

Introduction to qualitative methods

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Overview

- Objective
 - By the end of this session, you should know the basic principles of qualitative research and be able to carry out a qualitative research project
- To do that, we will
 - Explore the qualitative approach
 - Look at three methods and three analysis approaches
 - Work through Semi-structured Interviews
 - Work through Grounded Theory

Before we start

- Any questions from last time?
- Last time
 - Designing studies to minimise error
 - Research from which the outcomes are generalisable
 - Analysing the results to determine how significant they are
 - Reporting differences or trends only if they are significant
 - Aim: Objective, reproducible, scientific approach, where individual differences are “experimental noise”



Criticisms of quantitative approaches

- “Obsessive emphasis on quantified detail without context, on progressively finer and finer measurement of smaller and smaller problems, leaves us knowing more and more about less and less”
 - Toffler (1981, p. 141-142)
- “Culture is taken as accidental and local, while psychological processes are depicted as fixed and universal”
 - Kvale (1992)

The qualitative approach

- Main characteristics of qual research
 - Focus on meaning
 - “Naturalistic” settings
 - Researcher is involved – *reflexivity*
 - Social context taken into account
 - Inclusive and democratic
 - No variables or hypotheses
 - Hypothesis: claim derived from existing theory that can be tested
 - Research question: open-ended (no yes/no answer)
- Theory emerges from research, not imposed by prior knowledge



Qualitative methods

Data collection

- Interviews
- Focus groups
- Diaries
- Participant observations
- Study texts

Data analysis

- Grounded theory
- Interpretative phenomenology
- Discourse analysis

What type of questions would suit this approach?



Qualitative data collection



Interviews – Structured interviews

- Description
 - Similar to a questionnaire
 - No deviation from the questionnaire
 - Short specific questions
- Advantages
 - Control
 - Reliability
 - Speed (of administration and of analysis)
- Disadvantages
 - Not enough room for exploring themes
 - Mechanical, not natural conversation...

Interviews – semi-structured

- Widely used in qualitative research
 - Relatively easy to carry out, wide range of analysis options
- Characteristics
 - No fixed schedule, openness to unanticipated directions
 - Less control, more flexibility – more natural
 - Researcher is a facilitator, rapport with participant
 - Increased participant freedom, enjoyment, empowerment
 - Researcher can follow up interesting and important issues
 - Rich data

Interviews – semi-structured

- Practicalities
 - Preparation
 - Decide on topic and relevant themes
 - Put Qs / themes into appropriate sequence, including prompts
 - Decide on sample and recruitment methods
 - Tips
 - Should be neutral (no “do you agree that...”)
 - Stimulate reflection through questions (express ignorance)
 - Avoid jargon
 - Use open questions (no “was that important?” instead “how did you feel about...”)

Interviews – semi-structured



- Types of questions
 - Descriptive
 - Questions about what happened (biographical info, anecdotes...)
 - Structural
 - How the interviewee organizes his/her knowledge; categories they use to make sense of the world (values, meaning of concepts [musician, artist, student...])
 - Contrast
 - Comparisons between events and experiences (“do you prefer A or B?”)
 - Evaluative
 - Feelings about someone/something (“how did you feel about...”)

Interviews – semi-structured

- Practicalities
 - The interview itself
 - Plan quiet location (let someone know where you are)
 - Record the interview (audio / video) – participant consent!
 - Easy opening questions
 - “Funnelling”: from general to specific questions
 - Try not to let the participant ramble too much
 - Flexibility in schedule between participants is fine
 - NOT THERAPY
 - Reflect on your input into the process
 - Transcribe (decide level of detail: just words, emphasis, hesitations, tone, laughter...?)

Interviews – semi-structured

- Practicalities
 - Pilot it!
- Group work
 - interviewers
 - Decide topic
 - Decide questions
 - interviewees
 - Respond to questions
 - reflect on your experience
 - How it went
 - Things to look out for



Interviews – semi-structured

- Potential problems
 - Participant not reflective / not chatty
 - Participant inconsistent (showing different aspects of self?)
 - Validity of data and of interpretations
 - It's a social situation
 - Social desirability, interaction
 - Influence of researcher
 - Just seeing what you expected to see?
- To help
 - Collect more data
 - Reflect on relationship with participant, your influence on the process

Focus groups

- Characteristics
 - A group interview
 - Up to 6 participants
 - Homogenous / heterogenous; new / pre-established; concerned / naive
 - Uses interaction among participants
 - Researcher is moderator, steering discussion
 - Allows statements to be expanded on
 - Challenge, clarification, justification of position
 - Observe joint construction of meaning
 - More natural?
 - Sensitive topics?



