Chapter 6
Qualitative Research Methods

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Methods: Doing Social Research, 4e

Approach of Qualitative Research

- Qualitative research – different assumptions/ approach than quantitative research
- Emphasis on seeing the world from the eyes of the participants
- Strive to make sense of phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them
- Holistic emphasis – studying the person, group, culture in the natural setting

Table 1.2, Qualitative and Quantitative Research Contrasted

QUALITATIVE	QUANTITATIVE
Multiple realities	Single reality
Reality is socially constructed	Reality is objective
Reality is context interrelated	Reality is context free
Holistic	Reductionistic
Strong philosophical perspective	Strong theoretical base
Reasoning is inductive	Reasoning is deductive and inductive
Discovery of meaning is the basis of knowledge	Cause-and-effect relationships are the bases of knowledge
Develops theory	Tests theory

Table 1.2, Qualitative and Quantitative Research Contrasted (continued)

QUALITATIVE	QUANTITATIVE
Theory developed during study	Theory developed a priori
Meaning of concepts	Measurement of variables
Process oriented	Outcome oriented
Control unimportant	Control important
Rich descriptions	Precise measurement of variables
Basic element of analysis is words	Basic element of analysis is numbers
Uniqueness	Generalization
Trustworthiness of findings	Control of error

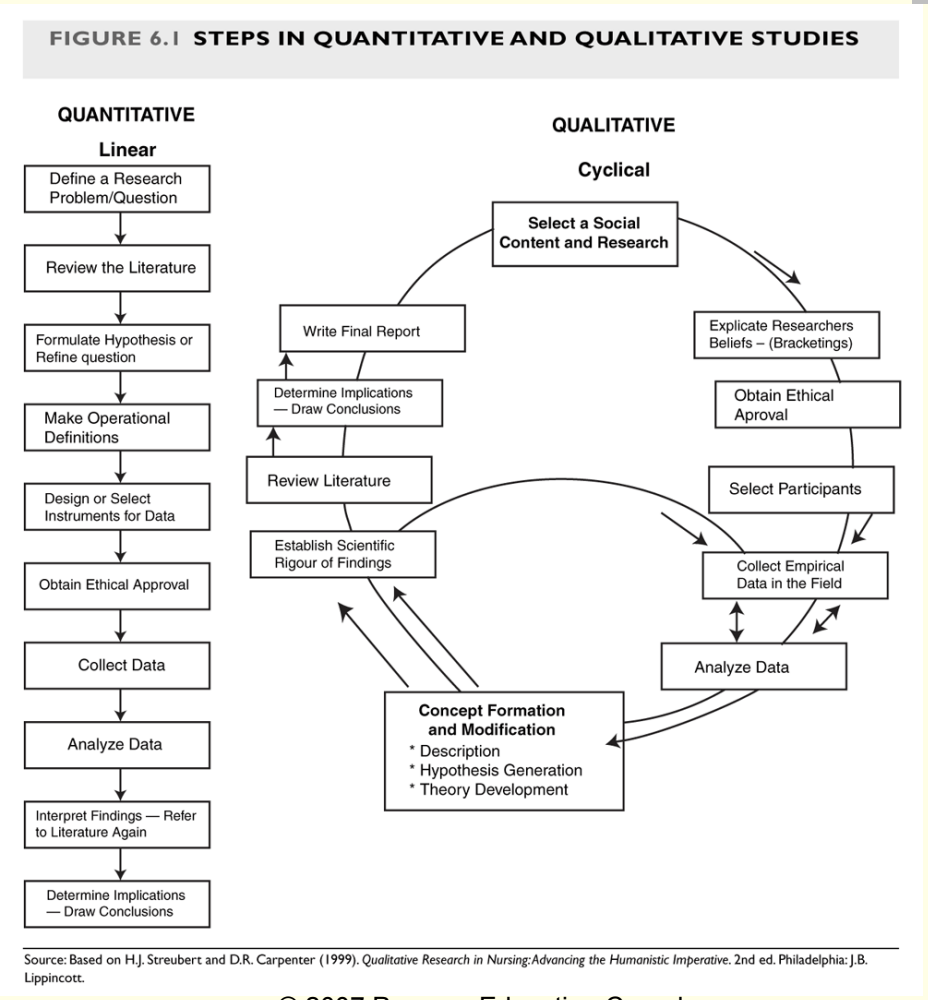
Figure 6.1, Steps in Quantitative and Qualitative Studies

