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Presenting Data Using Qualitative Research

Chapter Summary

This chapter is organized into three parts:

1. Phase 1: essential first steps;
2. Phase 2: collecting, summarizing, and organizing data; and,
3. Phase 3: analyzing data.

Qualitative research has its own demands and integrity in comparison to quantitative research. There are subtle and not-so-subtle differences in the way the research issue is conceived and the data are collected, analyzed, and reported. Selecting a research problem is the first stage in a research process. Sampling issues in qualitative research involves the deliberate selection of subjects, locations, groups, and situations or cases to be observed or interviewed. Sampling in qualitative research is usually less concerned with generalization to large populations than with understanding what is going on in specific settings.

Qualitative research usually involves one or more of the following data-gathering techniques: observation, in-depth interviewing, focus groups, and the use of textual materials. There are two basic forms of observation: **non-participant observation**, where the researcher stands back from the situation and simply observes and **participant observation**, where the researcher becomes an active participant in the research enterprise. The most basic technique for gathering data in either type of observation is note-taking. There are several issues to consider when taking notes: first, the separation of observations and personal reactions; second, distinguishing between observing and note-taking; and last, notation.

In-depth interviews provide an opportunity for discovering what someone else thinks or feels. **Life narratives** are a modification of the in-depth interview where people are asked to write or record their life stories. **Focus groups** combine the strengths of in-depth interviewing and observation in a group context. In a focus group, a small group of people agrees to meet for collective discussion with the researcher who acts as facilitator. The use of **textual material or content analysis** can also be a source of data in qualitative research.

How do you analyze or make sense of your data? Researchers use the themes to construct a picture of what it is like to experience a given situation. Qualitative researchers look through interviews, tex-

tual data, and observational data for recurring themes or issues. They identify themes and organize them into systems of categories, a practice referred to as **coding**. Researchers should approach all qualitative analysis with a view towards developing sensitivity to the data and convey the authentic voices of the participants.

Qualitative research does not always lead to clear conclusions, but it does involve careful description of what was observed and heard. Researchers also employ a number of frameworks to make sense of data from particular analytical perspectives. The **action/cultural framework** makes reference to cultural or social facts in understanding social actions. The **typical actions framework** considers how people construct their social lives.

Key Terms

Action/cultural framework A way of making sense of qualitative data. In this framework, researchers must gain extensive knowledge of the culture of the group with whom they are working prior to collecting and analyzing data. This can be done by consulting published sources of information about the group, visiting its website, obtaining pamphlets or informational material, and consulting experts. (p. 264)

Content analysis A type of data collection that involves the examination of various forms of communications—usually in written form. Researchers access the written data and prepare codes and themes as they review and re-review the material to come up with a better understanding of a phenomenon. (p. 261)

Facilitator In a focus group, the researcher acts as the moderator for a group of people (between four and twelve in number) and leads a collective discussion. The facilitator's job is to ensure the focus group does not end before the topics of the interview guide are discussed in sufficient detail. (p. 259)

Focus groups A type of group interview where four to twelve participants with similar characteristics meet and discuss issues related to the researcher's topic of interest. The focus group is run by one or two facilitators who direct the group conversation. Facilitators usually have an interview guide provided by the researcher, which lists a short number of topics or questions that must be discussed during the focus group. Like unstructured interviews, the questions or topics need not be addressed in the order they appear in the interview guide. (p. 259)

In-depth interviewing A qualitative research method that involves asking general questions to participants in order to obtain personal reflections and experiences regarding the phenomena of interest. Researchers use an interview schedule rather than a survey as a guide to topics that are important to the study. Interviewers encourage participants to talk about their experiences rather than answering direct questions as a way of encouraging a conversational tone to the interview. This approach is meant to elicit more authentic information than that obtained using structured interviews, which are deemed to be too artificial and too biased (as the researcher creates questions based on her personal biases). A major benefit of in-depth interviews is the ability for the interviewer to probe respondents for additional information, an activity not possible in structured interviews. (p. 254)

Life narratives A modification of the in-depth interview is to ask people to write or record their life stories. (p. 257)

Non-participant observation A qualitative form of data collection that occurs when the researcher observes activities associated with the research population but does not actively participate in them. (p. 248)

Observation A way of collecting data that involves close monitoring of events, individuals, environments, or phenomena. (p. 248)

