

QUALITATIVE EVALUATION

Qualitative Research: The What and Why



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Qualitative Research: The What and Why

Qualitative methods are research designs whose purpose is to gather information about certain events, activities, or people, in as natural a state as possible. In that respect, qualitative designs are developed to capture information as it actually appears in real situations, or as it is actually expressed by people, with minimal intrusion by the researcher or the research design. Because of this tendency to capture raw natural data, qualitative methods are structured to be adaptable, flexible and inclusive. Instead of guiding the research by its design (such as is found in most quantitative methods), qualitative methods are driven more by the nature and characteristics of the phenomenon that is subject of the inquiry. The following example illustrates these points:

Suppose that you are conducting a facilitated discussion for a group of students on the relationship of their substance abuse prevention training or classes to their attitudes towards substance abuse. First you will want to collect data about who has been through training or classes on substance abuse prevention. This could be accomplished quantitatively by asking students to report if they have been involved in such training or courses. Your question to this effect will likely be concise and straightforward. It will not allow for much variation in responses; only a “yes”, or “no” response. Or, you may ask them to provide a count of training events and courses that they attended, or you may go as far as asking them to rate these events or to assess how valuable they have been. In all cases the design of your questions and response patterns will be precise, and will limit responses to specific options. The strong structure of the question design and response pattern are characteristics of quantitative methods in general.

Once this data is collected, you proceed to implement a qualitative approach. You may ask students about their attitudes about substance abuse according to whether or not they have been to training or classes. Here you will want to allow students to express their experiences and attitudes as they actually felt and learned them. Therefore, you probe these attitudes by asking the qualitative “what”, “how” and “why” questions. In response to these questions, students discuss their feelings and attitudes, which vary in terms of occurrence and magnitude. Consequently, the structure of your questions becomes more flexible and adaptable in order to capture the depth of their varying narratives and explanations.

The strong question and response structure of quantitative methods is necessary for the types of data analysis performed with such methods. These analyses, mainly statistical, will prove unfruitful if the data is too loosely recorded, thus not manageable. By contrast, the qualitative data may lend itself to either quantification and statistical analyses (after a process of coding and transforming responses into quantitative data), or to qualitative interpretation, which does not abide by statistical requirements and methods. Continuing with the previous example, the following example illustrates these points:

While students discuss their attitudes and feelings about substance abuse, you or your assistants record their responses using audio-tapes, taking notes, or posting highlights on a flip chart. You then study the data and realize that you could codify responses in categories of specific attitudes and feelings. You also find it possible to connect such responses to the quantitative data on the frequency of attending prevention training or courses, or their assessment of their value. By doing this, you will be quantifying the data in order to analyze it statistically. Alternatively, you may decide that quantifying the data will lead to the loss of its depth and the “qualitative significance” of the narratives, experiences and feelings. Therefore, you perform qualitative analyses of the data. In many instances, however, the data may lend itself to conducting both types of analyses described above, the qualitative and the quantitative.

Qualitative methods, as illustrated in the examples above, provide depth and insights into data that may not be attainable using quantitative methods. Because most qualitative methods engage the researcher and individuals involved with the subject of inquiry (i.e., focus groups and interviews), the possibilities of exploring more research aspects and expanding or deepening the inquiry are always present; the researcher has more control over how far and how much research to conduct. The findings from qualitative methods usually provide a realistic picture of the subject of inquiry.

Despite their advantages, qualitative methods, like all other methods of inquiry, are not without disadvantages. Their effectiveness depends basically on sound planning and implementation. A major concern with qualitative methods is the subjectivity of their data. The intimate involvement of the researcher with these methods could lead to influencing the objectivity of the process and the findings due to by the researcher’s bias, preconceived ideas and beliefs, and even his/her personality.

Another concern with qualitative methods is related to their limited generalizability to other similar subjects of inquiry. However, this concern assumes that a qualitative research is intended to provide such generalization. Yet, in many instances this research is intended only to investigate aspects of a specific event, case or activity, not to be generalized to other situations.

In summary, the use of qualitative methods is almost inevitable for any type of inquiry. They provide depth, meaning and “life” to the subjects of inquiry. The flexibility and adaptability of qualitative methods allow researchers to plan and manage their resources based on the research needs. Finally, qualitative methods do not negate the need for the quantitative methods, which usually provide the direction and raise the questions that are better answered by the qualitative ones.

Focus Groups

When to Use

To collect information from a group of individuals who have specific knowledge, interest or concern about the subject of inquiry

When group interaction is necessary or helpful for generating the information

To clarify issues

To explore questions or hypotheses

To interpret or explain

Advantages

Bringing together a group which shares similar knowledge, interests or concerns

To gather individual's own perspectives in their own language

To generate new ideas

Determine why individuals and/or groups behave in particular ways (attitudes and values)

Group interaction stimulates ideas and thoughts

To gain insight regarding professional or world experience

To learn similarities on some demographic or other dimensions

Disadvantages

Some group dynamics may negatively affect, limit or narrow the flow of information

Some topics may not lend themselves to Focus Groups because of sensitivity or invasion of privacy

Some research questions cannot be addressed through focus groups

Some individuals are not comfortable speaking out in a group

Skills

- Group facilitation skills
- Basic knowledge of the subject of inquiry
- Active listening
- Trying to maintain neutrality and impartiality
- Conflict management
- Time management
- Encouraging dominating people to share the discussion
- Encouraging quiet people to speak
- Organization
- Non-disruptive recording (written and audio-tape)

Ethical Rules

- Ensure that participants are not harmed during the focus group because of their views
- Discuss with participants how information gathered will be used and/or protected
- Follow human subjects review guidelines