Quantitative (Linear)

↓ Define a Research Problem/Question
↓ Review the Literature
↓ Formulate Hypothesis or Refine Question
↓ Make Operational Definitions
↓ Design or Select Instruments for Data
↓ Obtain Ethical Approval
↓ Collect Data
↓ Analyze Data
↓ Interpret Findings – Refer to Literature Again
↓ Determine Implications – Draw Conclusions

Source: Based on H.J. Streubert and D.R. Carpenter (1999). *Qualitative Research in Nursing: Advancing the Humanistic Imperative*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: J.B.Lippincott.

Figure 6.1, Steps in Quantitative and Qualitative Studies (continued)



Source: Based on H.J. Streubert and D.R. Carpenter (1999). *Qualitative Research in Nursing: Advancing the Humanistic Imperative*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott.

Core Activities in Qualitative Research

Qualitative approaches on:

A. Literature review
B. Explicating researcher's beliefs
C. Role of participants: subject or informant?
D. Selection of participants
E. Setting for data collection
F. Approach to data analysis
G. Saturation

A. Literature Review

- Conducted after the data have been collected and analyzed
- Rationale for delaying the literature review:
  - To avoid leading the participants in the direction of what has already been discovered
- Purpose of literature review:
  - To show how current findings fit into what is already known

B. Explicating Researcher's Beliefs

- Bracketing – setting aside one's biases and personal views on a topic
  - Investigator keeps a diary of personal thoughts and feelings about the topic
- Purpose: the researcher is made aware when interpretations of the data reflect personal beliefs rather than those of the participants

C. Subject or Informant?

- People being studied are viewed as *participant* or *informant*, not "subject"
  - Viewed as active participants in the research
  - They "inform" the researcher about their culture
- Researcher seeks to understand the participants' cultural knowledge
  - Hence, requires learning about the participants' culture through on-going discussion and involvement with them

D. Selection of Participants

- Method is called "purposive sampling"
  - Participants must have first-hand experience with the research topic (e.g., homelessness, gang involvement, attending medical school) and be able to talk about it
- Researcher establishes clear criteria and rationale for sample selection
- Goal is not generalization of findings but *rich descriptions* of phenomenon by those who have experienced it

E. Setting for Data Collection

- "Informant-driven" rather than "theory-driven"
  - Investigator assumes ignorance of the culture or experience being studied
  - Informant teaches the investigator
- Data is collected in the "field" – the natural world where people live and experience life
  - Investigator should:
    - be nonintrusive
    - spend a prolonged time in the field
- Some researchers used multiple methods

F. Data Analysis

- Researcher immerses self in data to bring order and meaning to vast narrative
  - Come to truly understand what the data are saying
- Cyclical process – data collection occurs simultaneously with data analysis
  - Analysis begins when data collection begins
  - Reading, rereading, intuiting, analyzing, synthesizing, and reporting on data
  - Sometimes called *theoretical sampling* (collect data until saturation is reached)

F. Data Analysis (cont'd)

- Generalizations drawn from earlier interviews are returned to participants for clarification and elaboration
- Look for meaning in the data as it is gathered
- Data similar in meaning are clustered together into preliminary categories
- Requires an extensive amount of time

G. Saturation

- Refers to a situation in data analysis where participants' descriptions become repetitive and confirm previously collected data
  - An indication that data analysis is complete
  - When data analysis is complete, data collection is terminated

Three Qualitative Methods

TABLE 6.1	COMPARISON OF QUALITATIVE METHODS		
METHOD	STUDY FOCUS	ANALYTIC FOCUS	DISCIPLINES
Ethnography	culture/cultural group	describe a culture/cultural group	Cultural Anthropology
Grounded Theory	cultural groups	generate theory about a basic social process	Sociology/ Symbolic Interaction/ Criminology
Phenomenology	individual experience	discern the essence of the lived experience	Philosophy/ Psychology/ Sociology

