Different Kinds of Qualitative Data Collection Methods

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Different Kinds of Qualitative Data Collection Methods

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By the End of This Chapter You Should Be Able to:

- understand the meaning of qualitative research;
- understand the kinds of questions that can be addressed with qualitative research;
- identify different qualitative techniques;
- know which qualitative methods are appropriate for your research project.

Introduction

This chapter offers an introduction to qualitative research. There is guidance on the advantages to the researcher-practitioner taking a qualitative approach to a research study, the kinds of questions qualitative research can answer and the ways that it can complement other methodological approaches.

There is an array of qualitative methods that can be used when conducting research, some of which are more applicable to certain types of questions than others. Unfortunately, there are no hard and fast rules and it is up to you to weigh up advantages and disadvantages, and to adopt the method or methods that seem to fit with your aims and questions. Therefore to help the practitioner-researcher decide which method(s) are the most appropriate for their particular project, this chapter discusses some of the most commonly used qualitative methods and explores how these methods are likely to play out in the field (although there is much greater detail on the process and analysis of qualitative research in Chapters 9 and 10). The main focus will be on semi-structured interviewing and focus groups, two of the most common methods that are likely to be used by practitioner-researchers. However, the chapter also discusses the uses of unstructured interviewing, observation, diaries and documentary analysis.

Furthermore, the chapter considers the more practical elements of conducting qualitative research, such as access to participants, sensitivity of approach and cost implications. The aim of this chapter is to provide an understanding and ‘feel’ for qualitative research.

Understanding Qualitative Research

Chapter 2 has already suggested ways of distinguishing between qualitative and quantitative research and warned that much of the discussion about the differences between qualitative and quantitative approaches is over-simplistic and describes two diametrically opposed methodologies and accompanying theoretical

positions. In reality, there are many researchers who use both approaches and are aware of the uses and advantages of both methods.

Qualitative research is about looking at the depth information involved in an issue; Flick expresses qualitative research as seeking ‘to contribute to a better understanding of social realities and to draw attention to processes, meaning, patterns and structural features’ (2009: 1). Qualitative research attempts to interpret meanings, emotions, behaviours and/or perceptions by ‘analysing concrete cases in their temporal and local particularity and starting from people's expressions and activities in their local contexts’ (Flick, 2009: 30). Practitioner-researchers are therefore well placed to conduct qualitative research as they often have ready access to research participants in their local contexts.

Qualitative research produces data that informs us about the nature or the ‘quality’ of people's lives, circumstances or situations. As a rule, if your research question includes the words ‘how’ or ‘why’ or you wish to explore ideas and experiences with your participants, then qualitative research is likely to be the approach that you want to use. For example, if you are conducting research about a school cohort that has participated in widening participation events at a higher education institution you may want to use an interview or focus group method. Either of these methods will help you to understand how pupils’ viewed certain aspects of the activities; using an interview would garner individual responses about personal preferences or dislikes while a focus group would help you to understand the range of experiences and perhaps a collective group experience.

There is no single accepted way of undertaking qualitative research. Rather, it depends on the researcher's beliefs about the social world and what they think can be discovered about it (Snape and Spencer, 2003). As these beliefs vary considerably, so too do the beliefs about how data can be interpreted. One of the defining features of qualitative research is that it is broadly associated with what is referred to as the interpretivist sociological tradition, an approach that begins from the premise that society itself is a human construct in a continuous process of revision and rebuilding (Becker and Bryman, 2004). Qualitative research looks at the world in depth and aims to uncover reality, as seen from the eyes of the research participants themselves or, in other words, by examining life worlds ‘from the inside out’ (Flick, 2009). The core aim of qualitative research is to make sense of the social world through interpretation, thus qualitative research penetrates beneath everyday life to reveal the reality that lies underneath (Woods, 1988).

Many qualitative researchers are therefore interested in the life history of their research participants. Bolton argues that our nature as humans is ‘storied’, and that we are brought up surrounded by stories which tell ‘us who we are and where we belong, what is right and what is wrong’ (2006: 205). As a practitioner-researcher you may find that exploring the life stories of your participants can be a valuable tool. For example if you are researching transitions to higher education then it will be important to understand the educational life history, along with other influencing factors such as family background, peer group or childhood experiences of your research participant in order to understand how this has impacted upon the choices they have made.

