

# Qualitative Research

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## Approaches to Qualitative Research

- Focus is on phenomena that occur in natural settings
- Involves studying those phenomena in all of their complexity
- Researchers recognize the multifaceted form of the issue they are studying
- The researcher is the instrument

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## **The Nature of the Research Problem and Planning in Qualitative Research**

- Qualitative researchers formulate only general research problems and ask only general questions about the phenomena they study.
- Qualitative researchers may not identify ahead of time the exact methods they will use.
- The methodology may continue to evolve over the course of the study.
- Qualitative research requires considerable preparation and planning.
- Qualitative studies do not allow the researcher to identify cause-and- effect relationships.

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## **Purposes of Qualitative Research**

- Description
- Interpretation
- Verification
- Evaluation

### **Note:**

Qualitative studies do not allow the researcher to identify cause-and-effect relationships.

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## Qualitative Research Designs

- Case Study
- Ethnography
- Phenomenological Study
- Grounded Theory Study
- Content Analysis

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## Case Study

- **Definition:** In a case study, a particular individual, program or event is studied in depth; findings may not be generalizable.
- **Method:** The researcher collects extensive data on the individual(s), program(s), or event(s) on which the investigation is focused.
- **Data Analysis:** involves (1) organization of details about the case, (2) categorization of data, (3) interpretation of single instances, (4) identification of patterns, and (5) synthesis and generalizations.
- **Research Report:** includes (1) a rationale for studying the case, (2) a detailed description of facts related to the case, (3) a description of data that was collected, (4) a discussion of patterns found, and (5) a connection to the larger scheme of things.

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## Ethnography

- Definition: In an ethnography, the researcher looks **in depth at an entire group that shares a common culture**; it is especially useful for understanding complexities of a particular, intact socio-cultural group.
- Method: Site-based fieldwork is the essence of any ethnography. The researcher depends on a gatekeeper and key informants and is a careful observer.
- Data Analysis: Data collection and data analysis occur somewhat simultaneously. Steps in data collection include (1) description, (2) analysis, and (3) interpretation. The research strives for rigorous subjectivity.
- Research Report: Often written in a personal, literary style and includes (1) an introduction providing a rationale for the study, (2) a description of the setting and methods, (3) an analysis of the group studies, and (4) a conclusion.

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## Phenomenological Study

- Definition: A phenomenological study attempts to **understand people's perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of a particular situation**. The researcher tries to answer the question, "What is it like to experience such-and-such?"
- Method: Phenomenological researchers depend almost exclusively on lengthy interviews with a carefully selected sample of participants. The phenomenological interview is often unstructured in which the researcher and participants to arrive at "the heart of the matter."
- Data Analysis: The central task in data analysis is to identify common themes in people's descriptions of their experiences. Steps include (1) identifying relevant statements, (2) grouping statements into "meaning units," (3) seeking divergent perspectives, and (4) constructing a composite.
- Research Report: There is no specific structure but the report should produce understanding of the experience.

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## Grounded Theory Study

- Definition: The major purpose of a grounded theory study is to begin with the data and use them to develop a theory. The study uses a prescribed set of procedures for analyzing data and constructing a theoretical model from them—the theory is “grounded” in the data.
- Method: Data collection is field-based, flexible, and likely to change over the course of the study. Interviews typically play a major role. A *constant comparative method* is used in that data analysis drives later data collection.
- Data Analysis: Data analysis includes (1) open coding, (2) axial coding, (3) selective coding, and (4) development of a theory. No matter what form the theory takes, it is based entirely on the data collected.
- The Research Report: Writing is objective and impersonal and includes (1) a description of the research question, (2) a review of the related literature, (3) a description of methodology and data analysis, (4) a presentation of the theory, and (5) a discussion of implications.

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## Content Analysis

- Definition: A content analysis is a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes, or biases. A content analysis is typically performed on forms of human communication and involves the greatest amount of planning at the front end of the project.
- Method: A content analysis is systematic and includes (1) identification of the material to be studied, (2) definition of the characteristics to be studied, (3) a breakdown of complex items into smaller segments, and (4) scrutiny of material for identified characteristics under study.
- Data Analysis: Data analysis involves tabulation of the frequency of each characteristic found in the material studied. Tabulations and statistical analyses are used to interpret the data.
- The Research Report: The research report includes (1) a description of the material studied, (2) precise definitions of material characteristics, (3) the coding or rating procedures, and (4) tabulations for each characteristic.