Three Qualitative Methods: Ethnography

- Focus: study human behaviour in the cultural context in which it is embedded
- Ethnography is the work of describing a culture – the way of life of a cultural group
  - Associated with Cultural Anthropology
- Example: David Counts and Dorothy Ayer Counts: “An Ethnography of RVing Seniors”

Three Qualitative Methods: Grounded Theory

- Focus: develop a theory to explain underlying social processes of a cultural group
- Useful in areas where little is known or when a new perspective is needed
  - Used for exploratory, descriptive studies
- Because the theory emerges from the data, it is said to be *grounded* in the data
  - Foundation in Symbolic Interactionism
- Example: Kerry Daly and the social construction of fatherhood

Three Qualitative Methods: Phenomenology

- Focus: reveal the meaning of the *lived experience* from the perspective of participants
- Describe the *essences* of lived experience
  - *Essences:* elements related to the true meaning of something that gives common understanding to the phenomenon under study
  - Conveyed with descriptive language
  - Drawn from Philosophy; used across disciplines
- Example: J.E. Solchany: A phenomenological study of women's preadoptive experiences

Data Collection Methods in Qualitative Studies

- Three data collection strategies introduced:
  1. Participant observation
  2. In-depth interviews
  3. Focus group interviews

- Qualitative researchers may combine more than one method

Data Collection Methods: 1. Participant Observation

- Intensive, usually long term, examination of a social group, an organization, etc.
- Researcher becomes a participant in the lives of group members
  - Observes their behaviour and learns meaning systems (which are tied to language)
- Most closely associated with Ethnography, as developed in Classical Anthropology
- Now done in a variety of disciplines

1. Participant Observation (cont'd)

- Many classic participant observations studies
  - E.g., *Asylums (*Erving Goffman), *Tally's Corner (*Elliot Liebow), *Street Corner Society (*William F. Whyte), etc.
- Today most ethnographers take an *overt role*
  - I.e., their identity as a researcher is known to the people being studied
- *Covert* participation (i.e., identity concealed from participants) is fraught with ethical issues – e.g., Humphrey's "Tearoom Trade"

Steps Involved in Participant Observation Research

A. Gaining entry into the group
B. Developing and maintaining rapport
C. Developing a method for taking field notes
D. Integrating data collection and data analysis

Steps in Participant Observation: A. Gaining Entry into the Group

- Take into consideration the type of group
  - formal organizations require formal entry; involves letter writing, permission requests, etc.
  - Informal groups – different strategy needed
- Access may be gained through a *gatekeeper* (an individual with special status)
- Want to involve *key informants* (those who are most knowledgeable about the group)

Steps in Participant Observation: B. Developing/Maintaining Rapport

- Researcher must work hard to develop and maintain good relationships in the field
  - E.g., be sure not to become associated with one faction in a group or organization
- Researcher could be blamed for problems that arise in the setting

Steps in Participant Observation: C. Strategies for Taking Field Notes

Field notes – integral to participant observation

- Include descriptions and interpretations of individuals, interactions, and events
  - Distinguish descriptions from interpretations
- Record time and location of observations, as well as key information (weather, events happening and their significance)
- Keep *theoretical memos* – which are the tentative interpretations emerging and being assessed through further data collection

Field Notes (cont'd)

- May not be possible or advisable to take notes while in the field
  - Important that they be done as soon after field observation as possible
- Note-taking is time-consuming because it is integral to guiding the data collection and continuing the analysis
  - E.g., field notes for *When Prophecy Failed* were well over 1,000 typed pages

Steps in Participant Observation: D. Integrating Data Collection and Analysis

- Organizing field notes into different types of files facilitates data analysis
- *Master field file* – complete journal of field notes; number pages and include entry dates
- Background, history file – subfile organizing background material
- Key character files – subfiles on key players in the group or organization
- Analytic files – subfiles for different types of observations or relationships

Data Collection Methods: 2. In-depth Interviews

- Some studies cannot employ the participant observation method
  - E.g., Desroches's study of bank robbers
- In-depth interviews allow participants to describe their experiences and the meaning of events taking place in their lives
  - Verbatim quotes capture the language and meaning expressed by participants
- Interviews are flexible and allow for probing
  - Interview method is quite diverse, adaptive

