

Introduction to Qualitative Research

Prof. Andrew Stokes

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Qualitative research methods¹

Qualitative research draws on methods developed in Sociology, Anthropology and other disciplines. Commonly used methods include,

- ▶ direct observation
- ▶ in-depth interviews (key informant interviews)
- ▶ focus group discussions
- ▶ Participatory research

¹Sources materials: Smith text (Ch.15), IDRC 10B-C, Prof. Sabin

Aims of qualitative research

- ▶ Understand perspectives of specific groups of people
- ▶ Attempt to put yourself in others' shoes and understand their social worlds
- ▶ Experiences, assumptions, beliefs, attitudes
- ▶ The factors that shape each of these (social, cultural, historical, political economic)

Advantages of qualitative research

- ▶ Collects in-depth and detailed information
- ▶ Tells the story, often with illuminating detail: “When I look at the medication container, I want to throw up”
- ▶ Uses participant’s own words
- ▶ Helps us understand the details
- ▶ Seeks wide understanding of entire situation

Disadvantages of qualitative research

- ▶ Due to subjectivity, difficult to establish reliability and validity of data
- ▶ Generalizability
- ▶ Difficult to prevent and detect researcher induced bias
- ▶ Difficult to discuss all topics because of the in-depth nature of interviews
- ▶ Difficult to do well: to collect what you are looking for with sufficient detail

Organizing concepts

Principals of qualitative data collection include,

- ▶ explorative flexibility
- ▶ iteration
- ▶ triangulation
- ▶ contextualization

Explorative flexibility

- ▶ A unique feature of qualitative research is its allowance for themes to emerge in real time as data are collected. New questions and unanticipated topics can be explored and these can be carried forward in subsequent steps of the research process, including data collection and analysis.
- ▶ Flexibility here refers to the fact that new themes can be pursued as they come up, unproductive avenues of research can be dropped and new methods developed, within the context of the overall research plan.

Iteration

- ▶ Since qualitative research evolves over the course of the project, it can be thought of as an *iterative process*. Data collection may be repeated and refined as you progress.
- ▶ For example, if you are conducting focus group discussions, you may decide to add an additional one based on the lessons learned in the previous session. Or you may have a second one because you'd like to focus on something that worked really well or tweak something that didn't.

Triangulation

Use of multiple methods in combination.

- ▶ Helpful for validation
- ▶ But also to gain a deeper understanding of a complex problem
- ▶ Can involve use of multiple qualitative approaches
- ▶ Or a combination of qual. and quant. (“mixed methods”)

Contextualization

- ▶ what are the social, cultural, historical, political and economic contexts of the research?
- ▶ What explains the findings?

Reflexivity

Because qualitative research requires subjective interpretation by the researcher of the data collected it is essential to adopt a *reflexive* position. Questions to consider include,

- ▶ What are the biases of the researcher?
- ▶ What are his or her motivations?
- ▶ Political, economic agendas?
- ▶ Cultural beliefs

How can you internalize this in your own research?

Direct observation

- ▶ Two types: unstructured and structured observations
- ▶ Unstructured tend to be used in qualitative context only
- ▶ structured observations are sometimes integrated into statistical analysis

Unstructured observation

- ▶ Ethnography
- ▶ Participant observation vs. non-participant observation
- ▶ In participant observation, the researcher integrates into the community and does what they do
- ▶ Example: studies of organized crime, gangs, police, community college
- ▶ Potential ethical issues?

Unstructured observation: non-participant observation

In non-participant observation, researcher records but doesn't participate. Example include,

- ▶ how do mothers make oral rehydration salts?
- ▶ how are patients treated in visits to a physician?

Structured observation

- ▶ Use of a pre-coded or partly coded data collection instrument distinguishes structured from unstructured observation
- ▶ Used for monitoring between survey rounds and for evaluating behavior
- ▶ The structure of the instrument confines the observation to specific aims assuring relevance and consistency
- ▶ Examples: hand-washing practices; physician-patient consultations for malaria, stove/fuel use, ITN use

In-depth interviews

The goal of an in-depth interview (IDIs) is to step into the subject's shoes and try to see the world through their eyes

- ▶ often uses a narrative approach in which subject recounts story in detail
- ▶ In some cases, where the purpose of the IDI is to learn more about a community and its members and to gain access to it, IDIs are similar in concept to *key informant interviews*.
- ▶ Key informants are people who are selected to represent a certain group of interest and have intimate access to that group
- ▶ Key informants are typically referred by community leaders

In-depth interviews: advantages

- ▶ Detailed and rich data
- ▶ Allows interviewer to establish rapport with the respondent and clarify questions
- ▶ Provides an opportunity to build or strengthen relationships with members of an important or vulnerable population
- ▶ Can raise awareness, interest, and enthusiasm around an issue
- ▶ Can contact informants to clarify issues as needed

