

UNIT 7

Qualitative Research

Overview

Unit 6 covered the quantitative approach in social research and specifically the survey as a main method of data collection used under this approach. The alternative research approach is that of the qualitative approach. Unit 7 thus examines the qualitative research approach demonstrating how it varies from quantitative research and highlighting its main advantages and disadvantages. The unit will also provide you, the researcher, with some orientation to the major types of qualitative research methods. One qualitative method that we will give special focus is the participatory action research method. This method is an important one for social researchers such as yourself, who are engaged in youth and development work which sometimes requires research and action for effecting social change. At the end of this unit you will then be expected to decide which approach, quantitative or qualitative, is better for your proposed social research project.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this Unit you will be able to:

1. Explain what the qualitative approach to social research is.
2. Identify the main qualitative methods.
3. Discuss the main ideas of participatory action research.
4. Describe the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative research methods.

This Unit is divided into four Sessions as follows:

Session 7.1: The Qualitative Approach

Session 7.2: Qualitative Methods of Data Collection

Session 7.3: Participatory Action Research

Session 7.4: Advantages and Disadvantages of Qualitative Research



Readings & Resources

Required Readings

- ABL Group. (1997). Future Search Process Design. Toronto: York University.
- Creswell, J., and Clark, V. (2007). Designing and conducting mixed methods research. Sage Publications.
- Ereaut, G. (2002). Qualitative market research. Principles and practice. Sage Publications Ltd.
- F Franklin, B. (1994). "Grassroots Initiatives in Sustainability: A Caribbean Example." Human Society & The Natural World: Perspectives on Sustainable Futures. Ed. D Bell and R. Keil. Toronto: York University, 1994. 1-10.
- Gilbert, N. (2006). *Researching social life*. London: Sage Publications.
- O'Brien, R. (2001). Um exame da abordagem metodológica da pesquisa ação [An Overview of the Methodological Approach of Action Research]. In Roberto Richardson (Ed.), Teoria e Prática da Pesquisa Ação [Theory and Practice of Action Research]. João Pessoa, Brazil: Universidade Federal da Paraíba. (English version) Available: <http://www.web.ca/~robrien/papers/arfinal.html>
- Palmquist, M. (2012). retrieved at:
<http://www.gslis.utexas.edu/~palmquis/courses/content.html>
- Robson, C. (2002). *Real world research*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Rossman, G., and Rallis, S. (1998). *Learning in the field: An Introduction to qualitative research*. Sage Publications.
- Susman, Gerald I. (1983). "Action Research: A Sociotechnical Systems Perspective." In *Beyond Method: Strategies for Social Science Research*. Ed. G. Morgan. London: Sage Publications, 1983. 95-113.
- Trochim, W. (2006). Research methods knowledge base. Web Centre for Social Research Methods. <http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/contents.php>

You are also advised to locate and read: Additional papers relevant to the topics covered.

Session 7.1

The Qualitative Approach

Uses of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is used to gain insight into people's attitudes, behaviours, value systems, concerns, motivations, aspirations, culture or lifestyles. It is used to explore new areas of research and find deeper meanings attached to social problems. It is also used to inform business decisions, policy formation, communication, research and social change. Why do qualitative research?

- **To generate new theories and hypotheses**

Before looking at the effects of a new psychotropic drug for the mentally ill, go spend some time visiting several mental health treatment contexts to observe what goes on. If you do, you are likely to approach the existing literature on the topic with a fresh perspective born of your direct experience. You're likely to begin to formulate your own ideas about what causes what else to happen and thus formulating new ideas and theories (Trochim 2006).

- **Deeper understanding of an issue**

For instance, garrison politics in Jamaica which is a sensitive issue. You might want to go into one garrison community as an observer to the lifestyles, daily happenings, and so on, where you conduct in depth interviews with members of the community.

- **To get details on a phenomenon**

This enables you to describe the phenomenon of interest in great detail, in the original language of the research participants. For instance, if you want to write a story or perhaps a book on HIV/AIDS victims, qualitative research allows you to obtain descriptive, narrative data on the research subjects from their point of view.

The downside of employing the qualitative approach, however, is that you cannot generalize from the information obtained. This is because qualitative methods focus on smaller samples from a more in-depth perspective. Since the samples are often not representative of wider populations, generalizations are not possible. Therefore, while qualitative research may be high on validity it can fall short on reliability and generalization.

