

Tutorial Sociology I

Qualitative Research Methods in the Social Sciences

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Typical features of qualitative research

1. Qualitative researchers are concerned primarily with practice and **process** (the *How*) rather than outcomes or products. Focus on the process that is occurring.
2. Qualitative researchers are interested in **meaning**
– how people, language, classifications, and orders make sense of and structure experiences. Focus is on participants' perceptions and experiences and the way they make sense of their lives. The attempt is therefore to understand not one, but multiple realities.
3. The qualitative researcher is the **primary instrument** for data collection and analysis rather than some inanimate mechanism. Data are mediated through his human instrument, rather than through inventories, questionnaires, or machines.

Typical features qualitative research

4. Qualitative research involves **fieldwork**. The researcher physically goes to the people, setting, site, or institution to observe or record behavior and events in its **natural setting**.
5. Qualitative research includes **description** in that the researcher is interested in process, meaning, and understanding gained through words or pictures.
6. The process of qualitative research is **inductive** in that the researcher builds abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, and theories from details. (bottom-up). Theory or hypotheses are not established a priori

Adapted from Merriam (1988). Case study research in education.

Typical features of qualitative research

7. **Idiographic** interpretation is utilized – attention is paid to particulars; and data are interpreted in regard to the particulars of a case rather than generalizations
8. Is an **emergent** design in its negotiated outcomes. Because it is the subjects' realities that the researcher attempts to reconstruct, meanings and interpretations are negotiated with human data sources

Labels

- Relativistic
- Holistic/ organic
- Interpretative
- Inductive
- Idiographic
- Intensive
- Descriptive/ exploratory
- Speculative/ illustrative
- Subjective
- Grounded
- Does not impose theory
- Flexible/ fluid
- Fieldwork
- Political
- Non-rigorous
- Soft
- Story telling

Points of departure qualitative research

- *Verstehen*: understanding “from within”, by means of empathy, intuition, or imagination (as opposed to knowledge from without, by means of observation or calculation)
 - a pre-interpreted social world
 - Role of *Verstehen* currently debated in social research
- Role-taking (Mead)
- Methodologically
 - ‘Direct examination’ of the empirical world (Blumer)
 - Meaningful reality objectified in concepts (Schutz; ideal types; Blumer; sensitizing concepts)
 - Continuous cycles of collecting, analysis, reflection, and verification

Points of departure qualitative research

- There is no such thing as a neutral observer:

What we as social researchers see as empirical reality is a consequence of the theories which we bring to bear in organizing our understanding of it

Interpretivism

The ways that the objectivity of the world is locally accomplished and managed with reference to broad organizational, social and cultural resources

- Purpose: Interpretation, understanding and thick description
 - dense, detailed descriptions of social life (Geertz, 1974): include context of action, the intention of the social actors, and the processes through which social action and interaction are sustained and/or changed

- Use of of interpretive resources and categories in constituting everyday realities (rhetorics of collective representations)
 - e.g., local culture, discourse structures, and organizational embeddedness

Criteria for judging a qualitative study

“The researcher seeks believability, based on coherence, insight and instrumental utility and trustworthiness through a process of verification rather than through traditional validity and reliability measures” (Becker, forthcoming)

- Concerned with questions such as:
 - Accuracy of data (based on close observation)
 - Whether data are precise (close to the things and situations discussed & observed) - grounded theory method
 - Whether an analysis is full or broad

The 'Practical Epistemology' of Qualitative Research (Becker, forthcoming)

- If we take account of the viewpoint of the social actor, how (accurately) do we do it?
- How do we deal with embeddedness of all social actions in the world of everyday life?
- How 'thick' can we and should we make our description?

If we take account of the viewpoint of the social actor, how (accurately) do we do it?

- The nearer we get to the conditions in which they actually do attribute meanings to objects and events, the more accurate our descriptions of those meanings are likely to be
- Various meanings of “taking the point of view of the other”
 - summaries and interpretations of the Other’s viewpoints
 - or letting them express it themselves

If we take account of the viewpoint of the social actor, how (accurately) do we do it?

- Actors do not give stable or consistent meanings to things & frequently change their minds
- Moreover, they often do not know what things mean
 - “ask not for meaning, but for purpose” (Spradley, 1979)
- Error of attribution’. All social scientists attribute a point of view and interpretations to the people whose actions are analyzed (Blumer, 1969)
 - requires the verification of speculations

If we take account of the viewpoint of the social actor, how (accurately) do we do it?