Another defining feature of qualitative research is that it is generally seen to be ‘inductive’ that is, ideas,

concepts and theories tend to grow and develop from the data as opposed to being fixed and in place before the data is collected (Becker and Bryman, 2004: 248). Qualitative research is also advantageous because it can be adapted organically. Looking again at our research into widening participation events at higher education institutions, you may begin to think that it is important to know what young people think of the university campus but discover that in fact they actually report fears about making new friendship groups once they get to university. Therefore, what facilities are available within the institution or pupils' opinions of them is relatively unimportant. Thus, the qualitative researcher allows the research findings to lead 'from the ground up, rather than handed down entirely from a theory or from the perspectives of the enquirer' (Creswell, 2007: 19). However as Strauss and Corbin (1990) argue, within an effective piece of research, data should be explored through a combination of induction, deduction, and verification and that all parts are absolutely essential (see also Chapter 2 in this volume).

When conducting qualitative research, it is important that you consider your own moral, ethical, political or emotional position about the research question. This is rather clumsily called your 'positionality', and essentially means recognising and acknowledging where you stand on an issue. Very often, the reason for pursuing an area of research is intrinsically intertwined with a researcher's own values or experiences (Carspecken, 1996). It is important to remember that holding up a pretence of value neutrality is not always helpful and it can lead to the research being misread. It is important to be honest about the reasons for investigating an issue but it is equally necessary to conduct research without pursuing a desired outcome. Without an open mind, evidence may be lost, or important issues neglected. This is not to say 'anything goes' but as May makes clear 'procedures through which we understand and interpret our social world are now necessary conditions for us to undertake research' (2001: 15). Therefore a balance is needed in both acknowledging your 'positionality' and maintaining professional practice (see Chapter 4).

Given the importance of acknowledging one's own 'positionality', some qualitative researchers prefer to write in the first person because they accept that the argument is theirs and a different outcome would be likely if someone else had conducted the research. Humphreys bemoans the writing of research in the third person as such:

> This world is inhabited by scholars who teach, research, publish, and often conceal their presence within third-person research accounts. (2005: 843)

Furthermore, Becker concurs that use of the passive voice 'conceals any traces of the ordinary human activity which produces results' (1987: 36) and therefore removes any personal attachment or responsibility for the findings or statement that is being made. In some instances you may feel that your research will only be accepted by your practitioner community if it has been written in a way that appears 'neutral', that is, in the third person. Therefore, you will need to consider which method is more effective for your research purpose.

The boundaries of qualitative research are set to achieve an understanding of the issues involved within a subject rather than being able to quantify the extent to which the findings are applicable across the population. Therefore, you can make claims about the findings based on the specific location of the research, but it does

not mean that a general claim can be made about the likelihood of the same results being found across wider groups. Qualitative research tends to be small scale and to have small sample sizes primarily because in having a small sample size the researcher is able to concentrate on producing in-depth data that gets at the real experiences, thoughts and feelings of participants. Silverman refers to this as a ‘sacrifice of scope for detail’ (2006: 229). A small sample size is something that is often criticised by the quantitative research community and findings drawn from small sample sizes may have limited acceptability in the broader research community (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006). However, qualitative researchers such as Ball argue the case for ‘working small’, he values the ‘events and specifics and locations, in contingencies, concatenations and contexts, in the odd as much as the typical’ (2006: 4). This emphasises the point that qualitative research is seeking factors of interest that may be found in only a single case rather than trying to find widespread evidence that can be generalised.

Qualitative research will be particularly useful for practitioner-researchers who are likely to have immediate access to some research participants, for example user groups such as patients in a hospital or tenants in a housing complex. However, it is important to think about the research you could undertake by consulting non-users as well as those who engage with your services, this might include, for example, whether measures should be implemented to engage people who feel marginalised and that they are not catered for. Qualitative research can be useful for evaluating projects through investigating people's experiences of that project, for consultations on proposed policy implementations as well as in the development of new strategies or policies. It is useful to look at some of the advantages of using a qualitative approach in order to decide whether it will help you to address your research questions.