According to Ereaut (2002), qualitative research has multiple focal points:

- What people say (the knowledge they have)
- What people mean (emotional drivers; conscious and unconscious)
- What people do (the actions they take; behavioural patterns)
- Culture (shared meanings, norms, codes)



LEARNING ACTIVITY 7.1

Reflect on the uses of qualitative research. What value can it add to your research that the quantitative approach falls short on? Discuss with your peers in the discussion forum.

Session 7.2

Qualitative Methods of Data Collection

Main Data Collection Methods

Here, we discuss some of the main methods of data collection in qualitative research.

These include:

- In-depth interviews
- Focus groups
- Participant observation (overt and covert)
- Content analysis

An interview is “conversation with a purpose” and it can be described as:

- *Conversations in which the researcher guides the participant in an extended and in-depth discussion*
1. Questions are framed to elicit in-depth descriptions of what the participant knows and is willing to share
 2. Examines all sides of an issue
 3. Allows the interviewee or participant flexibility (for instance, you may ask the interviewee “what are your thoughts on...”)
- Semi-structured or open-ended questions (not to be confused with the questionnaire. The qualitative interview uses an interview schedule which is flexible as opposed to a questionnaire which is structured)
 - Prolonged (length is not pre-determined)
 - Flexible in terms of questions asked and how they are asked
 - Interactive (researcher and participant face to face)

Uses of the Interview

- To enter the other person's mind
- To understand an experience and reconstruct events in which one did not participate in
- To describe social and political processes
- To help fill in historical gaps
- To delve into important personal issues

What Are Focus Groups?

The focus group consists of a small group of individuals, usually 6 to 10 people, who meet together to express their views about a particular topic defined by the researcher (Gilbert 2006). The focus group is distinguished by its explicit use of the group interaction as part of the research data is a distinction between the focus group and ordinary group discussion. For instance, if we take the example of working conditions in the public health system and you bring together a group of public health workers, an important element of this would also be how the participants involved in the focus group interact with each other. It can be described as:

- A form of interview but conducted with a specific and targeted group as opposed to an individual
- Group discussions organized to explore a specific set of issues e.g. vending on campus
- Involves some kind of collective activity
- Requires a facilitator

Use of Focus Group

- Explores the social context of public understandings
- Examines people's thinking, how they develop the thoughts and the reasoning behind such thoughts
- Examines the impact of diverse identities and social networks on people's perception and reaction to a given issue

Table 7.1

Advantages of the focus group	Disadvantages of the focus group
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group dialogue allows for greater variety of communication such as boasting, arguing, storytelling, and singing songs as well as teasing and joking. These dimensions reveal parts of the issue that other methods cannot reach. • Ensure that priority is given to the issue of significance to the participants • Reveals group norms • Explores differences of opinions • Theorize about differences in opinions • Diversity within the group forces people to explain the rationale for a given position • Allow the researcher to observe not only how people theorize their viewpoint but how they do so in relation to other perspectives and they put their own ideas to work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May inhibit or distort individual opinions and points of views (group think) • Difficult to control some groups especially if arguments occur

Participant Observation

A form of data collection where the researcher becomes part of the group or setting and makes direct observations of the phenomenon under investigation. It can be described as:

- It requires that the researcher become a participant in the culture or context being observed
- Often requires months or years of intensive work because the researcher needs to become accepted as a natural part of the culture in order to assure that the observations are of the natural phenomenon
- Often requires a gatekeeper to facilitate the researcher
- Observation can be overt (those being researched are aware that you are studying them) or covert (the researched are not aware that they are being studied)

Table 7.2:

Advantages of participant observation	Disadvantages of participant observation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It allows the researcher to directly witness the complexity of people's lives as they unfold • Researchers are free to search for concepts that are meaningful to research participants • Researcher is able to explore broader scope e.g. trends, patterns, behavior styles, etc. • When combined with other methods, observation produces greater consistency and enhances validity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When it is overt the researched may react to the fact that they are being investigated and thus may not act naturally. This will give an untrue representation of the reality • When it is covert, the researcher can get into trouble for invading the group's privacy without their given consent or permission

Content Analysis

Content analysis is a research tool focused on the actual content and internal features of media. It is used to determine the presence of certain words, concepts, themes, phrases, characters, or sentences within texts or sets of texts and to quantify this presence in an objective manner. Texts can be defined broadly as books, book chapters, essays, interviews, discussions, newspaper headlines and articles, historical documents, speeches, conversations, advertising, theatre, informal conversation, or really any occurrence of communicative language (Palmquist 2012). Content analysis can be described as:

- The analysis of text documents
- The analysis can be quantitative, qualitative or both
- Its major purpose is to identify patterns in text.

