

Data Collection vs. Data Generation

Most books on research methods include long sections on *Data Collection*. It's interesting then, that in Schwandt's *The Sage Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*, there is no entry for *Data Collection* but a 'See' reference to *Description* and *Generating Data*. In the former entry he discusses how so called factual descriptions of the world are theory laden and that *Data Collection* is more appropriately described as generation or construction. In the latter, he mentions that data is not 'out there' to be discovered like gold or collected as we would gather fruit from a tree.

The word *generate* gives rise to images of nature, birth, growth and so on. What about *data construction*? Certainly we would hope that we are not just making it up as we go along.

One definition of data is 'factual information' but given the discussion above, this makes for even more complications. The meaning in Latin is more informative – something given – which would signify that the research subjects are active, or as Creswell (2007, p.118) puts it "will provide good data". When Creswell discusses *data collection* he often refers to 'studying' a site or an individual. Put these two ideas together and *data collection* means studying what research subjects can give you.

Qualitative research is primarily about understanding, which most agree is achieved through interaction. This involves acknowledging the potential for misunderstanding as well as being open to challenging one's own understanding. Recognizing and exploring the role of both the researcher and the data giver may *generate* or *construct* greater insights. *Collecting data*, removing it from its source and then subjecting it to analysis seems unlikely to achieve this.

It's worthwhile to reconsider what we are doing when we *collect data* and why.

References:

Creswell, J.W. (2007) *Qualitative inquiry and research design; choosing among five approaches*. 2nd.ed. London, Sage.

Schwandt, T.A. (2007) *The Sage dictionary of qualitative inquiry*. 3rd ed. Los Angeles, Sage.