Advantages of Qualitative Research

There are a number of advantages in conducting qualitative social research. These are highlighted in Table 8.1 and discussed further below.

Table 8.1 Advantages of qualitative research

Advantage	*Detail*
Exploration	If research is done an under-researched area we may not know which questions to ask straight away and therefore qualitative research would be much more appropriate than quantitative research. It helps the researcher to explore the area in an open manner before developing a more nuanced approach (if so desired).
Detail	You may require a detailed explanation to understand an issue.
Access	It is easier to reach ‘hard to reach’ groups using qualitative methods, for example, homeless people, youth groups, or individuals with literacy problems.
Sensitivity	When something is taboo, delicate or intimate then people may need an approach which builds trust and confidence before responding to such issues.
In the	Asking open-ended questions through a focus group or interview can help you to develop a more nuanced

development of quantitative methods	structured questionnaire through which you would attempt to find out how widespread the issue is.
Cost	The cost is in ‘time resource’, that is, practitioner researcher time rather than in equipment costs.

Exploration

Within qualitative research there is the opportunity for the practitioner-researcher to explore new issues as they are uncovered in the fieldwork stage. Thus, the researcher is not bound and tied by a pre-determined set of questions or assumptions and can pursue areas of interest as they arise. Often interviews can meander off what was initially thought of as the main point and this can reveal some of the underlying assumptions of the interviewee, greatly adding to the data you can gather. For example, you may be conducting interviews with residents on an estate with outdated housing stock with the aim of discovering how the condition or size/layout of the physical buildings affects day-to-day life. However, in the first few interviews, it becomes apparent that it is not the housing that is perceived as problematic but the lack of public transport to the area and the poor local facilities that cause concern. Thus, the researcher is free to explore these issues at depth and will learn more than if he or she had simply continued with the line of questioning about the physical buildings. Exploration allows the researcher to understand in more detail the issues that concern the research participants, it gives them a ‘voice’ and minimises the risk of imposing the researchers own agenda.

Detail

Qualitative research allows the practitioner-researcher to explore issues at a great depth. If a research participant becomes comfortable with the researcher, they are more likely to provide a deeper level of response than if they had been asked a one-off structured ‘closed’ question. The researcher can concentrate on one response and probe further in order to illuminate both the explanations and emotions associated with the topic. It is also useful within the context of face-to-face qualitative research to record non-verbal factors, such as facial expressions and body language which can often reveal what the ‘plain text’ cannot.

Access

Qualitative methods are the most effective way of reaching people who are classified as ‘hard to reach’ groups. Hard to reach groups will be different depending on the sector in which you work. However, homeless people, disaffected youth groups, and people with mental health problems are some of the groups that have been identified as hard to reach.

It will often take an innovative approach to recruit and conduct research with these groups and therefore qualitative methods are most appropriate. For example, to gather the views of disaffected youths, it may

be necessary to go and find out where they congregate and get to know them before they will consider participating in the research. In this instance a practitioner-researcher could be a youth worker who may be the only person likely to have the opportunity to get to know the young people. Youth workers may also act as a gatekeeper for other people attempting to conduct research with young people; this could result in the same group of youths being consulted on a number of issues. There are gatekeepers who represent many hard to reach groups but it is problematic to always rely on them as you then run the risk of hearing only those who are most visible or active in that community and who may not be representative of the entire community. Some gatekeepers may have an agenda (the 'local vocal') that they are seeking to promote and therefore only allow access to those participants who will 'tow the party line'; practitioner-researchers should be wary of this when selecting their research sample.

Sensitivity

Some issues in social research are regarded as 'sensitive' and include asking questions beyond those that a participant would normally answer to a stranger. Sensitive issues may even concern a subject area that is normally considered taboo. Examples would include questions about sex and sexuality, terminal illness or mental health. In these cases, it is likely that participants will respond more openly in a trusted environment, where they are able to expand on their answers. This entails building confidence in the participant to enable them to give this information. Qualitative research over a period of time can allow the researcher to build a rapport and ultimately, can enable participants the confidence to talk about sensitive issues. For example, if you are researching a very sensitive subject, such as bereavement, you may need to spend time asking preliminary questions, possibly, focusing on happy memories, which will enable you to gain the trust of your participant before you ask difficult or upsetting questions about loss and grief; building confidence in the participant, until they feel comfortable enough to discuss the issues in depth.

