

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a method of inquiry employed in many different academic disciplines, traditionally in the social sciences, but also in market research and further contexts.

- Qualitative researchers aim to gather an in-depth understanding of human behavior and the reasons that govern such behavior. The qualitative method investigates the *why* and *how* of decision making, not just *what*, *where*, *when*. Hence, smaller but focused samples are more often needed than large samples.

In the conventional view, qualitative methods produce information only on the particular cases studied, and any more general conclusions are only propositions (informed assertions).

Quantitative methods can then be used to seek empirical support for such research hypotheses.

This view has been disputed by Oxford University professor Bent Flyvbjerg, who argues that qualitative methods and case study research may be used both for hypotheses-testing and for generalizing beyond the particular cases studied.

Most qualitative approaches have:

- a focus on natural settings;
- an interest in meanings, perspectives and understandings;
- an emphasis on process;
- a concern with inductive analysis and grounded theory.

Qualitative researchers are interested in life as it is lived in real situations. This has a number of implications

- They do not set up artificial experiments. 'Natural experiments', however, can be very useful. These are events that occur naturally but interrupt the normal course of life, such as a change in national or school policy, a pupil or teacher career transition, the circumstances leading up to a school exclusion.

- Situations are deemed to be important because they influence behaviour.
- People often behave differently in different circumstances, such as in a staffroom or classroom, or in a high-achieving or low-achieving class, or in a class at the beginning or end of the week.
- The context cannot, therefore, be taken as a given, but rather as a set of parameters with which individuals interact.

Researchers usually prefer fairly lengthy and deep involvement in the natural setting. Social life is complex in its range and variability, and operates at different levels. It has 'many layers of meaning' and the researcher has to discover the innermost meanings.

This is not to say that smaller-scale studies are without their uses, though they will have more limited objectives and be more exploratory.

- In order to gain access to deeper levels, the researcher needs to develop a certain rapport with the subjects of the study, and to win their trust

- Qualitative methods are probably the oldest of all scientific techniques, with Ancient Greek philosophers qualitatively observing the world around them and trying to come up with answers which explained what they saw

DESIGN

- The design of qualitative research is probably the most flexible of the various experimental techniques, encompassing a variety of accepted methods and structures.
- From an individual case study to an extensive interview, this type of study still needs to be carefully constructed and designed, but there is no standardized structure.
- Case studies, interviews and survey designs are the most commonly used methods.

ADVANTAGES

- Qualitative techniques are extremely useful when a subject is too complex to be answered by a simple yes or no hypothesis. These types of designs are much easier to plan and carry out. They are also useful when budgetary decisions have to be taken into account.

- The broader scope covered by these designs ensures that some useful data is always generated, whereas an unproved hypothesis in a quantitative experiment can mean that a lot of time has been wasted.
- Qualitative research methods are not as dependent upon sample sizes as quantitative methods; a case study, for example, can generate meaningful results with a small sample group.

DISADVANTAGES

- Qualitative methods still require a lot of careful thought and planning, to ensure that the results obtained are as accurate as possible.

Qualitative data cannot be mathematically analyzed in the same comprehensive way as quantitative results, so can only give a guide to general trends. It is a lot more open to personal opinion and judgment, and so can only ever give observations rather than results.

Any qualitative research design is usually unique and cannot be exactly recreated, meaning that they do lack the ability to be replicated.

Role of the Researcher

- Researcher must physically go to the people, location, setting or site (or the “field”) in order to observe, interview or collect documents (or artefacts). He should immerse himself in the situation and do not manipulate the situation, but rather watch naturally occurring events and not controlling them, i.e. qualitative research is naturalistic

In contrast, in quantitative research, the researcher is detached but he or she manipulates the situation, such as you would do when conducting an experiment in which a treatment is given to one group while another group is not given the treatment and acts as the control group.

- The researcher being the main instrument of data collection is more responsive to the situation and he or she is able to adapt to the changing conditions.
- For example, the researcher is more sensitive to reactions of participants and the data can be immediately processed and he or she is able to take whatever action to check and confirm with the subject if there is doubt or uncertainties

Difference between qualitative & quantitative research

| | Qualitative | Quantitative |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| 1. Philosophy: | Phenomenology | Positivism |
| 2. Goal: | Understand, meaning | Prediction, test hypothesis |
| 3. Focus: | Quality (features) | Quantity (how much, numbers) |
| 4. Method: | Ethnography/Action research | Experiments/Correlation |
| 5. Data collection: | Interviews, observation documents, artefacts | Questionnaire, scales, tests, inventories |
| 6. Research Design: | Flexible, emerging | Structured, predetermined |
| 7. Sample: | Small, purposeful | Large, random, representation |
| 8. Generalisation: | Unique case selection | Generalisation |
| 9. Analysis | Inductive (by the researcher) | Deductive (by statistical methods) |
| 10. Role of Researcher: | Immersed | Detached |

Thank you.

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