**Qualitative Research Methods Overview**

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**Introduction to Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is a type of scientific research. In general terms, scientific research consists

of an investigation that:

• Sseeks answers to a question

• systematically uses a predefined set of procedures to answer the question

• collects evidence

• produces findings that were not determined in advance

• produces findings that are applicable beyond the immediate boundaries of the study

Qualitative research shares these characteristics. Additionally, it seeks to understand a given

research problem or topic from the perspectives of the local population it involves. Qualitative

research is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values,

opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of particular populations.

What can we learn from qualitative research?

The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex textual descriptions of how

people experience a given research issue. It provides information about the “human” side of an

issue that is, the often contradictory behaviors, beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships of

individuals. Qualitative methods are also effective in identifying intangible factors, such as social

norms, socioeconomic status, gender roles, ethnicity, and religion, whose role in the research issue may not be readily apparent.

When used along with quantitative methods, qualitative research can help us to interpret and better understand the complex reality of a given situation and the implications of quantitative data.

Although findings from qualitative data can often be extended to people with characteristics similar to those in the study population, gaining a rich and complex understanding of a specific social context or phenomenon typically takes precedence over eliciting data that can be generalized to other geographical areas or populations. In this sense, qualitative research differs slightly from scientific research in general.

**Qualitative research methods**

The three most common qualitative methods, explained in detail in their respective modules, are

participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups. Each method is particularly suited

for obtaining a specific type of data.

• Participant observation is appropriate for collecting data on naturally occurring behaviors in

their usual contexts.

• In-depth interviews are optimal for collecting data on individuals’ personal histories, perspectives, and experiences, particularly when sensitive topics are being explored.

• Focus groups are effective in eliciting data on the cultural norms of a group and in generating broad overviews of issues of concern to the cultural groups or subgroups represented.

**What forms do qualitative data take?**

The types of data these three methods generate are field notes, audio (and sometimes video)

recordings, and transcripts

What are the basic differences between quantitative and qualitative research

methods?

Quantitative and qualitative research methods differ primarily in:

• their analytical objectives

• the types of questions they pose

• the types of data collection instruments they use

• the forms of data they produce

• the degree of flexibility built into study desig

**Comparison of quantitative and qualitative research approaches**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **General framework** | Seek to confirm hypotheses about  Phenomena  Instruments use more rigid style  of eliciting and categorizing  responses to questions  Use highly structured methods  such as questionnaires, surveys,  and structured observation | Seek to explore phenomena  Instruments use more flexible,  iterative style of eliciting and  categorizing responses to questions  Use semi-structured methods such  as in-depth interviews, focus  groups, and participant observation |
| **Analytical objectives** | To quantify variation  To predict causal relationships  To describe characteristics of a  population | To describe variation  To describe and explain relationships  To describe individual experiences  To describe group norms |
| **Question format** | Closed-ended | Open-ended |
| **Data format** | Numerical (obtained by assigning  numerical values to responses) | Textual (obtained from audiotapes,  videotapes, and field notes) |
| **Flexibility in study design** | Study design is stable from  beginning to end  Participant responses do not  influence or determine how and  which questions researchers ask next  Study design is subject to  statistical assumptions and  conditions | Some aspects of the study are  flexible (for example, the addition,  exclusion, or wording of particular  interview questions)  Participant responses affect how  and which questions researchers  ask next  Study design is iterative, that is,  data collection and research  questions are adjusted according  to what is learned |

What are the advantages of qualitative methods for exploratory research?

One advantage of qualitative methods in exploratory research is that use of open-ended questions

and probing gives participants the opportunity to respond in their own words, rather than forcing

them to choose from fixed responses, as quantitative methods do. Open-ended questions have the

ability to evoke responses that are:

• meaningful and culturally salient to the participant

• unanticipated by the researcher

• rich and explanatory in nature

Another advantage of qualitative methods is that they allow the researcher the flexibility to probe

initial participant responses – that is, to ask why or how. The researcher must listen carefully to

what participants say, engage with them according to their individual personalities and styles,

and use “probes” to encourage them to elaborate on their answers. (See the modules on In-Depth

Interviews and Focus Groups).

**Sampling in Qualitative Research**

Even if it were possible, it is not necessary to collect data from everyone in a community in

order to get valid findings. In qualitative research, only a sample (that is, a subset) of a population is selected for any given study. The study’s research objectives and the characteristics of the

study population (such as size and diversity) determine which and how many people to select. In

this section, we briefly describe three of the most common sampling methods used in qualitative

research: purposive sampling, quota sampling, and snowball sampling. As data collectors, you

will not be responsible for selecting the sampling method. The explanations below are meant to

help you understand the reasons for using each method.

**Purposive sampling**

Purposive sampling, one of the most common sampling strategies, groups participants according

to preselected criteria relevant to a particular research question (for example, HIV-positive women

in Capital City). Sample sizes, which may or may not be fixed prior to data collection, depend on

the resources and time available, as well as the study’s objectives. Purposive sample sizes are

often determined on the basis of theoretical saturation (the point in data collection when new data

no longer bring additional insights to the research questions). Purposive sampling is therefore

most successful when data review and analysis are done in conjunction with data collection.

**Quota sampling**

Quota sampling, sometimes considered a type of purposive sampling, is also common. In quota

sampling, we decide while designing the study how many people with which characteristics to

include as participants. Characteristics might include age, place of residence, gender, class, profession, marital status, use of a particular contraceptive method, HIV status, etc. The criteria we

choose allow us to focus on people we think would be most likely to experience, know about, or

have insights into the research topic. Then we go into the community and – using recruitment

strategies appropriate to the location, culture, and study population – find people who fit these

criteria, until we meet the prescribed quotas. (See the section in this module on Recruitment in

Qualitative Research).

**Purposive and quota sampling difference**

Purposive and quota sampling are similar in that they both seek to identify participants based on

selected criteria. However, quota sampling is more specific with respect to sizes and proportions

of subsamples, with subgroups chosen to reflect corresponding proportions in the population. If,

for example, gender is a variable of interest in how people experience HIV infection, a quota

sample would seek an equal balance of HIV-positive men and HIV-positive women in a given

city, assuming a 1:1 gender ratio in the population. Studies employ purposive rather than quota

sampling when the number of participants is more of a target than a steadfast requirement – that

is, an approximate rather than a strict quota.

**Snowball sampling?**

A third type of sampling, snowballing – also known as chain referral sampling – is considered a type

of purposive sampling. In this method, participants or informants with whom contact has already

been made use their social networks to refer the researcher to other people who could potentially

participate in or contribute to the study. Snowball sampling is often used to find and recruit “hidden

populations,” that is, groups not easily accessible to researchers through other sampling strategies.

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