2. In-depth Interviews (cont'd)

- Spradley – three key elements for the interview method to be successful

1. *Explicit purpose* – researcher and informant are aware that the discussion has a purpose
2. *Ethnographic explanations* – researcher tries out *explanations* on the participants to see if they make sense
   - Encourage the informants to use colloquial language, and teach the researcher its meaning

2. In-depth Interviews (cont'd)

3. *Ethnographic questions* include:
   i. Descriptive questions – ask participants to describe their experiences (e.g., their ideas, circumstances, viewpoints, dilemmas, etc)
   ii. Structural questions – ask participants how they organize their world (e.g., activities)
   iii. Contrast questions – ask participants what is meant by specific terminology

- Prus & Grills stress the *value* of the interview method in a multi-method approach

Data Collection Methods: 3. Focus Group Interviews

- Interview format, but in a group setting
  - 6-12 participants with common experience
- Dates back to the 1940s – used to assess effectiveness of morale-boosting radio shows
  - 1970s onward – used by market researchers
  - 1980s onward – used by academics
- Transcript of discussion is the data
  - Plus accompanying notes
  - Use content analysis or grounded theory approach to analyze the data

3. Focus Group Interviews (cont'd)

- Strengths:
  - Open-ended question
    - Spontaneously deal with issues as they arise
  - Cost-effective method of collecting data
  - Less time-consuming
- Weaknesses:
  - One or two participants may dominate
  - Not done in a natural setting, so little "observation" to help understand the experience of the participants

Approaches to Data Analysis

- Qualitative researchers have developed several different methods of data analysis
- This chapter provides two examples:
  1. Ethnographic data analysis
  2. Grounded theory
- Both approaches reflect the *inductive* strategy typical of qualitative data analysis
- Each shows that coding strategies facilitate the identification of themes in the data

Approaches to Data Analysis: 1. Ethnographic Data Analysis

- The ethnographer integrates data analysis into the data collection process while in the field
  - Helps the ethnographer to guide his/her participation and observations in the field
- While in the field, the researcher conducts four levels of analysis simultaneously
  A. Domain Analysis
  B. Taxonomic Analysis
  C. Componential Analysis
  D. Theme Analysis

Ethnographic Data Analysis: A. Domain Analysis

- The researcher is moving from observing a social situation (set of behaviours carried out by people in a social situation) to discovering the cultural scene
- Cultural domain – categories of meaning that include smaller categories
  - Strive to identify the semantic relationship in the observations made
    - E.g., *x* is a kind of *y*; *x* is the result of *y*; *x* is a part of *y*

Ethnographic Data Analysis: B. Taxonomic Analysis

- More in-depth analysis in which the researcher is searching for larger categories to which the domain may belong
- A *taxonomy* is a set of categories organized on the basis of a single semantic relationship
  - Major difference: the taxonomy shows more of the relationships among things inside the cultural domain

Ethnographic Data Analysis: C. Componential Analysis

- Componential analysis looks for *contrasts* among the cultural categories in the domains
  - "Systematic search for the attributes (components of culture) associated with cultural categories" (Spradley)
  - Uses idea of mail to explain. In our culture, we can classify our mail – e.g., junk mail (flyers, notices, etc.), bills, magazines, personal letters – because each cluster has an attribute that conveys meaning. Not visible to someone from another culture

Ethnographic Data Analysis: D. Theme Analysis

- *Cultural themes* are recurrent patterns in the data that are used to connect domains
  - *Themes* are assertions that apply to numerous situations and have a high degree of generality
- Spradley suggests a number of universal themes, such as social conflict, cultural contradictions, informal techniques of social control, managing impersonal social relations, acquiring and maintaining status, solving problems, etc.