Development of Quantitative Methods

Qualitative and quantitative research can often complement each other and can be used for triangulation, that is, checking the reliability of the data either before or after the quantitative research has been conducted (see Chapter 3). By using qualitative research before a quantitative measure (for example, a survey) you can uncover the issues that appear relevant to that group, assess the terminology that they use and develop questionnaire schedules that are more appropriate to the sample group of participants. The survey will then quantify how widespread the issues that were identified in the qualitative research appear to be. Qualitative research can also be used after a survey to explore the issue in more depth and thus address 'how' and 'why' questions. Using both approaches in your research also allows you to draw on the advantages of both methods and to minimise criticism that you may receive about sample sizes, applicability across the general population or depth of responses.

Costs

There is a myth surrounding qualitative research that suggests that because sample sizes are smaller, the research will be more cost-effective. In some instances this may be true, however in the majority of circumstances qualitative research will produce such a vast quantity of data that the time spent in analysing the findings contributes heavily to the overall cost. Wellington warns of the danger of falling into the trap of over-collecting and under-analysing, and reflects that many novice researchers 'tend to collect far too many data, for fear that they won't have enough, and then either run out of time, words or energy when it comes to analysing, interpreting, discussing, or locating the data' (2000: 133). It is important to consider the amount of data you are likely to collect in only a few interviews, and assess whether you will be able to conduct, analyse and reflect on the total sample data within the timeframe for which you have budgeted.

Transcription is very expensive in terms of labour time. If you decide you want full transcripts of interviews and focus groups it may be worth considering outsourcing this part of the research to a professional transcription service. If you are not experienced in transcription it can take a lot longer than you might expect (it can typically take a beginner up to four hours to fully transcribe one hour of interview). The cost of a transcription service is often a wise investment in comparison with the cost of practitioner-researcher time. If you do decide to have the interviews transcribed, ensure that you listen through the recording with the transcript in front of you to check for accuracy and to add any notes that you took relating to non-verbal data. Alternatives to transcription include note taking or summarising the discussion noting the key points that were discussed. It is sometimes useful to return the summary to the interviewee to check that they are happy with your précis.

Types of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research encompasses a number of methods, a selection of those which may be most relevant to practitioner-researchers are highlighted in Table 8.2.

Table 8.2 Qualitative methods: an overview

Method	*Detail*
Semi-structured interviews	Interviews that follow a question guide but have scope to deviate from the script.
Focus groups	Small group discussion on a specific issue.
Unstructured interviews	Like a conversation with loose ideas about what should be included.
Participant observation/observation	Recording incidents that are observed and looking for certain actions.
Diaries	Notes made by participants relating to the issue in question.
Documentary analysis	Intensive analysis of either 'official' or personal documents.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interview is a popular qualitative method that typically uses a list of questions set by the researcher, usually known as a topic guide or interview schedule. All participants are asked the same

questions, usually in roughly the same order. However, there is flexibility in this approach and the researcher can change the order and wording of the questions in order to achieve a more natural style of conversation. Thus semi-structured interviewing requires more skill than structured quantitative interviewing because the interviewer must recognise moments in the interview that have potential for further questioning and be able to formulate questions ‘off the cuff’. Consequently, if someone only partially answers the question or alludes to an area that is of interest to the researcher, the interviewer can ask further questions. Although much of the data the researcher collects will essentially be comparable, due to the flexible nature, each individual interview will be unique and adapted to the circumstances of each participant. Additionally, since semi-structured interviews are usually (although not definitively) of a one-to-one nature, participants will be more likely to provide information which they might not wish to divulge in a group setting.

To illustrate, semi-structured interviewing would be a good approach to adopt if you are researching the work experiences of black or minority ethnic employees in a large organisation. The structure of the interview would enable you to explain, at the recruitment stage, what the interview will cover. However, the flexibility within the actual interview, would allow you to tailor your approach and questions as appropriate. Additional questions asked of an employee who has had a very positive experience of working for the organisation would be very different from those asked of an employee who has experienced racism.

