

Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods

What is qualitative research?

I: Characteristics of qualitative methods

- In pairs, discuss:

‘What is qualitative research?’

(paradigms, techniques)

- Feedback



Key characteristics

- *A form of social enquiry*
- Interpretative
- Fieldwork
- In-depth
- Process
- Naturalistic
- Reflexive

Qualitative research – one definition

Qualitative research is a form of social inquiry that focuses on the way people **interpret** and make sense of their **experiences** and the world in which they live... to understand the **social reality** of individuals, groups and cultures. Researchers use qualitative approaches to explore the behavior, perspectives and **experiences** of the people they study. The basis of qualitative research lies in the **interpretive** approach to **social reality**. (Holloway, 1997, p.2)

A qualitative approach

- **Interpretive** rather than positivist
- **Inductive** - theory generating rather than testing
- Focus on **depth** than on breadth
- **Words** rather than numbers
- **Flexible**, often **exploratory**

A qualitative approach in practice

- **Meanings** and **interpretations**
- Importance of **context**
- **Holistic** approach to social phenomena
- **Reflexive** (role/effect of the researcher)
- Attending to the **mundane**/routine

Two forms of social inquiry...

	Positivist	Interpretivist
Basic assumptions	Social 'facts' Objective reality	Social construction (symbolic meanings) Multiple perspectives
Methods	Controlled measurement	Depth interviews Observations
Research intention	Verification Prediction	Understanding Insight Explanation
Participation	Subjects	Participants
Approach to theory	Hypothesis development Deductive testing	Inductive theory building

Consequences for research

- Nothing is taken for granted
- A detailed way of witnessing human events in the context in which they occur” (Savage)
- “Professional stranger” (Agar)
- Reflexivity

Agar MH (1980) *The Professional Stranger*. London: Academic Press.

Savage J (2000) Ethnography and health care. *BMJ*; 321:1400-1402.

Data collection

- Major methods
 - Interviews (in-depth/semi-structured)
 - Focus groups
 - Participant observation
 - Observation
 - Documentary analysis

II: Applications of qualitative research

General applications



Evaluation



Explanation



Consultation



Design

Application of qualitative methods

In country groups, discuss:

‘How qualitative methods are/can be used in HERA2 research’

- What are our research questions?
- What methods can we use?



Reflexivity

- A way to assure or enhance the credibility of the research
- Examination of the researcher's own position, i.e. their:
 - Motives for doing the research
 - Background
 - Perspectives
 - Effect of these on the data collection & interpretation

How to be a reflexive researcher

- Identify your own preconceptions
 - Personal
 - Professional
- Maintain curiosity
- Some researchers keep a 'reflexive diary'
- Refer to and consider these during analysis and write-up



Establishing a role

- Learner?
- Observer?
- Participant observer?
- Self evaluation and reflection
- ‘Professional stranger’?

Establishing a role

- Be clear to participants about the research aims
- Be clear about confidentiality and anonymity
- Be aware of your boundaries - if you are a healthcare professional, advise people to seek help rather than provide help or advice
- Consider the potential impact of research on participants
- Consider respondent validation/feedback

Exercise 1

- Write down your own personal and professional preconceptions that might affect a qualitative project.
- Include:
 - Your professional position at the moment
 - Your professional background
 - Your prior knowledge about the topic & setting
 - Your personal background
 - Your reasons for doing the research

Using reflexivity

1. Think about how these might affect the research that you do
2. How can you address their impact?

III: Qualitative interviews

Learning outcomes

- Describe key features of qualitative interviews
- Practice using a range of interview techniques
- Be aware of issues relating to sensitive interviewing and how to respond to these
- Construct an interview topic guide

Types of research interview

- Structured (survey)
 - Precise format (e.g. questionnaire)
- Semi-structured
 - Loose structure via topic guide
 - Open-ended questions
- Depth
 - 1 – 2 issues covered in great detail

Britten (1999)

Aims of interviewing

To obtain:

- Vivid accounts
- Experiences and narratives
- Insider perspective
- New dimensions
- Interpretation/ explanation

Interviews v. focus groups

Interviews

- Complex subject with high volume of issues/ dimensions
- Seeking in-depth understanding of individuals/ personal experience
- Sensitive, personal topic matter/ 'vulnerable' groups

Focus groups

- Focused on a particular, contained issue
- Seeking understanding of interaction
- Group process can stimulate new insight or product: e.g. consensual view; ranking of items; set of guidelines.

‘Requirements’ of interviewer

- Listen (how to probe further)
- Distil essential points (deciding what to pursue)
- Memory (returning to issues later in interview)
- Establish rapport (with range of people)
- Tranquillity (be comfortable with situation)
- Humility (don't try to demonstrate knowledge)
- Be inquisitive (fascination uncovers new insights)

Interview technique

“A few comments and remarks, together with an occasional question designed to keep the subject on the main theme, to secure more details at a given point of a narrative, or to stimulate the conversation if it lags, are the usual means of interviewing. Gestures, nods of the head, smiles etc. and reflecting emotions narrated are also important.”

Techniques 1: encouragement

Stimulate conversation with open question.

Listen and guide this via:

- Body language/ non-verbal prompts
- Verbal expression – making encouraging ‘noises’
- Affirmation and empathy

Techniques

- Playback
 - Repeat a keyword/ phrase
- Reflecting
 - Paraphrase remarks/ emotions narrated by the respondent
- Probe/ ask clarifying questions

Use of probes

- Further elaboration
 - “What happened next”
 - Can you tell me a little more about that...”
- Exploratory probes
 - “What did you feel when...”
 - “What makes you say that...”
- Clarificatory probes
 - Clarify language/terms, details/sequences

Types of question to avoid

- Closed
- Long/ unclear
- Questions with technical language
- Tests of knowledge
- Double questions
- Leading questions

To avoid leading...

- Accept statements without judgement (verbal and non-verbal)
- Resist urge to agree/ disagree/ join in
- Respond carefully if asked questions
- Introduce and end questions carefully



“Don’t you think that?”



“..., isn’t it?”

Researcher as research 'tool'

'Directiveness'

Least



Most

- Make encouraging noises
- Reflect on remarks made by informant
- Probing remark made by informant
- Probing an idea expressed earlier in interview
- Introducing new topic

(Adapted from Whyte, 1982)

Dealing with sensitive topics

Some potential problems:

- Interviewee becomes distressed
- Interviewee discloses information to provoke concern about risk
- Interviewer becomes embarrassed/ distressed/ feels responsible

But – interviews may also be therapeutic...

Key points

1. Learn techniques for managing distress during the interview
2. Be clear about a) your role; b) when duty of care overrides confidentiality
3. Devise a protocol as part of study planning
4. Make opportunities for interviewer to de-briefing

Managing distress

- Watch out for signs/ changing rapport
- Allow respondent to tell story
- Acknowledge emotions
- Summarise to give breathing space
- Move from personal to generalized
- Temporarily re-focus
- Offer chances to pause
- Offer to discuss post interview

Interviewing skills practical exercise

Aim: To practice these skills using a topic guide for interviewing health care professionals (HERA1)

In groups of 3:

- Interviewer 1 asks **Qs 1,2,3** to interviewee, who role plays a health professional
- Swap roles after c.20 mins
- Interviewer 2 asks **Qs 1,6,7** to interviewee
- Observer keeps time and feeds back after each round