Composing a Group

- Identify the group(s) you want to talk to which is beneficial for asking questions
- Design a sample of the group(s) that is representative of various factors (i.e., gender, age, status)
- Limit the group size to 8-10 (no more than 15) participants

Logistics

- Advertisements/ fliers
- Networking
- Referral
- Incentives (food, random drawing, etc.)
- Confirmation (calls, email, letter)
- Followup thanks

How to Build Questions

Identify the research topics for inquiry or exploration

Determine the purpose of the focus groups (exploring, interpreting, or gaining in-depth understanding)

Develop questions which focus on the research topics, and the research purpose

Maintain a logic flow for the questions

Pilot-test the questions to ensure clarity

Avoid leading questions

Preparing for the Focus Group

Arrange and verify room availability

Prepare items you need for the focus group (tape recorder, pencils, flip charts, name tags, etc.)

Arrive to the meeting place early

Organize the meeting room

Test the recording equipment

Manage group time to no more than 2 hours

Conducting a Focus Group

Acquaintanceship

Break the ice

Break the fear

Discuss logistics (time limits, breaks, note taking)

Discuss ethical matters

Give an introduction to the subject and the purpose of the focus group

Ask questions clearly

Avoid leading questions

Prompt respondents to elaborate

Encourage the involvement of the silent participants

Attempt to get equal participation from all participants

Ensure that all participants get their opportunity to talk

Re-phrase statements that you think need clarification

Intervene to keep the discussion on track

Keep HUMOR!!!

FOCUS GROUPS

WORKSHEET

Questions / issues that lend themselves to being addressed in a focus group:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Intact or convened groups that might provide insight:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Who can provide assistance?

What are convenient and/or appropriate times for scheduling these?

PERSONAL TIPS

Interviews

When to Use

- To collect information from individuals who have specific knowledge, interest or concern about the subject of inquiry
 - When each individual's input is better provided independently (i.e., to secure privacy and confidentiality)
 - To go more in-depth with specific questions or issues
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Advantages

- Allows for gathering in-depth information
 - Ensures high levels of confidentiality and privacy to the interviewee
 - More detailed insights
 - Avoids group pressure and "Group Think"
 - Helpful for quiet and shy individuals
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Disadvantages

- Could be costly and time consuming
 - Some questions or issues may be better addressed using other approaches
 - Interpersonal dynamics may reflect negatively on the results
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Skills

- Interviewing and asking questions
 - Basic knowledge of the research subject
 - Monitoring time allocations and inquiry needs
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Ethical Rules

- Ensure that interviewees are not harmed by their participation or sharing their views
- Ensure that privacy of interviewees and information shared are protected
- Establish standards for attributions (quotations and otherwise)
- Establish standards for participation listing

Selecting Interviewees

- Identify the individual(s) you want to talk to
- Design a sample that is representative of various factors (i.e., gender, age, role)
- Limit the interviewees to a manageable number
- Design a sample that has appropriate size for in-depth summaries of generalized findings

How to Build Questions

- Identify the topics for inquiry
- Determine the purpose of the interview (exploring, interpreting, or gaining in-depth understanding)
- Develop questions which focus on the research topics, and the research purpose
- Maintain a logic flow for the questions
- Pilot-test the questions to ensure clarity

Logistics

- Decide on conducting an in-person or telephone interview
- Establish time constraints
- Confirmation (calls, email, letter)
- Follow-up thanks

Conducting the Interview

Establish rapport

Discuss logistics and note-taking

Break the ice

Break the fear

Give an introduction to the subject and the purpose of the interview

Ask questions clearly

Avoid leading questions

Prompt the interviewee to elaborate and to go more in-depth

Probe for more information at the closing of each question

Re-phrase statements that you think need clarification

Keep HUMOR!!!

INTERVIEWS

WORKSHEET

Questions / issues that lend themselves to being addressed in an interview:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Specific individuals or groupings of individuals who might provide insight:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Who can provide assistance?

What are convenient and/or appropriate times for scheduling these?

PERSONAL TIPS

Observations

When to Use

To collect information related to certain events, activities or behaviors

To record certain aspects of an event, activity or behavior in its most natural state

Advantages

Providing data that is most reflective of the natural state

Avoiding the subjective opinions of interviewees or focus group participants

To provide focused observation of a certain event

To demonstrate needs or issues

To serve as a method of quantitative data collection

Disadvantages

Subjectivity or biases of observer(s)

Some topics may not lend themselves to observations because of sensitivity or invasion on privacy

Some questions or issues may be better addressed using other approaches

Does not answer “why” or “how”

In its purest form is not interactive

Skills

Basic knowledge of the research subject

Accurate knowledge of classification criteria

Adept at interpreting observed function within criteria

Accurate recording of data

Ethical Rules

Ensure that observation is not violating individual's privacy
Being as unobtrusive as possible
Not a safety hazard

How to Develop an Observation

Identify the topics of interest
Determine the events, actions or behaviors that are related to the topics
Identify the aspects of the event, activity or behavior that are relevant to the topic
Develop a measurable/objective criteria to assess the occurrence of these aspects
Develop an observation form
Pilot-test the observation

Conducting the Observation

Arrive in the location of observation early
Select a position that allows for the best observation of what you are interested in
Record observations
Maintain low key
Adapt observation data collection process
Record unique or individual findings

OBSERVATIONS

WORKSHEET

Questions / issues that lend themselves to being addressed in an observation:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Intact or convened settings that might provide insight:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Who can provide assistance?

What are convenient and/or appropriate times for scheduling these?

PERSONAL TIPS

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