In-depth interviews: disadvantages

- ▶ Recruiting members of a vulnerable population can be difficult
- ▶ May be challenging to reach and schedule interviews with busy and/or hard-to-reach respondents
- ▶ Obtaining useful data can sometimes be hard with less educated respondents or those who are reluctant to be truthful
- ▶ Difficult to generalize results to the larger population unless interviewing many individuals
- ▶ Time-consuming, thus usually restricted to a small number of individuals

Focus group discussions

- ▶ A group discussion of a topic of interest. NOT a group interview. Helps bring out shared values
- ▶ Often used for exploratory research when little is known about a topic
- ▶ Can be used at any stage of a study
- ▶ Ideally, 6-12 participants

Focus group discussions

- ▶ Discussions guided by facilitator with a second person taking notes
- ▶ Participants are chosen to avoid problematic power dynamics
- ▶ Generally selected on gender or age or sometimes another characteristic
- ▶ Number of focus groups depends on number of relevant population sub-groups

Focus group: advantages

- ▶ Can collect data from many participants quickly
- ▶ Allows participants to explore and clarify views with each other. This provides checks and balances on individual perceptions/opinions
- ▶ Gather rich data in participant's own words
- ▶ Opportunity for participants to be involved in preliminary analysis: "What is the most important issue we have talked about today?"

Focus group: disadvantages

- ▶ Participant's response not independent
- ▶ Dominant members can skew session
- ▶ Requires skilled and experienced moderator

When to use focus groups?

- ▶ When you want an in-depth exploration of cultural norms, feelings, attitudes, opinions.
- ▶ For example, what community thinks about a subject or why the community thinks this way
- ▶ When you want to understand community interaction and explore group social processes
- ▶ When you want to capture forms of communication not present in individual interviews.
- ▶ Jokes, anecdotes, teasing, arguing.
- ▶ Spontaneous communication; does not require reasoned responses

Sampling in qualitative studies

- ▶ Maximum variation sampling
- ▶ Homogenous sampling: Want to know about a particular group
- ▶ Typical case sampling
- ▶ Snowball (Chain) Sampling

Interview techniques

- ▶ Give the informant full attention
- ▶ Maintain as much eye contact as is possible & appropriate
- ▶ Take notes, but do so as inconspicuously as possible
- ▶ Be alert to who might be listening to conversation - people are often reluctant to speak in front of others
- ▶ Always ask for specific examples to back up responses

Interview techniques

Repeat the main points of the informant's responses

- ▶ “Then your feeling on this point is. . .”
- ▶ “Did I understand correctly that. . .”

Interview techniques

If informant has difficulty talking about a sensitive topic:

- ▶ Try to depersonalize it
- ▶ Don't say: "Why did you fail to stay on treatment for HIV?"
- ▶ Instead: "It can be a real challenge to stay on treatment. What were the challenges that you faced?"

Interview techniques

- ▶ Be neutral, even if informant's views seem misinformed
- ▶ Be careful of non-verbal signs that indicate disapproval
- ▶ Never judge a response - keep your poker face on

Record non-verbal expressions

- ▶ Can help to understand the validity of answers
- ▶ Sometimes what people do not say is as important as what they do say. Q: "What happened when you told the doctor?"; A: (Long pause) "It was hard."
- ▶ Expressions can signal need for a follow-up probe

Common problems in interviewing

- ▶ Participant only gives a yes or no answer
- ▶ Participant does not give opinions
- ▶ Participant is hostile

The importance of probing in qualitative research

- ▶ Effective probing stimulates the respondent to produce more information
- ▶ Appropriate when answers are incomplete, interesting, unexpected
- ▶ Requires careful planning and training

Example probes

How to probe???

- ▶ Can you explain it to me?
- ▶ Can you give me an example?
- ▶ Do you have anything else you want to add?
- ▶ Can you describe what you mean?
- ▶ Could you repeat that?
- ▶ Could you tell me a little more about that?

Types of probes

- ▶ Silent probe: remain quiet and wait
- ▶ Echo probe: repeat last thing said by respondent
- ▶ Long question probe: What is it like to dive into very deep water? vs. Tell me about diving into really deep water. What do you do to get ready and how to you descend and ascend? What's it like down there?
- ▶ Directive probe: leading the respondent (e.g. what parts of the question were hard to understand?)
- ▶ Phased assertion or baiting - act like you already know something to get people to open up

Final tips for interviewing

- ▶ Remain respectful - respondent is the expert
- ▶ Probe for full responses when the answer isn't complete or you feel there is more
- ▶ Do not be judgmental, regardless of what the respondent(s) says
- ▶ Try to ensure full participation of everyone (in FGDs)

For next time

- ▶ Interview Guide (Oct 1 5pm)
- ▶ Problem Set 1 (Oct 3)

Data collection

- ▶ Make additional revisions to survey based on instructor feedback and piloting
- ▶ Send to me for final approval
- ▶ Begin collecting data!

Case Studies from Prof. Sabin's research