Qualitative Methods for Social Research

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What word or phrase comes to mind when you think about qualitative research?
Qualitative Research Webinar Series

Session 1: Qualitative Methods for Social Research
July 19, 1:00 – 2:00 pm ET

Session 2: Qualitative Methods to Inform Criminal Justice Policy and Practice
July 26, 1:00 – 2:00 pm ET
What is social research?

“New knowledge by drawing upon past knowledge”*

Enables us to conceptualize and analyze our experience of social life as presented to us as empirical reality**

- a diversity of activities by which we construct representations of social life
- a dialogue between ideas and evidence


Why social research?

How is social order possible?
A century of social research in America

The early 20th century: The rise of qualitative research
- Classical ethnographic studies
- Recognition and respect for qualitative research

The middle of the 20th century: The age of quantitative research
- Mainframe then personal computers
- Massive amounts of record data accessible to researchers
- New statistical programs
- Linking computers and people around the world
- The World Wide Web, the internet, the cloud

The late 20th century: A time for mixed methods
- Multi-methods
- Mixed methods
Doing social research

To conceptualize, describe, analyze, understand, and explain social experience, different methods are used in different ways depending on

- the subject of interest
- the questions being asked
- how social reality is defined
Poll Question #1
The methods of social research

The **sharpest contrast** has been and continues to be between quantitative and qualitative methods

**Quantitative methods**
- focusing on relationships among variables
- emphasis on measure

**Qualitative methods**
- focusing on commonalities
- emphasis on meaning

**Mixed methods**
- integrate quantitative and qualitative research methods
- in recognition of their differences
Comparing qualitative methods and quantitative methods

**Conceptually**
- quantitative studies attend to social phenomena as objects and emphasize experimentation to eliminate plausible explanations (deductive)
- qualitative studies attend to social phenomena as subjects and emphasize methods that seek meaning in symbolic representations (inductive)

**Methodologically**
- quantitative methods are designed for the study of relationships among discrete and precisely defined and measured variables
- qualitative methods are designed for the study of commonalities among broadly conceptualized social phenomena
The foundations of qualitative methods in social research

- **the production of descriptive data and analytic findings**
  from the written and spoken words and observable behavior of
  people who participate in the real-life experience of the social
  phenomenon being studied
- **the use of grounded theory** to construct theoretical
  explanations by induction from systematically collected and
  analyzed data
Poll Question #2
General goals and objectives of social research

• identifying general patterns and relationships
• testing and refining theories
• making predictions
• interpreting culturally, socially, or historically significant phenomena
• exploring diversity
• giving voice
• advancing new theories
Particular goals and objectives of qualitative research

• Immersing the researcher in a research setting
• Probing, analyzing, and interpreting social phenomena in natural settings
• Enhancing rather than condensing data to find meanings in the subject being studied
• Advancing or stimulating new theoretical thinking (grounded theory)
• Giving voice to marginalized social groups
Data collection in qualitative research

Methods of data collection for qualitative research are designed to collect and analyze data and to use findings to construct meaningful descriptions and interpretations of the research subject.

Specific methods include
- Ethnography, participant observation
- Semi-structured, open-ended, in-depth interviews (individual/group)

These methods allow the researcher to gain a more profound understanding of the meaning of an instance of social reality as a subjective experience from the perspective of its participants.
Sampling for qualitative research

Selection of respondents
- snowball (convenience) sampling
- key informants
- hidden population studies

Sample size
- **theoretical saturation**
  - constant comparison
  - data collection and analysis continue iteratively until neither additional respondents nor additional data any longer contribute to a better understanding of the social phenomenon under study
  - a form of triangulation
Data analysis:
analytic induction*

• **Focusing on cases representing a broad social phenomenon** and systematically analyzing them for commonalities toward a deeper conceptual understanding of the phenomenon

• **Different from deductive reasoning**, which begins with a general hypothetical statement and conducts analyses of empirical data to reach a logical conclusion

• **Considering a theory and testing its subjective adequacy** with what is learned from interviews allowing for continuous reconstruction and refinement

Data analysis: narrative analysis*

- **Making sense of narrative data** from spoken or written words
- Learning from the **narratives people offer** about the meaning they give to their own experience in a particular social situation
- Narratives **can be analyzed by** theme, how the respondent tells the story, the interaction between the teller and the listener

What about using software to analyze qualitative data?

Using **available software programs**, qualitative researchers can conduct analyses by **measuring and counting** things such as

- how many times a respondent uses a particular word
- how many times a computer program counts a pattern it finds in your transcript

Unfortunately, measuring and counting are by definition elements of quantitative analyses.

Qualitative analysis is about finding meaning, not measure, so there are no shortcuts.
Validity

• In social science commonly is defined as “the closeness of agreement of a test with some independently observed criterion of the behavior under consideration” *

• Also defined as trustworthiness relative to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability **

• And as a relationship “between an account and something outside of that account, whether this something is construed as objective reality, the constructions of actors, or a variety of other possible interpretations” ***


Validity in quantitative research

- Establishing measures of an objectively conceived and clearly defined criterion, requiring attention to internal and external validity *

- Mathematical probability

Validity in qualitative research

• Meaning being a subjective phenomenon, the decision to accept the correspondence of meanings requires an appreciation and relative certainty that the subjective interpretations are knowable and coherent

• Adequacy with respect to meaning**: how well the conceptual construction of a social phenomenon by a researcher can be recognized and understood by the social actors who participate in that phenomenon in real-life experience

Something to think about

Given that we live in a nation populated by hundreds of millions of people with a multitude of different beliefs and values sharing insufficient space with essential resources disproportionately distributed among us, why are there so few murders?

How would you design and implement a qualitative study to address a question like this (or any other) and how would you share your findings with those who could use them?
Your Questions

Please enter your questions in the Q&A box.