



# Get the Most from Qualitative Research

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Qualitative research is rooted in anthropological and sociological tradition and has as its major tenet the desire to study and make sense of the thoughts, beliefs, actions and activities of informants. Qualitative research is essentially multi-method in its focus, involving an interpretative, naturalistic approach to its subject matter (Bryman, 2008; Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Therefore, researchers are concerned to study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research makes use of a variety of materials in order to explore the lived realities of those they are researching.

The value of statistics should not be overlooked, Qualitative work is interpretive, meanings have much greater significance than frequencies. For qualitative researchers the importance of their studies lie in their ability to address issues of 'what, why, where and when' rather than of 'how many'. Critics of the qualitative paradigm constantly raise concerns as to the 'validity' and reliability of the approach. But deciding what is to count as a unit of analysis is fundamentally an issue of interpretation, requiring judgements on significance. Does a study become more 'reliable' if the views of 200 or 2000 people are collected rather than of 2? What is 'validity'? Whose version of the 'truth' is represented, and how? We need to remember that in reality 'facts' are socially constructed and as such meaning is culturally and somewhat arbitrarily defined. For qualitative researchers the key is never to take things at face value, or to accept unquestioningly data as they are presented. Even the most familiar settings: - the doctor's surgery, the hospital ward, the school classroom, or the shopping centre can reveal the unexpected. Researchers need to be constantly checking with those they are researching to ensure that they are correct in their assumptions and interpretations of the various aspects of everyday life. The thick, descriptive narratives, which are then produced, are the very strength of qualitative research, since they offer validity to the accounts, which quantitative studies could not hope to equal.

It is important to acknowledge the existence of the researcher effect. Simply deciding to study a particular setting, or group, whether by qualitative or quantitative means will have an impact (Hawthorne effect). What qualitative researchers must do is acknowledge, make explicit and reflect upon, the ways in which issues of gender, age and ethnicity and power all impact upon the research process and therefore the data which is generated from it. The distinction between what counts as qualitative research and what is 'common-sense' is the demand that researchers recognise and acknowledge that they are part of the social world that is being studied. There is a need to appreciate that behaviour and attitudes are not stable across contexts and that no study can be totally free from researcher bias, Therefore data should be regarded as problematic and subjected to rigorous scrutiny and verification through triangulation within and between methods. This method of validation is done by comparing different kinds of data from different sources in order to see if there is corroboration. So data that relate to the same phenomenon are compared, but they are derived from different phases of fieldwork, different points in time, different participants, or different methods of data collection. See the study by West (1990) which looked at mothers' criticisms of doctors and Glennerster et al. (1994) on GP fund holding.

Respondent validation is another approach and consists of the researcher showing their findings to the people studied and seeking verification in which the actors recognise a correspondence between the findings of what they, the actors, say and do. This verification becomes largely a matter of authenticity. In his study of specialist doctors Bloor (1983) found that sometimes doctors agreed with his description of their practices and other times did not. He argues that this becomes a stimulus to generate new data and new paths of analysis.

But there are problems with this strategy;

- ▶ They may not be consciously aware of what they do and why
- ▶ They may attempt to rationalise their attitudes and behaviours and so discredit the researchers account
- ▶ They may have no interest in reading the account

Critics of qualitative research often query the representativeness of the findings because of the sample sizes. However, the richness and validity of the account is the significant aspect in qualitative research. The use of critical case samples is one means of generating useful data. But strategic sampling can take other forms. Theoretical sampling is done by using two complementary strategies, firstly minimising the differences between cases to highlight basic properties of a particular category and secondly, maximising the differences between cases in order to increase the density of the properties relating to the core characteristics.

Sampling within case occurs when decisions are made regarding who to talk to, what to observe and what to ask. Researchers decide what is, and what is not, relevant to the particular case under study. Sampling within case

usually takes place within these three dimensions of time, people and context, however decisions may be made opportunistically with regard to the sampling and so researchers need to make explicit the criteria that informed these choices.

Because qualitative research recognises the significance of different perspectives on the same phenomenon, often more than one method of data collection is used during a research project. This methodological triangulation provides a more holistic view of the settings and lends itself to a 'toolbox' approach to methods with techniques including:

- ▶ Interviews – Unstructured, or semi-structured
- ▶ Observations - Participant and non participant
- ▶ Case Studies
- ▶ Photography – Still and video
- ▶ Documents –Diaries, journals, field notes, archive materials, policy documents and recordings.

## Summary

Qualitative research is exhilarating, providing a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts. The tradition of qualitative research within a health setting is now firmly established (Atkinson, 1997; Bloor, 1997; Pope, 2003). Qualitative research can be exciting, stimulating and rewarding. But the approach generates huge volumes of data which can be difficult to handle, is time consuming, frustrating and emotional. In consequence, *“qualitative research is only suitable for people, who care about it, take it seriously, and who are prepared for commitment. It must be done properly or not at all.”* Delamont, 1992:viii).

## Further Information

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