Approaches to Data Analysis: 2. Constant Comparison Method

- During data-collection process, grounded theorists generate theory using the *constant comparative method*
  - I.e., each piece of information is coded and compared to other pieces for similarity and differences
- Steps in Constant Comparative Method
  A. Concept Formation
  B. Concept Development
  C. Concept Modification and Integration

Constant Comparison Method: A. Concept Formation: Coding

- Coding occurs at three levels
- Level 1 coding: also called substantive codes
  - Study the data line by line looking for key processes – codify the substance of the data
  - Substantive codes use participants' words
- Level 2 coding: condense level 1 codes to assign categories of codes
  - Categories are usually mutually exclusive
- Level 3 coding: identify *core variables or the basic social psychological process (BSP)*

A. Concept Formation: Coding (cont'd)

- A *core variable* is one that focuses the theory and accounts for most of the variation in a pattern of behaviour that is both relevant and problematic for the participants involved
- Usually represent the title given to the themes that emerge from the data
- They are the processes that occur over time and that involve changes over time

Constant Comparison Method
B. Concept Development

Three steps involved:

1. Reduction

- Compare each category of codes to see if there is an umbrella category under which several existing categories can be merged
- Identify theoretical linkages among categories and collapse them to form more general categories

B. Concept Development (cont'd)

2. Selective sampling of the literature

- Done to learn more about emerging concepts
- Literature is considered "data" and used to fill in the gaps in emerging theory
- May add clarity to the theoretical descriptions

B. Concept Development (cont'd)

3. Selective sampling of the data

- Done once main concepts have emerged
- Collect additional data in a selective manner:
  - To develop the hypothesis statements,
  - To identify the properties of the main variables,
  - And to ensure saturation of categories
- Researchers stop collecting new data when satisfied that they are not hearing anything new about the category or hypothesis
  - At this stage, *core category variables* emerge

Constant Comparison Method: C. Concept Modification and Integration

Two processes: Theoretical coding and memoing

Theoretical coding

- Done to form theoretical linkages between categories
- 18 families of *theoretical codes:* 3 examples
  1. Consequence family (the six Cs: causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariances, and conditions)
  2. Interactive family (mutual effects, reciprocity, mutual trajectory, mutual interdependence, interaction of effects, and covariance)
  3. Strategy family (strategies, tactics, mechanisms, manipulations, maneuvering, dealing with handling techniques, ploys, means, goals)

C. Concept Modification and Integration

Theoretical memoing

- These are the researcher's ideas about the codes and categories and the relationship among them
- Three roles
  - To raise the data to a conceptual level
  - To develop the properties of each category
  - To generate hypotheses about the relationships between categories

Methods of Evaluating Qualitative Research

- Developing standards of quality
- Lincoln and Guba's classic work shed light on how to assess truth in a qualitative report
- Offered four alternate tests of quality that reflect the assumptions of the qualitative paradigm:
  - Credibility
  - Dependability
  - Transferability
  - Confirmability

Alternate Tests of Quality

Credibility refers to accuracy

- Description must be plausible and recognized by participants

Enhanced by:

- Prolonged time in the field repeatedly observing and interacting with participants
- Using different data sources, methods, data type
- Conducting *member checks*
  - Involving other investigators in the study

Alternate Tests of Quality

Dependability refers to the stability and trackability of the changes in data over time and conditions

- Want to determine the extent to which another researcher with similar training and rapport with participants would make the same observations
- This is determined by an **audit trail**
  - Involves auditing research process, documenting all the raw data generated, and assessing method of data analysis

Alternate Tests of Quality

Transferability refers to the generalizability of the study findings to other settings, populations, and contexts

- Report must provide sufficient detail so that readers can assess this
- Lack of transferability is viewed as a weakness of qualitative methods

Alternate Tests of Quality

Confirmability refers to the objectivity of the data

- Would another researcher agree about the meanings emerging from the data
- An **audit trail** is used in which the researcher explicates how personal biases may have come into play

Contemporary Standards of Quality

- Diverse inquiry communities
- Positionality
- Community
- Voice
- Critical subjectivity
- Reciprocity
- Sacredness of the research relationship
- Sharing privileges

Advantages and Limitations

- Focus on the whole of the human experience and the meanings ascribed to them by participants
- They provide the researcher with deep insights that would not be possible using quantitative methods
- The major strength of qualitative work is the validity of the data it produces
- Participants true reality is likely to be reflected
- Major limitation is its perceived lack of objectivity and generalizability
- Researchers become the research tools and may lack objectivity