observing and hearing the same things in the same setting.
- *Internal reliability:* Assesses the extent to which different researchers involved in the same research project make the same observations of the studied setting and people. This criterion is similar to *inter-observer consistency* in quantitative research.
- *Internal validity:* Is there a good match between what is observed and the resulting theoretical ideas? LeCompte and Goetz argued that internal validity is a particular strength of qualitative research because the researcher is engaged with the group for a long period of time. This allows the researcher to establish good correspondence of theory to the collected data.
- *External validity:* Can the findings be generalized across social settings? The authors argued that this is difficult to achieve in qualitative research because qualitative research usually involves small number of participants.

Lincoln and Guba (1985, 1994) belong to the third group of researchers arguing that qualitative research needs its own distinctive measures of quality. They propose **trustworthiness** and **authenticity** as the primary ways to assess qualitative research. Authenticity speaks to whether researchers faithfully and fairly represent experience of the participants, while trustworthiness is the overall assessment of quality in a qualitative project. **Trustworthiness** is composed of the following four criteria:

- *Credibility*: Establishes whether the people studied agree with the interpretation of their thoughts and actions offered by the researcher. This is accomplished via **respondent/ member validation**, where participants are asked to review the findings and express their criticisms. Problems can emerge with this method because the respondents may become defensive and try to censor the research, or they do not give genuine feedback because they want to please the researcher, or they do not have the expertise to provide meaningful comments. This criterion parallels *internal validity* in quantitative research.
- *Transferability:* This criterion parallels *external validity* in quantitative studies and assesses to what extent the obtained findings can be applied to other contexts or people not studied in this project. This criterion is difficult to satisfy in qualitative research because qualitative theory emerges out of a small group of observed cases. To address this problem,

Geertz (1973) suggested that a rich detailed account of the observations and their context is necessary. It would provide a **thick description** of the studied phenomenon from different points of view and with various evidence. Only "thick descriptions" involving details and interpretations, Geertz argued, could help to assess the significance of culture in people's life and possibly lead to a later comparison to other cases from different studies. Lincoln and Guba claimed that obtaining comparable thick descriptions would indicate transferability.

- *Dependability:* Have proper procedures been followed and can the theoretical inferences of the study be justified? This criterion parallels *reliability* in quantitative studies. To ensure dependability, Lincoln and Guba proposed that researchers should *keep as complete records* of the entire research process as possible, including problem formulation, selection of the participants and the site, the transcripts, notes, and other evidence collected, and decisions about data analysis. The researchers should make these available for a potential "auditing" by their peers, who will assess whether the study is dependable. In fact, auditing ended up being used very rarely in qualitative research because it may be time consuming and expensive due to the volume of data often generated in a qualitative research project.
- *Confirmability:* Was the researcher objective and unbiased? Did he or she act in good faith? Did his or her values and biases blatantly distort the conduct of research or its findings? Lincoln and Guba proposed that "auditing" may be used to address this issue as well.

While some of Lincoln and Guba's criteria—such as thick description and respondent validation—are used in qualitative research, the quantitative criteria are making a comeback. For example, qualitative researchers are increasingly using inter-rater reliability procedures to show consistency in qualitative research.

The Main Goals of Qualitative Researchers

We can speak of three main goals of qualitative research: seeing the world through the eyes of the others, emphasis on process, and flexibility and limited structure.

- *Seeing the world through the eyes of the people studied:* This can only really occur through face-to-face interaction, and *empathy* (the researcher's ability to put themselves into the place of participant, to assume their social role) is very important in achieving this. In order to see the world through the eyes of the others, the researcher often has to probe "beneath the surface" of social behaviour and appearances. In-depth probing can reveal the characteristics of participants not obvious in superficial analysis. On the other hand, probing can confirm popular notions about a particular group. However, excessive focus on the requirement to see the world through the eyes of participants can create problems. For example, the researcher may face a dilemma of how far he or she should go to develop empathy: should the researcher participate in illegal activities? Or more generally, *can the researcher* at all see the world through the eyes of a person of another gender or culture?
- *Emphasis on process:* The qualitative researcher tends to view social life as a process rather than a static picture. Thus he or she makes efforts to show how events and patterns unfold over time. By spending long periods of time in the field, the researcher is better able to understand individual and social change and the context in which it occurs. Tracing interdependent streams of events and actions helps the researcher to present social life as a process. This can also be done with ethnography, unstructured interviewing, or using a life history approach.
- *Flexibility and limited structure:* A structured process of research in quantitative tradition imposes the researcher's thoughts, ideas, and biases onto a research project. By contrast, being able to see the world through the eyes of those studied requires keeping the research structure to a minimum. Minimizing the structure can expose aspects of social world which would never come to light if a more structured method were used. There-