Types of Content Analysis

- *Thematic analysis of texts* - The identification of themes or major ideas in a document or set of documents. The documents can be any kind of text including field notes, newspaper articles, technical papers or organizational memos. For instance, you may want to research the Black Power Movement in Trinidad and Tobago in the 1970s and you do a content analysis of newspaper articles during that period in Trinidad.
- *Indexing* - There are a wide variety of automated methods for rapidly indexing text documents. For instance, Key Words in Context (KWIC) analysis is a computer analysis of text data. A computer program scans the text and indexes all key words. In indexing an interview text, for instance on sexual abuse, one could easily identify all uses of the term "abuse" and the context in which they were used.)
- *Quantitative descriptive analysis* - Here the purpose is to describe features of the text quantitatively. For instance, you might want to find out which words or phrases were used most frequently in the text. Again, this type of analysis is most often done directly with computer programs. You should be especially careful with sampling in order to avoid bias. For example, a study of current research on methods of treatment for cancer might use the published literature as the population. This would leave out both the writing on cancer that did not get published for one reason or another as well as the most recent work that has not yet been published.

Table 7.3:

Advantages of content analysis	Disadvantages of content analysis
<p>Content analysis offers several advantages to researchers. Palmquist (2012) summarizes the advantages of content analysis:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looks directly at communication via texts or transcripts, and hence gets at the central aspect of social interaction • Can allow for both quantitative and qualitative operations • Can provides valuable historical/ cultural insights over time through analysis of texts • Allows a closeness to text which can alternate between specific categories and relationships and also statistically analyzes the coded form of the text • Can be used to interpret texts for purposes such as the development of expert systems (since knowledge and rules can both be coded in terms of explicit statements about the relationships among concepts) • Is an unobtrusive means of analyzing interactions • Provides insight into complex models of human thought and language use • When done well, is considered as a relatively “exact” research method (based on hard facts) 	<p>Content analysis suffers from several advantages, both theoretical and procedural. In particular, content analysis:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be extremely time consuming • Is subject to increased error, particularly when relational analysis is used to attain a higher level of interpretation • Is often devoid of theoretical base, or attempts too liberally to draw meaningful inferences about the relationships and impacts implied in a study • Is inherently reductive, particularly when dealing with complex texts • Tends too often to simply consist of word counts • Often disregards the context that produced the text, as well as the state of things after the text is produced • Can be difficult to automate or computerize



LEARNING ACTIVITY 7.2

Below are two examples of content analysis. Review the two cases and discuss with your peers the usefulness/contribution of the content analysis method to overall reliability and validity in social research.

Craig, Stephen. "The Effect of Day Part on Gender Portrayals in Television Commercials: A Content Analysis." *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 26.5-6 (1992): 197-213.

Gender portrayals in 2,209 network television commercials were content analyzed. To compare differences between three-day parts, the sample was chosen from three time periods: daytime, evening prime time, and weekend afternoon sportscasts. The results indicate large and consistent differences in the way men and women are portrayed in these three-day parts, with almost all comparisons reaching significance at the .05 level. Although ads in all day parts tended to portray men in stereotypical roles of authority and dominance, those on weekends tended to emphasize escape from home and family. The findings of earlier studies which did not consider day part differences may now have to be reevaluated.

Horton, Nancy Spence. *Young Adult Literature and Censorship: A Content Analysis of Seventy-Eight Young Adult Books*. Denton: North Texas State University, 1986.

The purpose of Horton's content analysis was to analyze a representative seventy-eight current young adult books to determine the extent to which they contain items which are objectionable to would-be censors. Seventy-eight books were identified which fit the criteria of popularity and literary quality. Each book was analyzed for, and tallied for occurrence of, six categories, including profanity, sex, violence, parent conflict, drugs and condoned bad behavior.

Session 7.3

Participatory Action Research

Action research is known by many other names, including participatory research, collaborative inquiry, emancipatory research, action learning, and contextual action research, but all are variations on a theme. Put simply, action research is learning by doing, where a group of people identify a problem, do something to resolve it, see how successful their efforts were, and if not satisfied, try again (O'Brien 2001). In this form of research, there is a dual commitment to study a system and concurrently to collaborate with members of the system in changing it in what is together regarded as a desirable direction (ABL 1997).