Participant observation A qualitative research technique in which the researcher observes and participates along with the study subjects. This technique aims to reduce the distance between the researcher and the study participants. When the researcher interacts in various social situations and participates as part of the group studied, it is believed that the observations and conclusions drawn are more authentic than those drawn from quantitative research given the researcher there is more distant and objective. This subjective, in-depth immersion in the situation can yield rich, diverse data that contextualizes situations and environments that quantitative research is unable to produce. (p. 250)

Photojournals An increasingly popular method of qualitative data collection, participants are supplied with disposable or digital cameras and asked to take pictures of their lives and events over a short period of time. The photos are uploaded and participants are asked to reflect and describe their significance. The photos and commentary are used to produce evocative and highly engaging multi-dimensional reflections of the research topic, and they are a rich source of data. (p. 267)

Typical actions framework A qualitative method of data analysis that focuses on daily actions of a particular group. By collecting information about the daily activities of participants, the researcher has a better idea of lifestyles and interpersonal interactions within the research study group. (p. 265)

Unstructured interviews A type of qualitative interview that lacks a questionnaire. Interviewers are given an interview guide, a list of topics that must be discussed in the interview. Participants are encouraged to speak freely about subjects of interest as a way of reducing researcher bias that creeps into directed questions. By speaking freely about the topic, researchers hope to obtain a more authentic version of events or more legitimate observations by participants in their own words. (p. 266)

Study Questions

Scroll down for answers.

1. What are the key features of qualitative research in collecting, summarizing, and organizing data?
2. Describe observation as a data-gathering technique.
3. What are the key differences between quantitative and qualitative research regarding the conception of the research issue and the collection, analysis, and reporting of data?

4. What is the main purpose of collecting life narratives?
5. What are the potential problems concerning in-depth interviews?
6. What advantages does transcribing your own interviews have in conducting research?
7. Why must we take culture or history into account when undertaking any social research?
8. What is the role of the researcher in focus groups?
9. What does developing sensitivity to situations you research mean?
10. What is the action/cultural framework?

Video Resources

Life history interviews are, by their nature, interesting and compelling to watch. The following YouTube channel hosts a collection of in-depth interviews with Americans with disabilities. Students should find the content, of people telling an interviewer about their lives, engaging.

<https://www.youtube.com/user/ItsOurStoryProject>

Answers to Study Questions

1. The key features of qualitative research in collecting, summarizing, and organizing data are as follows:
 - It is generally concerned with the collection of data that excludes numbers.
 - It can include personal accounts, feelings, observations, images such as photos and drawings, and personal beliefs.
 - It is a powerful method of giving voice to the participants in a research study.
 - The sample size of qualitative research designs is small, often fewer than 20 people.
 - Qualitative research designs include unstructured interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and ethnographies. (pp. 246–267)
2. Observation, both participant and non-participant, is a way of collecting data that involves close monitoring of events, individuals, environments, or phenomena. It involves assessing the whole situation, analyzing the participants in a situation, and an awareness on the part of the researcher in relation to how he or she perceives what is going on. (pp. 248–252)
3. Quantitative research does not allow for changes in the research instrument once it has been distributed. Qualitative research allows for spontaneous and unexpected changes to the research instrument during the data-gathering steps of the research process. Quantitative research tries to keep interaction between the researcher and the participants to a minimum. Qualitative research allows for ongoing interaction between the researcher and the participants. Quantitative results are inflexible in terms of the management and analysis of the data. Qualitative results allow for flexibility in the management and analysis of the data. (pp. 247–248)
4. The main purpose of collecting life narratives is to allow participants the opportunity to tell their own stories in depth and detail. (pp. 257–259)
5. The potential problems concerning in-depth interviews are as follows:
 - Participants' cultural practices are easily ignored.
 - In-depth interviews usually take a considerable amount of time.
 - Participants may sometimes drift away from the specifics of the question.
 - Some participants tend to provide only very brief answers. (pp. 254–255)
6. The advantage of transcribing your own interviews is that you are able to annotate the interview transcript with things made note of in the interview, like gestures or facial expressions. This would not be caught by someone just directly transcribing. (pp. 255–257)
7. In order to properly understand your participants and the results of your study, they must be understood in the political, historical, social, economic, and current contexts. (p. 265)
8. The role of the researcher in focus groups may be as follows:
 - Act as facilitator
 - Introduce the research topic
 - Ask questions

- Direct conversations
 - Record results (p. 259)
9. Develop your sense of having been there or having been close to the situation so you can look at the data through the perspective of someone who knows the situation personally. (p. 264)
 10. Makes reference to cultural or social facts in understanding social actions. It often requires extra data about the culture of the people within the research situation, therefore it may be necessary to consult history books, religious texts, or company mission statements. (pp. 264–265)