fore the qualitative research avoids limiting the areas of inquiry: questions tend to be general in early research process, and the explored topics may change as the study progresses. Ethnography and participant observation are the two methods particularly suited for this flexible approach.

The Use of Qualitative Methods in Participatory Action Research

The main goal of qualitative research is to achieve a deep understanding of people and groups, but sometimes the goal is to bring about social change. A good way to achieve this is through *participatory action research*, where researchers treat the studied as equal creators of knowledge. Members of the studied communities are invited to become qualitative researchers themselves, in order to recognize the community ways of knowing, make community members equal partners in the research, minimize the power differentials between the researchers as privileged creators of knowledge, and to produce knowledge beneficial to the community and not simply to the professional researchers.

Critiques of Qualitative Research

Just as qualitative researchers criticize quantitative methods, the quantitative researchers point to the shortcomings of qualitative research. They most often mention the following criticisms of qualitative inquiry:

1. *Too subjective:* Qualitative research is often criticized for being too impressionistic and subjective. Qualitative findings are seen by the critics as depending too much on *researcher's values and opinions*. Furthermore, bias can result from *personal relationships* that researchers develop with the participants during the research. Additionally, it may be unclear as to how a particular topic or theme *became the focus* of the research. Quantitative researchers, critics argue, formulate the research problem clearly and explicitly, through a direct reference to gaps in literature or aiming to test an existing theory. Their formalization of the issue to study is therefore considered more direct and explicit than in qualitative research.

2. *Not replicable:* By nature, the qualitative research project requires creativity and ingenuity to peel away the layers of social behaviour and get at what underlies it. Each researcher will follow his or her own path of research, insights, and research ideas. Given how close the researcher must become to the topic and the subjects, reactive effect must be expected: participants are more likely to respond differently to a researcher of different class, gender, or race. A different researcher in the same community will certainly choose a different way to study it, will focus on different people, and will most certainly emphasize different findings from the fieldwork. Therefore researchers have low confidence in replicability of qualitative studies.

3. *Problems of generalization:* Because of the small number of cases in a given qualitative research, generalization is a huge leap, and the applicability of findings to other settings is questionable. However, we must remember that generalization is not the declared goal of qualitative research; rather, the researcher is interested in *the meaning of specific activities*. Qualitative researchers argue that rather than producing broad generalizations, they point to the "broader set of recognizable features" (Williams, 2000) of actors and settings, and this allows them to make comparisons to other research on similar groups. Although the generalizations that qualitative researchers make are more tentative and limited, they still describe some important events or people worth studying. In addition, qualitative research creates a certain understanding of groups and settings that may well lead to new theories or concepts that can be studied later with different research methods.

4. *Lack of transparency:* Qualitative researchers are often criticized for the lack of transparency about how the research was conducted, why certain people were chosen for in-depth interviews, or how researchers arrived to specific findings. This contrasts with generally detailed description of sampling and analysis techniques by quantitative researchers. While

transparency in qualitative research remains problematic, it can be diminished if researchers keep a detailed record of decisions they make at various stages of research. Also, the increased use of computer programs in qualitative data analysis is starting to provide more transparency to data analysis and arriving at conclusions.

Despite these criticisms, the advantage of qualitative methods is that they advocate the need to study people's motivations and interpretations, and generate unique insights for further research compared to other methods.