Susman (1983) distinguishes five phases to be conducted within each research cycle. Initially, a problem is identified and data is collected for a more detailed diagnosis. This is followed by a collective postulation of several possible solutions, from which a single plan of action emerges and is implemented. Data on the results of the intervention are collected and analyzed, and the findings are interpreted in light of how successful the action has been. At this point, the problem is re-assessed and the process begins another cycle. This process continues until the problem is resolved. According to Susman, the stages in the action research process include:

- Diagnosing – identifying/defining the problem
- Action planning – considering alternative courses of action
- Taking action – selecting a course of action
- Evaluating – studying the consequences of the action
- Specifying learning – identifying general findings

When Is Action Research Used?

Action research is used in real situations, rather than in contrived, experimental studies, since its primary focus is on solving real problems. It can, however, be used by social scientists for preliminary or pilot research, especially when the situation is too ambiguous to frame a precise research question. Mostly, though, in accordance with its principles, it is chosen when circumstances require flexibility, the involvement of the people in the research, or change must take place quickly or holistically.

It is often the case that those who apply this approach are practitioners who wish to improve understanding of their practice, social change activists trying to mount an action campaign, or, more likely, academics who have been invited into an organization by decision-makers aware of a problem requiring action research, but lacking the requisite methodological knowledge to deal with it. Many of you may be practitioners working with youth and youth groups in attempting to change their circumstances or advocating for changes among youth in your societies. The participatory action research method would thus be very useful to your own research agendas.

The Role of the Action Researcher

Upon invitation into a domain, the outside researcher's role is to implement the action research method in such a manner as to produce a mutually agreeable outcome for all participants, with the process being maintained by them afterwards. To accomplish this, it may necessitate the adoption of many different roles at various stages of the process, including those of:

- planner leader
- catalyzer facilitator
- teacher designer
- listener observer
- synthesizer reporter

The main role, however, is to nurture local leaders to the point where they can take responsibility for the process. This point is reached when they understand the methods and are able to carry on when the initiating researcher leaves. In many action research situations, the hired researcher's role is primarily to take the time to facilitate dialogue and foster reflective analysis among the participants, provide them with periodic reports, and write a final report when the researcher's involvement has ended.

Below is an example of action research:

Sample: Development of nature tourism in the Windward Islands (extracted from writings of one of the researchers involved, Franklin 1994)

- In 1991, an action research process was initiated to explore how nature tourism could be instituted on each of the four Windward Islands in the Caribbean - St. Lucia, Grenada, Dominica, and St. Vincent. The government took the lead, for environmental conservation, community-based development, and national economic development purposes. Realizing that the consultation process had to involve many stakeholders, including representatives of several government ministries, environmental and heritage groups, community organizations, women's and youth groups, farmers' cooperatives, and private business, an action research approach was seen as appropriate.

Two action researchers from York University in Toronto, with prior experience in the region, were hired to implement the project, with a majority of the funding coming from the Canadian International Development Agency. Multi-stakeholder national advisory councils were formed, and national project coordinators selected as local project liaisons. Their first main task was to organize a search conference on each island.

- The search conferences took place, the outcome of which was a set of recommendations and/or action plans for the carrying out of a number of nature tourism-oriented sub-projects at the local community level. At this point, extended advisory groups were formed on several of the islands, and national awareness activities and community sub-projects were implemented in some cases.
- To maintain the process, regional project meetings were held, where project coordinators and key advisory members shared experiences, conducted self-evaluations and developed plans for maintaining the process (e.g., fundraising). One of the more valuable tools for building a sense of community was the use of a video camera to create a documentary video of a local project.
- The outcomes varied. In St. Vincent the research project was highly successful, with several viable local developments instituted. Grenada and St. Lucia showed mixed outcomes, and Dominica was the least successful, the process curtailed by the government soon after the search conference took place. The main difference in the outcomes, it was felt, was in the willingness of the key government personnel to “let go” and allow the process to be jointly controlled by all participants. There is always a risk that this kind of research will empower stakeholders, and change existing power relations, the threat of which is too much for some decision-makers, but if given the opportunity, there are many things that a collaborative group of citizens can accomplish that might not be possible otherwise.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 7.3

In action research, the researcher has the dual role of researcher and implementer or advocate of the programme/policy being studied. Through the use of examples in your area of work, discuss these two roles.

