Research Methods 2

The Qualitative Researcher

Abigail Marks

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Research Methods 2: The Qualitative Researcher

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Chapter 1

Introduction to Qualitative Research

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1.1 Introduction

This book has been written for postgraduate students who are completing formal courses in research methods and who are undertaking a research project. As many of you will have had limited exposure to qualitative research, this text is formulated as a basic introduction to the underpinnings and practices of qualitative research. The focus is on the methods (Chapter 3 to Chapter 10) and also the philosophies underpinning the methods (Chapter 2), as well as forms of analysis (Chapter 11) and writing up your research (Chapter 12). By the time you have finished reading this volume you should have a basic but comprehensive understanding of qualitative research. Moreover, you should be in a position to answer the following questions:

- Is qualitative research for me?
- If so, does it fit with my philosophy/worldview?
- Are there particular methods that are appropriate for the answering of my research question?
- Do I understand how I should analyse my data?
- Do I understand the basics of writing up qualitative research?
- Do I know where to go to read more about my chosen methods/analytic approach?

Qualitative research focuses on the subjective world and provides an understanding of social, emotional and observed phenomena. The central purpose of qualitative research is to achieve a detailed understanding and perception of different cultures, settings and perspectives. Qualitative research encompasses a variety of methods such as interviews, observation and textual analysis, to name but a few. The method you choose will most likely be in accordance with your worldview or philosophical standpoint. This idea of the link between methods and philosophy was covered in the first textbook in this series and will be further examined in Chapter 2.

Qualitative research has become increasingly prominent in the social and behavioural sciences, yet many students, and indeed experienced researchers, believe that it is the 'easy' option – everyone can do a few interviews, can't they? Indeed, one of the main purposes of this text is to demonstrate that it is certainly not the 'easy' option, but it is very rewarding and manageable if you take your time and get the basics right. Each method described within this text should be understood not only as a stand-alone method but also as being embedded within the broader research process. Hence, the discussion of the various stages of the process of qualitative research are central to this text.

1.2 A Brief History of Qualitative Research

The key focus of qualitative research is the study of social relations, whether within an organisation or broader society. With the development of new technologies and constant restructuring of societies, social science researchers are central to the understanding of the new world order. In the context of this increasing complexity of life and work, the reductive (frequently quantitative) methodologies that were often favoured in the past are less effective. One of the reasons that, over time, social and behavioural scientists have become increasingly interested in qualitative research is the flexibility that it offers for understanding complex issues.

Within the social sciences, there is actually a long history of the adoption of qualitative methods. The main influence on qualitative work in the social sciences can be traced back to the Chicago school in sociology in the early twentieth century. However, it was in the 1960s that sociology led the way for the broader movement in social sciences away from quantitative methods towards a greater sympathy for qualitative research. American sociology, in particular, became critical of standardised and quantifiable social research (see, for example, Goffman, 1963; Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Over the next few decades there were attempts to formalise qualitative research which culminated in, for example, developments in grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) and the standardisation of guidelines for qualitative analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Developments in qualitative research also went hand-in-hand with what were seen as radical positions on research such as feminist perspectives, symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, among others. From the 1990s onwards there was a growing trend, or fashion, towards the narrative turn, where the focus of qualitative inquiry was on narratives rather than theory, and this was very much tied in with the movement within social sciences towards post-structuralist/postmodernist philosophical positions.

At the moment, the focus of qualitative researchers seems to be moving away from straightforward narrative approaches and towards creating a specific form of rigour that can be associated with qualitative research and is fundamentally different from rigour as discussed by quantitative researchers. In part, and perhaps associated with this move, there is a softening of boundaries between qualitative and quantitative research as binary opposites. For example, Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) offers a systematic way of analysing qualitative case studies (Rihoux and Ragin, 2009).

Moreover, researchers sympathetic to a critical realist perspective are potentially more sympathetic to a mixed methods approach (see Edwards *et al.*, 2014).

1.3 Qualitative/Quantitative Debate

The debate about the relative strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods has been going on for more than 30 years. Indeed, this is the essence of one of the most heated disputes in contemporary social science – the qualitative/quantitative debate.

> 'Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape the nature of inquiry … In contrast, quantitative studies emphasise the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes. Inquiry is purported to be within a value-free framework.'
>
> Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 4)

A central issue in the qualitative/quantitative debate (QQD) is whether quantitative and qualitative approaches represent inherently different and irreconcilable worldviews – or whether they simply represent different strategies at the disposal of any well-educated researcher. From the qualitative side usually emerges the discussion of meta-issues such as worldview, paradigms, epistemology and ideology (e.g. Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). More traditional scientists (or positivists) tend to be silent on these issues, preferring to talk about the reliability and validity of particular research methods (e.g. Reichardt and Rallis, 1994).

There is a fundamental problem with the QQD that I mentioned in the previous textbook in this series. The opposing sides in the QQD often confuse an allegiance to particular methods with a specific allegiance to qualitative or quantitative analysis. Furthermore, this allegiance also tends to extend to an attachment to specific philosophical positions.

So, questionnaires are more often than not viewed as quantitative instruments, while interviews are typically associated with qualitative research. Accordingly, quantitative approaches are predominantly associated with a positivist philosophy, whereas qualitative approaches are more associated with a constructionist position. Yet, interviews can be coded and then analysed quantitatively, and surveys use words to construct the questions as well as often allowing for open-ended responses which enable in-depth analysis. So this binary division between qualitative and quantitative research is not only potentially misleading but also naïve. In reality the relationship between methods and philosophy is more complicated than many textbooks present, and I hope that this textbook will go some way towards demonstrating this complexity.