Some Contrasts between Quantitative and Qualitative Research

The differences between the qualitative and quantitative research can be presented as a set of generalized contrasts between the two traditions:

- *Numbers vs. words:* Quantitative researchers focus on measurements, while qualitative researchers describe social world with words.
- *Point of view of researcher vs. points of view of participants:* In quantitative research, the researcher controls the research process and steps of investigation; in qualitative research, the investigation takes the perspective of the participants to decide what direction the study will take.
- *Researcher distant vs. researcher close:* Quantitative researchers see the distance between themselves and respondents as desirable, because it allows them to remain neutral and "objective." Qualitative researchers, by contrast, seek to diminish this distance to "see the world through the eyes of participants."
- *Theory and concepts tested in research vs. theory and concepts developed from data:* In quantitative projects, researchers test the chosen theories, while qualitative researchers use their fieldwork to *develop theories* and concepts.
- *Structured vs. unstructured:* Quantitative research is structured to maximize reliability and validity, while qualitative researchers leave the research process flexible in order to better understand people's meanings and allow the development of new concepts and theories during the study.
- *Generalizable knowledge vs. contextual understanding:* Quantitative researchers want their research to be applicable to the wider population, while qualitative researchers are interested in *understanding the behaviour and values* in specific contexts which may or may not apply to other settings.
- *Hard reliable data vs. rich, deep data:* Quantitative researchers describe their data as "hard," robust, and unambiguous, while qualitative researchers want their data to be "rich," deep, and nuanced, in order to get the better understanding of the process they study.
- *Macro vs. micro:* Quantitative researchers want to uncover large social trends and regularities of social life, while qualitative researchers want to provide insight into small-scale social processes and show how they are related to particular social contexts
- *Behaviour vs. meaning:* Qualitative researchers focus more on meanings of behaviour rather than on the behaviour as such, as quantitative scholars do.
- *Artificial settings vs. natural settings:* Quantitative research is conducted in more controlled, and therefore more artificial, social settings than qualitative research, which studies people in their natural environments.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you should learn to do the following:

- Understand the nature of qualitative research and its main steps, which include a inductive (bottom-up) research logic aiming to collect rich empirical evidence in order to develop concepts and formulate theories
- Name the main methods of qualitative inquiry: ethnography, participant observation, qualitative in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participatory action research
- Identify the different roles of theory and concepts in qualitative research as compared to the quantitative one
- Appreciate the difficulties of using conventional quantitative concepts of reliability and validity to assess quality of qualitative studies. Instead, the criteria of *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability* are proposed as better ways of evaluating qualitative research
- List and comment on the main goals of qualitative research: seeing the world through the eyes of those studied, emphasizing the description and context, describing social life as a process, and flexibility in qualitative research procedures
- Discuss the main criticisms of the qualitative model of research, including influences of the researcher on the outcomes of the study (choice of focus, setting, respondents, and emphasizing certain findings), difficulties of replication, problems of generalization, and lack of transparency in research process
- Comment on the main contrasts between the qualitative and quantitative models of research, such as different role of theory, different role of the researcher, differences in main goals of the two traditions, in the process of research, and in the type of evidence received

Media Resources

Pensoneau-Conway, S.L., and Toyosaki, S. (2011). Autatomethodology: Tracing a home for praxis-oriented ethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 10*(4): 378–399.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/article/view/10581/9361
- What is automethodology?
- How can this be seen as a new form of qualitative methodology?
- How does it serve to improve qualitative research methods?

Roulston, K. (2011). Working through challenges in doing interview research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 10*(4): 348–366.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/article/view/8305/9359
- How does a constructionist approach to interviewing impact a qualitative research project?
- How might interview interactions provide insights into further research design and methods?
- How might data analysis help develop further questions for later data generation?

Naidu, T., and Sliep, Y. (2011). Contextual reflexivity: Towards contextually relevant research with South African HIV/AIDS home-based care volunteers. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 10*(4): 431–443.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/article/view/9410
- How does reflexivity work in qualitative research?
- How is qualitative research impacted by the cultural background of the researcher?

- How does methodological reflexivity allows the researcher to enhance the contextual salience of emerging data?

Newbury, J. (2011). A place for theoretical _in_consistency. _International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 10_(4): 335–347.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/article/view/11021
- How does the expectation of theoretical consistency impact the qualitative research process?
- How might postmodern research be improved by considering possibilities that emerge from multiple theoretical perspectives?
- What might be the effect of researchers learning to critically review their own theoretical commitments and assumptions?

- Qualitative Validity http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/qualval.php

  - How is the reliability of qualitative research measured?
  - How does it compare to measuring reliability of quantitative research?
  - How effective are measurement criteria for qualitative research at actually measuring its reliability?