Reflexivity as a strategic element in developing insight
(Hine, 2000):

- How presuppositions and cultural positioning of the ethnographer shape the study
- Member reflexivity (“member feedback”).
- Destabilization of ethnographic authority within the text itself (‘epistemologically correct’ approach)

How do we deal with embeddedness of all social actions in the world of everyday life?

- Obtrusive methods. The situation is not just what it would have been without the social scientist
- However, by observing people in their natural setting we cannot insulate them from the consequences of their actions
 - seeing the “real world” of everyday life.
- The observation which requires less interference and fewer assumptions is more likely to be accurate
- A better goal than “thickness” might be “breadth”
 - to find out something about every topic the research touches on

How ‘thick’ can we and should we make our description?

- “Thick description” The fuller the description, the better?
- “The object of any description is not to reproduce the object completely (...) but rather to pick out its relevant aspects” (Becker, forthcoming)
- Despite new means of recording, the full reality is a long way away

Ethnography

Both process and outcome:

“Ethnography means literally “to write a people, to help construct a people’s identity by writing them” (Hess, 1992: 4).

Ethnography means participant observation, frequent and often informal interviews, and the cultivation of insiders known as ‘informants’.

Ethnography

- Origin in anthropology:
 - From isolated communities to communities in socio, political, economic context
 - From agrarian to modern, Western, societies; From primitive to industrial societies (“anthropology at home”, Jackson, 1987)
 - Ethnography of science, organizations, etc.
 - Changing role of fieldworker
 - From bounded places to ‘imagined’ and ‘invented’ communities (Anderson, 1991; Hobsbawm, 1983)

Key to ethnography

- The description of the ordinary and taken-for-granted; objective: making the implicit explicit.
- It uses the concept of culture as a lens through which to interpret results.
- Sensitivity to the making of context: it perceives human behavior, perceptions and artifacts in light of the social-political and historical context
- Traditionally, fieldwork is done in a bounded, physical, setting (culture as local)
- Awareness of the role of the researcher - the influence of the researcher in shaping the interactions, by being present (reflexive stand)

Ethnographic methods of data collection

- Direct observation (Malinowski): by way of firsthand experiences, looking upon matters through the eyes of the other.
 - shed light on the actual motives of the 'others' actions and whereabouts (intention vs. actual acts)
- Studying people in their natural environment (physical presence): “the researcher goes into the field instead of bringing the field to the investigator
- Intensive (face-to-face) contact with informants (gain a rich and contextualized picture)
- Participation (interactive) - observing behavior by participating in the group. Gaining first-hand experiences
- Prolonged engagement, longitudinal (“immersion”, “going native”) in order to get to an in-depth understanding
- In-depth interview: it is participants who structure the form and content of extensive reflective responses (sometimes called narratives) evoked by a broad initial enquiry from the interviewer
- Use of multiple data sources
- Usually equated with participant observation: “broadly conceived, participant observation includes activities of direct observation, interviewing, document analysis, reflection, analysis, and interpretation” (Schwandt, 2000: 88).

Ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, Cicourel)

- Social order is the product of every day acting of people.
 - the unconscious routines by which people manage their inter-personal contacts
 - member's practical everyday procedures (“ethnomethods”) for creating, sustaining, and managing a sense of objective reality

- The analysis of rationality, practical reasoning, and the achievement of everyday reality
 - Tension: treatment of sequences of activities vs. a more general interest in mundane reasoning
 - Due to emphasis on description “from within”
 - Primary concern fro relations between activities rather than for their meaning

Ethnomethodology

- E.g., performance of scientific work
 - Explored only in terms of its logics, epistemology, or paradigms if they imply cognitive resources for the work itself. (“wordly observability”)
 - Reasoning displayed in the light of “accountable details”
 - Order not to be found in occupational cultures and social institutions but activities are organized locally.
 - Radical interpretation: Livingston (1986) on the work of mathematical reasoning: “mathematical rigor resides in the local sequences of actions produced by mathematicians” (detailed, real-world enactment)

Ethnomethodology

- Conversation analysis: fine-grained analysis of naturally occurring spoken interaction (sometimes also includes non verbal interaction)
 - E.g., situated rules of talk embody power and authority differences
 - Speech seen as the primary source in the construction of meaning (against interpretive stand)
 - Conversation regarded as a collaborative conduct
 - Discovery of competences or methods whereby speakers generate orderly sequences of activity