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## Data Collection in Qualitative Research

- Multiple forms of data are used.
- Data collected early in the investigation may influence subsequent data.
- Potential sources of data are unlimited.
- Data collection takes a great deal of time.
- Data collection methods should be consistent with ethical principles of research studies.

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## Data Collection Procedures

- **Sampling:**
  - choice of sample depends on the research question
  - tends to be nonrandom in selection of data sources
  - is purposeful
- **Observations:**
  - researcher may be an outsider or a participant observer
  - intentionally unstructured and free-flowing
  - can be problematic and lack objectivity
- **Interviews:**
  - can yield a great deal of information
  - tend to be unstructured and open-ended
  - occasional use of focus groups

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## Guidelines: Conducting Interviews

1. Identify some questions in advance.
2. Consider participants' cultural backgrounds on their responses.
3. Make sure interviewees are representative of the group.
4. Find a suitable location.
5. Get written permission.
6. Establish and maintain rapport.
7. Focus on the actual rather than on the abstract or hypothetical.
8. Don't put words in people's mouths.
9. Record responses verbatim.
10. Keep your reactions to yourself.
11. Remember that you may not be getting the "facts."
12. When conducting a focus group, take group dynamics into account.

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## Organizing and Analyzing Data

- Employ a *data analysis spiral*

1. Organize the data;
2. Peruse the data set to get a sense of what it contains as a whole;
3. Identify general categories or themes (and possible subthemes), then classify data accordingly;
4. Integrate and summarize the data.

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## Criteria for Evaluating Qualitative Research

1. Purposefulness
2. Explicitness of assumptions and biases
3. Rigor
4. Open-mindedness
5. Completeness
6. Coherence
7. Persuasiveness
8. Consensus
9. Usefulness

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## Historical Research

- Deals with the meaning of events
- Not just the accumulation of facts, but the interpretation of the facts
- The historical researcher not only describes events but also presents a factually supported rationale to explain why they happened
- Not the domain of historians alone
- Largely a qualitative endeavor

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## Data Sources in Historical Research

- Primary Sources: data that appear first in time; may include letters, diaries, sermons, laws, census reports, etc. Also may include:
  - narrative/oral history research
  - interview data
- Secondary Sources: works of historians who have interpreted and written about primary sources; reflect the assumptions and biases of the people who write them. Secondary sources may include:
  - newspaper accounts
  - books and pamphlets
  - government records

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## Handling Historical Data Systematically

- Necessary to have a specific plan for acquisition, organization, storage, and retrieval of data:
  - A. Paper-and-Pencil Approach: works best for smaller projects with a limited amount of data; time- and space-consuming.
  - B. Computerized Approach: use of computer and software make handling of data systematic and time efficient.

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## Evaluating and Interpreting Historical Data

- **Two types of evaluation:**

1. External evidence is primarily concerned with whether or not an artifact or document is authentic. External evidence is of paramount importance for the credibility of the research. May involve carbon dating, handwriting analysis, identification of the type of ink and paper used.

2. Internal evidence is primarily concerned with the meaning of the data; applies not only to documents from the distant past but also to more contemporary documents as well. Primary question may be "what do the words mean?"

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## Historical Time and Historical Space

- ***Chronology*** = setting down occurrences and events in the order in which they happened.
- ***Historiography*** = genuine historical research; the interpretation of historical events.
- **Historical Time**: the time dimension of historical data; often represented by use of a time line to represent chronological data.
- **Historical Space**: the spatial dimension, or *where*, of historical data; represented by use of a map to represent a geographical relationship.

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## **Guidelines for Writing the Historical Research Report**

1. State your own argument early in the game.
1. Provide examples to support any assertion that you make.
2. Give the fairest possible treatment of any perspectives different from your own.
4. Point out the weaknesses of your own argument.