The semi-structured approach would also allow you to ‘probe’ for further information.

The example below shows how a discussion on employment led the respondent to talk about experiences of racism; this is taken up and pursued further by the researcher.

> Researcher: Could you tell me your experiences in this job?
>
> Participant: Well, I wasn't happy with certain people in the office from the start, with their attitudes to me.
>
> Researcher: In what way weren't you happy? What was it about their attitudes?
>
> Participant: Well to be blunt, I thought they were racist.
>
> Researcher: Could you give me any examples of things that were done or said?
>
> Participant: Yes, of course. I must have been there only a week when … (tells anecdote).

Being an effective semi-structured interviewer takes a degree of skill and expertise in knowing when to ‘probe’ for further information either at the time, or else by ‘storing’ the information and returning to the issue later in the interviewer. If you are new to research, giving the participant your full attention throughout the interview will maximise the chances of not letting these opportunities slip through the net. However, you should be wary of questioning your participant too much; Wellington advises that the interview's purpose is to ‘probe a respondent's views, perspectives or life history, that is, the exchange should be far more in one direction than another’ (2000: 73). If you feel you are doing more questioning or talking than the research participant, you

need to readdress the balance and ensure it is the participant's voice you are hearing.

Focus Groups

A focus group is a discussion usually involving 6–10 people lasting for one or two hours. This discussion is facilitated by a researcher who asks the group to discuss experiences and attitudes to a particular issue or to respond to specific questions. Focus groups are not simply a method of group interviewing as participants are encouraged to discuss and engage with each other rather than just with the researcher. As with other qualitative methods, focus groups are limited in terms of their ability to generalise findings to a whole population, mainly because of the small numbers of people participating and the likelihood that the participants will not be a representative sample (Gibbs, 1997).

Focus groups can be used for exploratory work at the beginning of a research project, as a method in their own right or as a complimentary approach to other methods (Gibbs, 1997). For example, you may wish to use a focus group to expand your knowledge and understanding of an issue, the findings would then inform the development of quantitative research tools, concepts for questionnaires or interview guides (Gibbs, 1997; Wellington, 2000). They may also be used to explore or generate hypotheses (Powell and Single, 1996).

Focus groups can be used to target specific sectors of society and participants may be selected because of certain characteristics, for example, living on a particular estate or being a member of a political party. In addition, focus groups are very useful for gaining insight into a group's shared understanding; as Cohen, Manion and Morrison note, within a focus group discussion ‘It is from the interaction of the group that the data emerge’ (2000: 288). Indeed, it is the conversations between participants that provide the most interesting data.

The advantages of focus groups are best illustrated by an example of researching the opinions of Bangladeshi women about local midwifery provision. Women from an area with a large proportion of Bangladeshi residents could be approached, the event could be held locally and benefit from the fact that it might be easier to recruit to an event where the women know they will be in company of their peers and as such, will not personally feel ‘put on the spot’ or under pressure. Additionally, if held in a ‘neutral’ environment it might also provide a ‘safe’ setting where women are away from the potentially inhibiting presence of health providers or other family members.

When conducting a focus group, the researcher has to avoid interrupting too often with further questions as this can interfere with the flow of the discussion. Bryman believes that ‘because the moderator has to relinquish a certain amount of control to the participants, the issues that concern them [the participants] can surface’ (2008: 475). This relinquishing of power, allows the group to introduce ideas that may not have been considered by the researcher. Once individuals find that other people have had a similar experience then this can precipitate a lively discussion. Indeed, focus groups ‘capitalise on communication between research participants’ (Kitzinger, 1995: 299). Thus, in our focus group of Bangladeshi women discussing midwifery provision, it is likely that if one woman relates her experience, it will inspire confidence in others to do so.

Participants may even disagree strongly about an issue and a debate will follow 'this process of arguing means that the researcher may end up with a more realistic account of what people think, because they are forced to think about and possibly revise their views' (Bryman, 2008: 475). Wellington concurs with this, noting that 'members of the group, brought together in a suitable conducive environment, can stimulate or "spark each other off" (2000: 125).