Diaries



- Characteristics
 - Intense
 - Participant makes commitment to maintain a record of their experiences, activities, feelings... over time (drop out rates)
 - Natural?
 - Keeping a diary has an effect in and of itself (research, ethics)
 - Varies from study to study
 - Frequency, subject, detail of entries, subject, video / dictaphone / written, time period
 - Temporally ordered
 - No retrospective interpretation, things as they happened

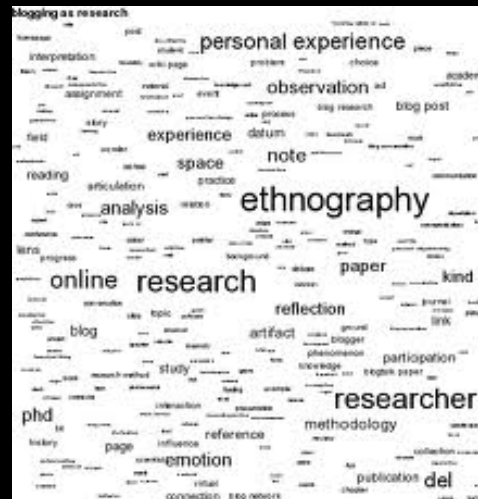
Participant observation

- Characteristics
 - Natural settings
 - Bar, hospital...
 - Observer
 - Overt / covert
 - Balance
 - Participation, documentation, informal interviewing and reflection
 - Keep detailed notes of observations
 - Verbatim quotes, timings, concrete...
 - Subsequently important “trivia”

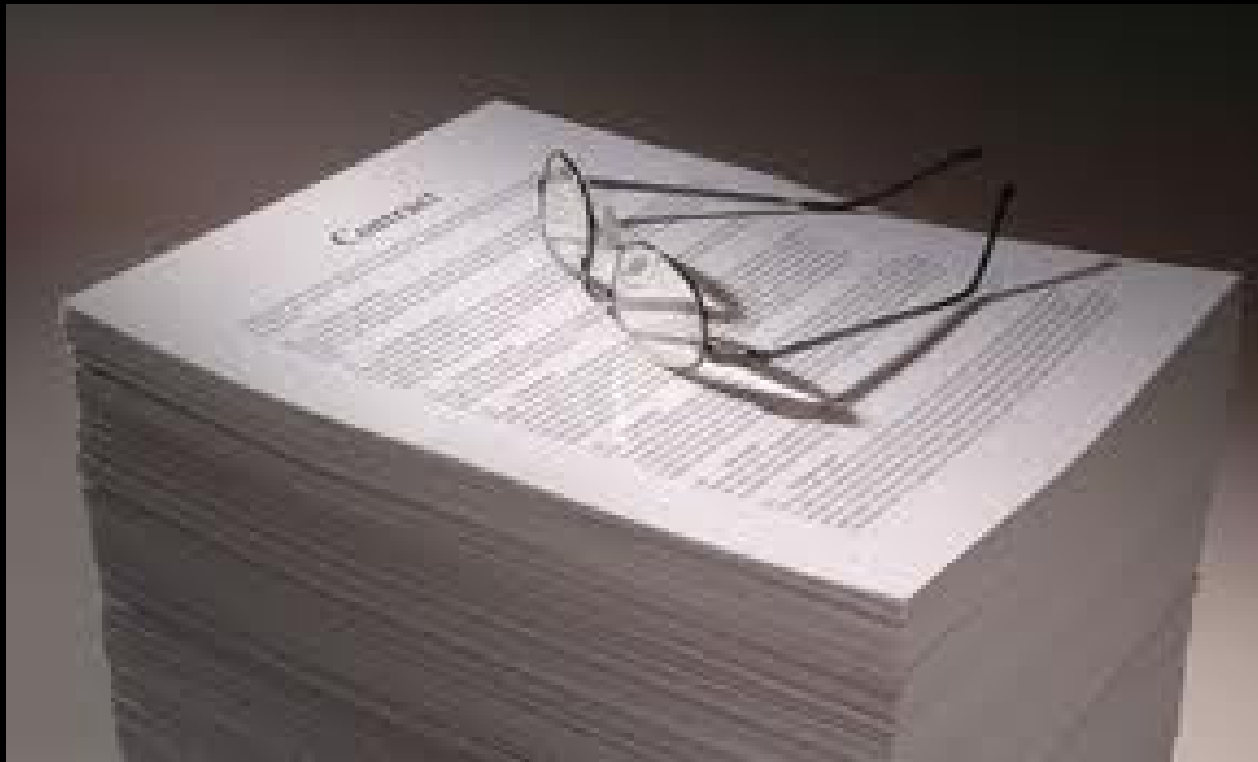


Text analysis

- Can apply the same methods of analysis to texts as to interviews
 - Several texts or one key text?
 - Comparing and contrasting themes from different types of publications / journals / groups of authors /...
 - Emerging themes rather than preconceived hypotheses



Qualitative data analysis



General principles

- All involve thematic analysis, start with open question
 - Grounded theory
 - “Theory” = looking at common themes
 - Interpretative phenomenological analysis
 - “Idiographic”, looking at unique meanings
 - Discourse analysis
 - Looking at how participant meanings are constructed and informed by social context

General principles

- Openness (not directed by researcher's expectations)
 - Meaning derived from words in data
 - Identify relevant themes in the text, reduce many themes to a few
- Detailed and time-consuming
 - Themes supported by textual extracts
 - Creative process

General principles

- Reflexivity
 - “requires an awareness of the researcher’s contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process, and an acknowledgement of the impossibility of remaining “outside” of one’s subject matter while conducting research” (Willig, 2001, p. 10).
- Personal
 - Impact of our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life?
- Epistemological
 - How does the research question shape the outcome?
- Report?