Data	Situations, contexts, phenomena reported in words or pictures (descriptive) -everyday language of respondents or technical language researcher
Data gathering	Presented with a lot of information (cannot insulate from data)
Techniques	Observation, participant observation, structured/ semi-structured & open interviews, focus groups, content analysis of documents
Data reduction techniques	Open and axial coding Developing themes Typology construction
Data analysis techniques	Description Theory generation -analytic induction -Grounded theory -Categorizing and connecting From everyday typifications to typologies
Arguments	Narrative – construction of convincing description of processes under investigation

Advantages and Limitations of Data Collection Types

Data Collection Types	Options Within Types	Advantages of the Type	Limitations of the Type
<p>Observations</p>	<p>Complete participant -researcher conceals role.</p> <p>Observer as participant -role of researcher is known</p> <p>Participant as observer -Observation role secondary to participant role.</p> <p>Complete observer - Researcher observes without participating</p>	<p>Researcher has first hand experience with informant</p> <p>Researcher can record information as it occurs</p> <p>Unusual aspects can be noticed during observation.</p> <p>Useful in exploring topics that may be uncomfortable for informants to discuss.</p>	<p>Researcher may be seen as intrusive.</p> <p>“Private” information may be observed that researcher cannot report.</p> <p>Researcher may not have good attending and observing skills.</p> <p>Certain informants (e.g., children) may present special problems in gaining rapport.</p>

Advantages and Limitations of Data Collection Types

Data Collection Types	Options Within Types	Advantages of the Type	Limitations of the Type
<p>Interviews</p>	<p>Face-to-face, one on one, in-person interview.</p> <p>“mediated”. Telephone or online interview</p> <p>Group - researcher interviews informants in a group (focus group interview)</p>	<p>Useful when informants cannot be directly observed.</p> <p>Informant can provide historical information.</p> <p>Allows researcher “control” over the line of questioning.</p>	<p>Provides “indirect” information filtered through the views of interviewees.</p> <p>Provides information in a designated “place” rather than the natural field setting.</p> <p>Researcher’s presence may bias responses.</p> <p>Not all people are equally articulate and perceptive.</p>

Advantages and Limitations of Data Collection Types

Data Collection Types	Options Within Types	Advantages of the Type	Limitations of the Type
<p>Documents</p>	<p>Public documents such as minutes of meetings, newspapers</p> <p>Private documents such as journal or diary, letters (biographical)</p>	<p>Enables a researcher to obtain the language and words of the informants.</p> <p>Can be accessed at a time convenient to researcher</p> <p>-unobtrusive source of information</p> <p>Represents data that are thoughtful in that informants have given attention to compiling</p> <p>As written evidence, it saves a researcher the time and expense of transcribing</p>	<p>May be protected information unavailable to public or private access.</p> <p>Requires the researcher to search out the information in hard-to-find places.</p> <p>Materials may be incomplete (representativeness).</p> <p>The documents may not be authentic or accurate.</p> <p>Credibility (free from error or distortion) not guaranteed.</p> <p>Audience context may be easily overlooked.</p>

Advantages and Limitations of Data Collection Types

Data Collection Types	Options Within Types	Advantages of the Type	Limitations of the Type
<p>Audiovisual Materials</p>	<p>Photographs</p> <p>Videotapes</p> <p>Art Objects</p> <p>Computer Software</p> <p>Film</p>	<p>May be an unobtrusive method of data collecting.</p> <p>Provides an opportunity for informants to share directly his or her “reality”.</p> <p>Creative in that it captures attention visually</p>	<p>May be difficult to interpret.</p> <p>May not be accessible publicly or privately.</p> <p>The presence of an observer (e.g., photographer) may be disruptive and affect responses.</p>

Advantages and Limitations of Data Collection Types

Data Collection Types	Options Within Types	Advantages of the Type	Limitations of the Type
<p>Virtual Methods</p>	<p>Text-based representations of (elapsed) interaction online. (textual analysis)</p> <p>Visual representation of interaction online. (graphical analysis)</p> <p>Real life interaction. (online participant observation and interview)</p>	<p>All interaction is immediately captured. No need for transcription.</p> <p>Allows the researcher to “enter the field” from the confined space of the home.</p> <p>And to access interaction and participate in different time zones.</p> <p>May be an unobtrusive method of data collecting.</p> <p>Provides an opportunity for informants to present themselves (the internet as ethnographic object).</p> <p>Ability to integrate the text, image and audio.</p>	<p>Displayed behavior may be not genuine and “check” is difficult to make.</p> <p>Problem to provide for the “meaningful context” of online interaction.</p> <p>Difficulty of “immersion”. True ethnographic research possible or merely a different understanding of ethnography?</p> <p>Still mainly text-based environments. Low “social presence” or “media richness” despite use of emoticons.</p>

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