Of course, there are disadvantages to this approach and in some instances it will be necessary for the researcher to mediate between the different members of the group and to ensure that one or two people do not dominate the discussion while encouraging more reticent members to have an input (Flick, 2009). In this way, the researcher is then able to ensure that the views of the group are not submerged by the opinions of one or two vocal participants (see Chapter 9, for a discussion of engagement techniques). Conversely, the researcher must not intervene so often that the discussion becomes a question and answer session between the researcher and individual participants.

Another disadvantage of focus groups relates to disclosure of information. For example, participants in the focus group of Bangladeshi women might be inhibited because the individuals all come from a minority community where the women know each other. Consequently, some participants might feel reluctant to talk about sensitive issues in front of neighbours or other family members. If this is the case, private semi-structured or unstructured interviews might be more appropriate. In other cases, familiarity can improve the discussion; Cappuccini et al. (2005) found this to be the case when conducting focus groups with international students at higher education institutions to discuss their experience of the careers service.

Unstructured Interviews

Unstructured qualitative interviews do not rely on a list of questions that are set by the researcher; instead interviewees are free to tell their story in their own way and order, although possibly with guidance from the researcher. The interviewer may have a rough schedule of issues to be covered, but the interviewee has greater freedom and agency than with semi-structured interviews. The main advantage of the unstructured interview is that the researcher can gather information that (s)he had not thought of asking originally. Therefore, unstructured interviews are suited to exploring subjects with your participants when there is an initial lack of clarity about the type of information you are likely to find or exactly which questions are most appropriate. As such, these sorts of interviews are especially useful for life history or (auto) biographical accounts. Conversely, although there is scope for the researcher to gather information that (s)he had not hitherto thought of asking there is, similarly, the possibility of gathering a larger amount of irrelevant material (Arksey, 2004).

The unstructured interview is particularly valuable in ethnographic research (where you are exploring an issue in the research participant's lived environment, for example, their home, community or workplace). Conversations are likely to arise naturally, but the content may be pertinent to the overall research question and therefore the researcher will want to develop the line of enquiry further. This type of interview requires

the practitioner-researcher and the research participant to develop a rapport that enables discussion to flow easily and naturally (see Chapter 9, for more on rapport and engagement).

Participant Observation/Observation

Sometimes a researcher will wish to study a group or culture by immersing himself or herself in the day-to-day activities of the group. Known as participant observation, this can be open (discussed below) or covert. For example, James Patrick gained entry to a violent Glasgow gang and studied their behaviour by participating in the gang activities, which included drug taking and carrying weapons (Patrick, 1973). Covert research can raise many ethical issues, such as whether the researcher should become involved in criminal activities in order to continue the research and not risk 'blowing his/her cover' (Pearson, 2009: 245). There is also the impact the researcher has on the group if (s)he is seen as an additional member, conducting activities that become accepted due to the agreement of another willing participant. Tedlock (2000: 465) describes participant observation as an 'oxymoron' arguing against the idea that the simultaneous emotional involvement and objective detachment it implies is somehow feasible (for a fuller discussion of the 'researcher effect', see Chapter 9.) In addition, there are ethical issues around the deceit involved in this type of research as well as the influence the researcher, by virtue of their involvement in the group, has on the research participants (for further discussion on ethical issues, see Chapter 4).

Open observation is a more common approach, which can involve the researcher becoming directly involved in activities. For example, a researcher may choose to act as a carer in a nursing home, even though it is known to everybody that (s)he does this as research rather than as a practitioner, the researcher gets accepted and can gather information. Open observation could also rely purely on observing events in a detached and independent manner, for example, doctor and patient consultations whereby events are systematically recorded.

Open observation is regularly used by action researchers within school settings, where children's actions or behaviours are analysed. Observations can be quantitative (observing the number of times something occurs), as well as qualitative (looking at the detail such as temporal and spatial influences in what is happening). The researcher does not get involved in activities but remains unobtrusive:

> Direct observation as a research method is most appropriate to open, public settings where anyone has a right to be or congregate. Conducting direct observation in private or closed settings without the knowledge or consent of members is more likely to raise ethical concern. (Childcare Research Organization, 2009)

Diaries

The diary is a data gathering method that can be used to record people's lives and patterns of behaviour. It is a participant-led research method that requires subjects to record certain experiences or activities in their

own words or by answering structured questions. The diary can make use of a variety of technologies, such as pen and paper, audio or visual recordings and online questionnaires.

