Qualitative research

Definition:

Qualitative research is an approach to research that is primarily concerned with studying the nature, quality, and meaning of human experience. It asks questions about how people make sense of their experiences, how people talk about what has happened to them and others, and how people experience, manage, and negotiate situations they find themselves in. Qualitative research is interested both in individual experiences and in the ways in which people experience themselves as part of a group. Qualitative data take the form of accounts or observations, and the findings are presented in the form of a discussion of the themes that emerged from the analysis. Numbers are very rarely used in qualitative research.

Qualitative research has become increasingly widely used in psychology over the last 30 years or so. A variety of qualitative research methods differ in their aims, procedures, and the types of insight they can generate. This entry describes the nature and purpose of qualitative research in general, followed by an introduction to different strands within qualitative research, their epistemological bases, and their approach to data analysis. There is also a discussion of methods of data collection and analysis and the types of research questions qualitative research pursues.

Characteristics of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is interested in the meanings people attribute to their own and others’ actions and experiences and how those meanings shape what they think, say, and do. It seeks to deepen the understanding of people’s behavior by accessing the meaning behind it. Qualitative methods of data collection and analysis are designed to detect meaning from the perspective of the research participants. It does not fit their words and actions into preexisting, theoretically informed categories. Instead, it works from the bottom up so that the themes presented in the analysis are informed by the participants’ own categories of meaning.

Qualitative research does not seek to establish cause-and-effect relationships or to identify significant differences between groups or relation between variables. It is not concerned with hypothesis testing or the development of predictive models. Instead, it seeks to capture the quality and texture of research participants’ experiences and to trace the implications and consequences of those experiences.
experiences in order to better understand the social and psychological processes at work.

Accordingly, it adopts an inductive (as opposed to deductive) approach to knowledge generation. The insights generated by qualitative research tend to be localized and context specific and cannot be generalized to the general population. However, qualitative research can give rise to novel theoretical formulations. Qualitative researchers tend to work with relatively small amounts of data that they explore in great depth (e.g., line-by-line analysis of a small number of semistructured interviews).

Because qualitative research requires the researcher to extract meaning from participants’ accounts of their experience, it is important that the researcher pay attention to the way in which his or her own categories of meaning enter the process of interpretation. This is referred to as researcher reflexivity and constitutes an integral part of qualitative studies. Finally, ethical responsibility requires any researcher to consider and reflect on the potential impact of research activities and outcomes on the research participants in particular and the community and wider society in general. Ethical responsibility is also an important feature of qualitative research.

**Approaches to Qualitative Research**

Approaches to qualitative research can be categorized in several ways. One involves the type of knowledge researchers aim to produce and their epistemological orientation. According to such a classification, qualitative research can be realist, phenomenological, or social constructionist.

**Realist** qualitative research seeks to obtain an accurate picture of some aspect of the social world (e.g., an individual's thought processes, a social group's practices, a linguistic community's speech patterns) in order to better understand the social and psychological processes that underpin it. This type of qualitative research shares epistemological assumptions with quantitative research in that it presupposes that psychological structures and processes exist independently of the researcher's understanding of them and that they can be identified and described.

Qualitative researchers who wish to conduct realist qualitative research can use methods such as thematic analysis or (some forms of) grounded theory methodology. Such methods are designed to obtain as accurate and complete a picture as possible of what is going on in a situation in order to develop an explanatory model that will help make sense of it.

**Phenomenological** qualitative research seeks to produce knowledge about the subjective experience of research participants. It seeks to enter their world in order to gain an “insider view” of their experience and to understand what it means to them. This approach to qualitative research requires that the researcher suspend his or her own beliefs about what is true or false or what makes sense or does not make sense and attempt to look at the world through the eyes of the research participants. Such research is based on the assumption that there is more than one experiential reality and that what is of interest is what the world is like for the participants. A number of phenomenological research methods (some more descriptive and some more interpretative) can be used to generate phenomenological knowledge. Phenomenological research methods include phenomenological-psychological reduction and interpretive phenomenology.