Session 7.4

Advantages and Disadvantages of Qualitative Research

Qualitative Research Summarized

If we were to summarize qualitative research, we would come up with the following main points:

- It is used to gain greater insights into the research problem
- It uses smaller samples
- There is a greater level of engagement with the research subjects
- The qualitative researcher has more flexibility
- It's more subjective and so there is greater room for bias, that is a lot of the research is based on the researchers understanding/interpretation of what the researched subject/s have said, expressed or done
- There is greater validity of results but we cannot generalize from qualitative research

The main advantages of qualitative research include:

- Meaningful and culturally salient to the participant
- Unanticipated by the researcher
- Rich and exploratory in nature (explore new ideas)
- Flexible and allows researcher to probe and engage with participants
- It is effective in identifying intangible social factors such as gender issues, social norms or ethnicity

Qualitative research like everything else also has its disadvantages. You should begin to see by now that quantitative and qualitative research are two sides of a coin, so that where the quantitative approach is strong, the qualitative is weak and vice versa. For instance if we look at the first advantage of qualitative research listed above where it is meaningful and culturally salient to the participant, in a focus group the participants have an opportunity to discuss and share their views/opinions on an issue that is very important to them. Some participants in focus groups get quite passionate and emotional sometimes depending on the topic. In a quantitative study however, for instance in a questionnaire the respondents hardly have the time or

opportunity to express their views in a meaningful way. Most questions are structured/semi structured and responses close ended which does not allow the respondents much leeway to express opinion, feelings or experiences. Thus, the quantitative research doesn't not allow for meaningful and culturally relevant engagement from participants in the same way that the qualitative research does.

The main disadvantages of qualitative research include:

- You can't necessarily use this data to make assumptions beyond this specific group of participants
- It is not a research method that conveniently allows for the collection of statistical data. However, this is only a disadvantage if your research question also requires statistical data
- It is time consuming and can last for months or years
- Very subjective and so data can be skewed
- Data overload which can then make analyzing data very tedious and time consuming

The ideal situation in any social research project is combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. In the next unit we will look at the best way of doing so.

UNIT SUMMARY

In Unit 6 we saw how the quantitative approach to research falls within the positivist tradition. Unit 7 has demonstrated how the qualitative approach to research falls within the post positivist tradition. The qualitative approach contends that research subjects in social research are human, thinking and feelings and thus cannot be quantified, measured and predicted. Qualitative researchers recognize the subjectivity and context driven nature of social research and therefore their methods of research are suited to that understanding. The unit has discussed the main methods of data collection within qualitative research, providing advantages and disadvantages of each. After completing Units 6 and 7, you are now better equipped with the range of data collection options and can now make important decisions regarding the best research design to suit your problem statement and research objectives.

References

- ABL Group. (1997). Future Search Process Design. Toronto: York University.
- Creswell, J., and Clark, V. (2007). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Sage Publications.
- Ereaut, G. (2002). Qualitative market research. Principles and practice. Sage Publications Ltd. Franklin, B. (1994). "Grassroots Initiatives in Sustainability: A Caribbean Example." Human Society & The Natural World: Perspectives on Sustainable Futures. Ed. D Bell and R. Keil. Toronto: York University, 1994. 1-10.
- Gilbert, N. (2006). Researching social life. London: Sage Publications.
- O'Brien, R. (2001). Um exame da abordagem metodológica da pesquisa ação [An Overview of the Methodological Approach of Action Research]. In Roberto Richardson (Ed.), Teoria e Prática da Pesquisa Ação [Theory and Practice of Action Research]. João Pessoa, Brazil: Universidade Federal da Paraíba. (English version) Available: <http://www.web.ca/~robrien/papers/arfinal.html> (Accessed 20/1/2002)
- Palmquist, M. (2012). retrieved at:
<http://www.gslis.utexas.edu/~palmquis/courses/content.html>
- Robson, C. (2002). Real world research. Blackwell Publishing.
- Rossman, G. and Rallis, S. (1998). *Learning in the field: An Introduction to qualitative research*. Sage Publications.
- Susman, Gerald I. (1983). "Action Research: A Sociotechnical Systems Perspective." In *Beyond Method: Strategies for Social Science Research*. Ed. G. Morgan. London: Sage Publications, (1983). 95-113.
- Trochim, W. (2006). Research methods knowledge base. Web Centre for Social Research Methods. <http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/contents.php>