Diaries can be used in many research fields and are relatively common way of recording dietary and other behaviour patterns in contexts where research needs to capture the incidence of repetitive events. For example, diaries can be used to record and analyse the way in which subjects spend their time (how many hours watching television; how many individuals spoken to per day); to record their usage and experiences of public transport systems; or to identify associations between diet and, for example, the incidence of migraine attacks. Usually, diaries are content analysed and are sometimes used to triangulate other research findings. However, on their own research diaries completed by unsuper-vised participants cannot represent the whole context of the participants' experience.

Practitioner-researchers themselves may choose to keep another kind of diary, that records their own field notes, events or discussions that have occurred during the research process or that otherwise contribute to the topic of investigation. Although this kind of diary is a tool to facilitate qualitative research by recording thoughts and events that might otherwise be overlooked during the research process, it should not be seen as a data collection method (see Chapter 10, for more on researcher diaries).

The private diary or journal differs from the diaries outlined above as it is unsolicited and not written for the purpose of participation in research (Jones, 2000). Diaries of this nature deal with a multitude of everyday events, activities as well as personal thoughts and perceptions. As such, they provide fascinating, invaluable and unique accounts. For example, Jokinen studied the diaries of three women, one writing in the 1960s, one in the 1980s and one in the 1990s to examine how concepts of motherhood and mothering change over time (Jokinen, 2004). Examining documents such as these can be invaluable when contextualising an issue socially and politically.

Documentary Analysis

Documentary analysis is the systematic scrutiny of the content of documents to identify patterns of change or development on specific issues; content can be the language, tone or terminology used, and also non-textual issues such as layout styles and use of graphics. Such analysis, though largely a qualitative exercise, has a quantitative element. For example, by taking a series of party political manifesto statements over a time series (such as five general elections) and tracing the changing use of language and rhetoric, researchers can come to certain conclusions, for example, about how seriously the issue of teaching standards are being taken by various parties. Quantifying the content analysis, by counting the incidence of certain key words, measuring the length of statements (by word count) and recording the relative position of the section relating to teaching standards in manifestos offers another level of analysis.

Analysis of less directly comparable documents can also be useful in certain contexts, for example, noting the incidence of certain key terms in a variety of media can demonstrate a changing social context that may be important in specific cases. For example, if your research involves the changing perceptions of young people,

analysis of how the mass media report on anti-social behaviour may in fact reveal that perceptions have changed since the media began to use the term ‘ASBO’ (to mean those under anti-social behaviour orders) as a convenient shorthand for any ‘problem kids’. In this case content analysis can aid your understanding of the context of young people's lives. Chapter 10, on qualitative data analysis, offers a discussion of various software tools that can enable the analysis of large amounts of textual data.

Conclusion

Qualitative research is an interpretivist methodology that provides an excellent way of identifying in-depth information about a subject, especially concerning under-researched areas, sensitive topics or groups that are hard to reach. Although it can be cost-effective in terms of the cost of equipment, there can be huge costs in the form of people ‘resources’, especially with regard to transcription and data analysis.

Which qualitative method you choose not only depends on access, cost and time but should also consider the nature of the data required and the research questions you wish to answer (see Chapter 3). This chapter has covered the main qualitative techniques that will be of interest to the practitioner-researcher with the aim of providing a succinct overview of these approaches, how they can be used and their advantages and shortcomings. Chapters 9 and 10 will now provide you with further information about these methods, in particular how to undertake them in the field and how to analyse the data that they produce.

Further Reading

Cresswell, J.W. (**2007**) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. London: Sage.

Cresswell offers a useful introductory, yet informative, text which looks at narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study.

Flick, U. (**2009**) *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 4th edn.London: Sage.

This is a thorough introduction to the theory and practice of qualitative research, including design, fieldwork and analysis.

http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446268346.n8