**Social constructionist** qualitative research is interested in the social processes through which meaning is constructed. Such research assumes that objects, events, and people can be perceived in many different ways, and it seeks to generate an understanding of the social processes that contribute to constructing particular versions of social reality. Social constructionist researchers take a relativist
position in that they assume that versions of reality are constructed for particular purposes in particular contexts. The aim of their research is to identify these processes rather than to find out what is “really going on.”

Because language plays an important role in the construction of meaning, social constructionist qualitative researchers often study discourses and their various deployments. Social constructionist research methods include discourse analysis (including Foucauldian discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, and discursive psychology) as well as narrative analysis and memory work.

Methods of Data Collection
Qualitative methods of data collection include semistructured interviews, focus groups, participant observation, diaries, a variety of visual methodologies (such as photo elicitation, video diaries, or paintings), personal journals, existing documents (such as media reports, letters, or transcriptions of radio interviews), and Internet-based materials (such as webpages, blogs, and chat-room conversations). These methods generate different kinds of data that can be analyzed in a number of different ways. Some methods of data collection (e.g., the semistructured interview) can generate data that can be analyzed according to phenomenological analysis, discourse analysis, narrative analysis, and thematic analysis to generate insights that are consistent with the method's epistemological aspirations.

Methods of Data Analysis
Qualitative methods of data analysis include thematic analysis, phenomenological analysis, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, grounded theory, narrative analysis, ethnography, action research, memory work, and Q-methodology. All require an intensive engagement with the raw data. Qualitative data are not transformed or reduced prior to analysis (except for the process of transcription of the spoken word), and researchers tend to work through the data line-by-line to extract themes. Some research methods (e.g., grounded theory and ethnography) require that the researcher move back and forth between data collection and analysis as preliminary analyses inform further, targeted data collection.

Newer Developments
Qualitative researchers have also begun to use a pluralistic approach to research whereby a number of different qualitative methods of analysis are used to analyze the same data set. Methodological pluralism acknowledges that one data set can provide the researcher with information about different aspects of a phenomenon, depending on the questions asked of the data. A pluralistic analysis involves several rounds of analysis, building up layers of understanding and interpretation. The result is not necessarily a coherent, integrated account of what is going on (even though it can be that), and methodological pluralism raises questions about how to handle the epistemological tensions that may exist within a pluralistic analysis.

Some researchers argue that because human experience itself is complex and multilayered, an analytic strategy that reflects this condition is an appropriate way of capturing human experience. Other researchers prefer to strive for a more integrated understanding. Another development is the reemergence of the case study design. The case study is perhaps the oldest qualitative method of research and was made famous by Sigmund Freud. Case study research did not receive much attention during the early years following the emergence of qualitative research in psychology, and it is only now that qualitative psychologists are embracing the single-case design as a legitimate form of psychological research.

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Qualitative Research Questions

Qualitative research does not test hypotheses. Instead, a qualitative research project is driven by a research question that identifies the focus of the research. Qualitative research questions tend to be concerned with processes rather than with causes or effects. The formulation of such questions has implications for the choice of methods used to address the question. For example, a research question that requires a realist approach might ask, “How does a telephone helpline train its volunteers?” A question that takes a phenomenological approach might be, “How do students make sense of failing an important assignment?” An item reflective of the social constructionist approach might be, “How do clinical psychologists construct ‘mental health problems’ in their interactions with patients?”

Qualitative research is most widely used in the subdisciplines of social, health, and counseling psychology. It is also often linked with applied psychology because its findings can help clarify how people experience and manage challenges, changes, and transitions in their lives. Thus, the results of qualitative research have important implications for how psychologists and other professionals offer support. In addition, qualitative research has links with critical psychology because its methods can be used to critically deconstruct the discourses that underpin the discipline of psychology itself.

See also Language, Interaction, and Culture; Mixed Methods; Mixed-Method Philosophies; Quantitative Research; Relational Theory; Single-Subject Research Designs; Social Construction

Further Readings


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