1.4 Being Reflexive

Reflexivity is the awareness of researchers of their contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process and an awareness of the difficulty of

remaining external to the subject matter of the research (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999). Due to the much closer relationship between the researcher and participants in qualitative research, it is essential to consider issues of reflexivity. Reflexivity means researchers exploring their involvement in a particular study and how their involvement acts upon and informs research. Reflexivity is key for all researchers but particularly important for the qualitative researcher.

There are broadly two types of reflexivity (Willig, 2001). The first is personal reflexivity, which involves individuals reflecting on how their identities, aims, interests, beliefs and political perspectives may have influenced their research. Moreover, personal reflexivity is concerned with researchers considering how the process of undertaking the research may have changed them and their values as researchers. Secondly, there is epistemological reflexivity, which requires researchers to engage with questions such as: 'How has the research question defined and limited what can be "found?" How has the design of the study and the method of analysis "constructed" the data and the findings? How could the research question have been investigated differently? To what extent would this have given rise to a different understanding of the phenomenon under investigation?' Thus, epistemological reflexivity encourages researchers to reflect upon the assumptions (about the world, about knowledge) made in the course of the research, and it helps researchers to think about the implications of such assumptions for the research and its findings.

1.5 Key Features

I have included several elements in this text to help you structure your learning. Firstly, each section of this book is written to make it as easy as possible to understand for the relative novice in qualitative research. I have attempted to provide the information that I think you should know, focusing on key ideas. At the end of each chapter, as in the first text in this series, is a set of 'key takeaways' and either a list of advantages/disadvantages or a set of questions that you need to ask yourself. This text should give you, for the purpose of a postgraduate course in qualitative methods, a comprehensive but basic understanding of qualitative strategies, methods, forms of analysis and guidance on how to write up qualitative research. However, at the point when you are starting to undertake your empirical investigation, I would advise that you take the time to read and explore further the methods and strategies of analysis of your choice.

1.6 Ethics and the Qualitative Researcher

Ethical considerations are critical for all forms of research, whether qualitative or quantitative. The *Cambridge English Dictionary* defines ethics as 'the study of what is morally right and wrong, or a set of beliefs about what is morally right and wrong'. Research ethics determine the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behaviours by the researcher, particularly with respect to the treatment of research participants. Moreover, the actual integrity of the research findings is dependent on whether the researcher has adhered to appropriate ethical principles. Every university has its own set of ethical guidelines but they all centre on treating research participants

with respect. Due to the importance of ethical standards for the social and behavioural sciences, many allied professional bodies publish their own ethical standards. In the UK, the bodies that may be relevant to you, such as the Economic and Social Research Council, the British Sociological Association and the British Psychological Society, all have their own ethics policies.

- British Sociological Association: https://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/24310/bsa_statement_of_ethical_practice.pdf
- British Psychological Society: https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-code-human-research-ethics
- Economic and Social Research Council: https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/
- Academy of Management: https://aom.org/about-aom/governance/ethics/code-of-ethics

Such ethical codes of practice encourage members to engage in positive ethical behaviour as well as providing guidance and advice about issues such as objectivity, intellectual property, potential discrimination, etc. However, these are just guidelines and you as a researcher will have to make additional decisions to ensure that your research practice is ethical. For qualitative research you must ensure that you respect the dignity and autonomy of all your research participants; that you respect also the values and interests of the communities in which the research participants are embedded; that you minimise risk (physical and psychological) for the research participants.

As part of any research project you will have to complete an application for ethical approval. This will be reviewed by an ethics committee, a group of experienced researchers in your field who will help to ensure the integrity of your research and to protect you and your university against potential legal problems arising from any behaviour that could be considered unethical. The most basic of ethical standards for qualitative researchers, and ones that will always be included in an ethics approval form, are voluntary participation and informed consent, which must be given and recorded either orally or in written form. You need to ensure that you have procedures in place to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of participants.

1.7 Book Structure

The book is structured in the order of activities that you are likely to have to consider for your research. Chapter 2 looks at issues around research philosophy. While issues of research philosophy were covered in the first textbook in this series, the chapter on philosophy in this book will be more focused on issues around qualitative research. We will then move on to looking at the research interview in Chapter 3. The reason that I start with the research interview is that it is the most commonly used qualitative research method in the social and behavioural sciences. This chapter will cover some of the different forms of research interview, including structured and semi-structured interview techniques. Chapter 4 also centres on interviews, with the focus being on the oral history and narrative approaches to data collection. Chapter 5 is concerned with focus group research. In effect, focus groups are multiple participant interviews,

to enable the researcher to gain multiple insights into a topic or understand participants' collective understanding about a subject.

In Chapter 6 we make a fundamental shift in terms of research instruments and move on to looking at diary research. Diary studies involve the collection of data by asking participants to record information regarding their day-to-day lives and experiences using a diary or journal. Chapter 7 centres on ethnographic research. Ethnographic studies tend to involve qualitative methods that are used in social sciences for the purpose of the observation of social practices and social interactions. The focus of Chapter 8 moves away from 'pure' qualitative methods and discusses the differing relationships between qualitative and quantitative approaches under the umbrella of mixed methods research. Chapter 9 changes direction once more to provide an introduction to the coding of your qualitative material in preparation for your data analysis. Data analysis can be undertaken using computer-based programs such as NVivo, and this software-based approach is covered in Chapter 10. Chapter 10 also looks at the other tools offered to qualitative researchers by the digital world and includes matters such as digital resources for diary research as well as looking at the method of netnography.

Chapter 11 presents an overview of some of the dominant analytic techniques associated with qualitative studies, followed by a guide to the 'writing up' or reporting of qualitative research in Chapter 12.

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