General principles

- Ensuring quality in analysis
 - Importance of discipline, and rigour
 - systematic and transparent approach
 - Reflexivity
 - document your (potential) influence
 - Generalisability?
 - report the attributes of the sample
 - Grounding in examples
 - Themes reinforced by evidence
 - Negative case analysis
 - Try to find disconfirming examples

General principles

- General principles
 - Credibility checks
 - Ask others to validate your interpretations
 - Member checks
 - Ask participants for their feedback
 - Coherence checks
 - Final categories should fit data and make sense



Grounded theory

- Originated in Sociology
- Progressive identification and integration of categories of meaning from data
 - Transcript
 - Segment the text into small units
 - Put everything in the text into categories
 - Write categories on the transcript as you go
 - Group categories that go together to make superordinate categories

Grounded theory

- Categories
 - Descriptive
 - e.g. anger, anxiety, pity → emotions
 - Analytic
 - e.g. drinking, writing poetry, jogging → escape
- Based on identification of relations of similarity and difference
- Emerge from the data, not mutually exclusive, evolve

Grounded theory

- Categories
 - When a category builds up, it becomes a “superordinate” category
 - Make a definition of the category based on what it includes
 - “personal interest”, “the right area for me”, “took to it naturally”
 - → perception of self as especially equipped for this role
 - One category can contribute to several clusters
 - Brother’s influence: role of family; role of gender

Grounded theory

- Coding
 - Assign descriptive labels to instances
 - Low-level → higher level
 - Not derived from previous analyses, new
- Constant comparative analysis
 - Once have identified overarching categories, look back at subcategories to look for differences between instances
 - Link categories so that all instances of variation are captured by the emerging theory

Grounded theory

- Negative case analysis
 - Try to find instances that do not fit with the emerging picture
 - add depth to the analysis
- Theoretical sensitivity
 - From descriptive to analytic level
 - Questions we ask the data are modified by what we find
- Theoretical sampling
 - Collecting further data in the light of the categories which emerged

Grounded theory

- Theoretical saturation
 - Continue to sample and analyse until no new categories can be created
 - Goal rather than reality
- Memo-writing
 - Maintain a record of theory development
 - Definitions of categories, integration, relationship between categories...
 - Date, which part of data inspired it
- Reporting: the key categories identified

Grounded theory

- Worked example
 - See handout

IPA

- Associated with Phenomenology (Philosophy)
 - How humans gain knowledge of the world around them
- Aim
 - Capture the quality and texture of individual experiences, recognising the researcher cannot see things from the participant's view point
- Detailed descriptions of analytic process
- Work from transcripts of semi-structured interviews
 - Open-ended questions
- Similar to GT, but more in-depth, cluster later (over cases), more detailed reporting

IPA

- Master theme 1

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
Constituent theme	Pages / lines	Pages / lines	Pages / lines
Constituent theme	Pages / lines	Pages / lines	Pages / lines
Constituent theme	Pages / lines	Pages / lines	Pages / lines

- Master theme 2

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
Constituent theme	Pages / lines	Pages / lines	Pages / lines
Constituent theme	Pages / lines	Pages / lines	Pages / lines
Constituent theme	Pages / lines	Pages / lines	Pages / lines

- ...

Discourse analysis

- Concerned with the role of language in the construction of reality
 - Discursive Psychology: how people use language in order to negotiate and manage social interactions to achieve interpersonal objectives (e.g. blame, justification...)
 - Foucauldian Discourse Analysis: describe and critique the discursive worlds people inhabit and to explore their implications for subjectivity and experience (e.g. what does the label “asylum seeker” imply? Consequences for the person’s experience of society?)

Discourse analysis

- Analysis
 - Read the text to get impression of “what it is doing”
 - Analysis purpose: how is it doing that?
 - Coding: highlight passages that are relevant to the research question
 - Analysis: “why am I reading this passage this way?”
 - What words are used to describe the concept
 - Implications?
 - Contradictions?

Qualitative research write-up

- Will go into this more in the lecture on writing up research (later this term)
- Keep your “workings” – scribble on the transcript, how categories emerge, any reflections...

In this lecture

- General principles of qualitative research
- Looked at different models and analyses
- Worked through Semi-structured Interviews and Grounded Theory
- Any questions?
- c.r.featherstone@leeds.ac.uk
- Key text: Willig (2001) *Introducing qualitative research in psychology: Adventures in theory and method*.