

A Way of Knowing: an Overview of Qualitative Research

Notes for Research Methods Module AHAN7001 Alie Bird

Qualitative research is sometimes negatively defined by what it promises to avoid: namely statistical techniques, formal sampling procedures and measurement. David Silverman points to the danger in the title which seems to assume a fixed preference or pre-defined evaluation of what is 'good' (i.e. qualitative) and 'bad' (i.e. quantitative) research.

Silverman suggests that the choice between different research methods should depend, not on a value judgement concerning the method, but upon what you are trying to find out: if you want to discover how people intend to vote, then a quantitative method, like a social survey, may seem the most appropriate choice. On the other hand, if you are concerned with exploring people's life histories or everyday behaviour, then qualitative methods may be favoured.

Keywords

- **Interpretation**
- **Context**
- **Cultural relativism**
- **Experience**
- **Sympathy**

Ideal Subjects for Qualitative Research

- Informants' social worlds
- Non observable phenomena: belief, knowledge, opinions, feelings
- Religion, cosmologies, ethnic affinities, folklore attachments
- Small, contained groups of informants: 'island' communities
- Kinship beliefs and practices
- Minority groups
- Holistic studies of communities/groups/tribes/families/workforces

Context for this Style of Research: Schools of Thought/Informing Philosophies

- Phenomenology: consciousness; conscious experience (Husserl)
- Hermeneutics: the importance of context (Heidegger, Gadamer)
- The Social Construction of Reality (Berger & Luckman)
- Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss)
- Feminist and postcolonial studies
- Consideration of the researcher's position in relation to the informant/s, eg:
 - insider/outsider
 - emic/etic (Headland, Pike & Harris)
 - experience near/distant (Kohut, adopted by Geertz)
 - native/at home
- Sympathy/Congruence
- *Verstehen* (Weber)
- Collaboration
- Reflexivity
- Bracketing (recognition and bracketing of researcher's bias)

Types of Qualitative Research Practice

- Participatory/experiential research
- Interviews
- Questionnaires
- Field Studies/Fieldwork
- Participant Observation
- Collecting Life Histories
- Sympathetic reading of Texts, contemporary & historical

Reporting Styles

- Ethnography (from the Greek *folk/people* and *to write*)
 - Malinowski: Trobriand Islanders
 - Boas: American First Nations communities
 - Mead: Samoa
 - Evans Pritchard: Azande, Nuer
 - Geertz: Java, Bali
- Writing Culture (Clifford & Marcus)
- Research Journals
- Auto-ethnography

Silverman, D., *Doing Qualitative Research: a Practical Handbook*, (2000), London: Sage.