Qualitative Methods: An introduction to key concepts

Vanessa Traynor, Program Coordinator, UNSW Research Capacity Building Program
NSW PHC Research Methods Short Course 11-14 April 2007

Outline
- What is “qualitative research”
  - See the world through a qualitative lens
- Paradigms, theoretical traditions & design choice
  - Grounding method choice in theory and conceptual approach
- A selection of commonly used methods
  - Testing out techniques
- Basics of coding and analysis
- Writing & reviewing qualitative research

Designing Research
- Research Purposes - theoretical or applied?
- Research Problems - what questions are asked?
- Research Settings - simulated or natural?
- Research Investigators - background and training
- Research Methods - a continuum
  - Experimental, Ethnography, Case study, Survey

Design / Method Choice
- Linked to:
  - Purpose
  - Research question
  - Theoretical assumptions (paradigms)
- All of these influence question style
  - Which influences method choice
  - Different answer from different methods
- Qualitative explores meaning
  - cf. quantitative which relies on numbers / quantifies

Choice also influenced by…
- Practical issue
  - time, skills, resources (people & financial)
- Sources of data
  - would secondary data provide the information?
- Beliefs about the world and how it can be measured
- Paradigm affiliation

Different and apart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualitative</th>
<th>Quantitative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal</td>
<td>To understand (what, how, &amp; why)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment of Data</td>
<td>To predict &amp; control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant-Observation (fieldwork)</td>
<td>Empirical variables &amp; tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-depth Interviews</td>
<td>Hypotheses on data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Groups</td>
<td>Narrow lens (deductive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document Analysis</td>
<td>Measure &amp; evaluate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toolbox</td>
<td>Surveys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaires</td>
<td>Randomized controlled trials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systematic reviews/meta-analyses</td>
<td>Treats of Data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predicition</td>
<td>Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naturalistic, interpretive</td>
<td>Generalisability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarities &amp; contrasts</td>
<td>Controlled &amp; experimental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process &amp; context</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Quantitative Design

Philosophical influences
- Empiricism (into the world)
- Positivism (objective measurement)
- Rationalism (set of cause and effect relations)

Distinct process
- Read first (literature review)
- Get an idea (theoretical framework)
- Go out (methods)
- Test it (results)
- See if you were right in the first place (discussion)

Qualitative Design

Philosophical influences
- Symbolic interaction / social constructivism (the way people interpret the world / how meaning is made)
- Phenomenology (insider’s point of view)
- Empiricism (into the natural world)

Distinct process
- Read first (literature review - perhaps)
- Gain insights (participate, listen, observe, record)
- Describe theoretical implications of what you saw/heard (discussion)
- Explain (how you went about your task of understanding)

The qualitative researcher is interested in illumination and understanding NOT causal determination or prediction.

Purpose
- Why do people do the things they do?
- What makes an organisation functional or dysfunctional?
- What effects behaviour, systems and relationships over time?

Context
- Able to interpret people’s behaviours, opinions and interactions within the context of their natural environment (home/ workplace/pub)
- Helps us to make the link between what people say they do and what they actually do
Meaning

- Phenomena have meaning in a context and their meaning differs in different contexts.
- Helps us capture the ways in which people interpret events, experiences and relationships (lived experiences).

Definitions

- Findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or quantification (Source: Strauss and Corbin 1990)
- … qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomenon in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (Source: Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.3)

Why qualitative approaches?

“Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts” (Albert Einstein)

Qualitative approaches help us to…

- Better understand phenomenon and gain new perspectives
- Collect and explore in-depth information that can’t be conveyed quantitatively
- Provide rich descriptions of complex phenomena
- Explore sensitive topics
- Explore the issues of difficult to access groups / subcultures
- Explore culturally defined experiences
- Track unique / unexpected events
- Illuminate experience and interpretation by actors
- Gives voice to those rarely heard
  - Narrative
  - Action research

Prominent Characteristics

- “Naturalistic” with “empathic neutrality”
- Researcher as “human instrument”
- “Inductive” data analysis
- Descriptive reports “presence of voice”
- Special criteria for trustworthiness
  - Rigor

Strategic Ideals

- Interpretivist commitment: the social world as understood, experienced and produced
- Commitment to methods that are flexible and sensitive to the complexities of ‘real life’, rather than the use of rigid frameworks or standardised measuring instruments
  - Centrality of the atypical and the pervasive
  - Search for detailed and rounded understanding of complexity and interaction
- Emergent design (not predetermined)
  - Assumptions:
    - Not possible nor appropriate to finalize R strategies before data collection
    - Qualitative proposals establish a boundary where primary questions to be explored and data collection strategies might be specified
You can use qualitative methods

- Alone
- Complementary (mixed method)
- In sequence
- In tandem

Qualitative Method Criticisms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criticism</th>
<th>Solution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not replicable</td>
<td>Different ways to address validity/reliability. (Systematic/rigorous/focus on ‘value’).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can’t generalize</td>
<td>Different purpose. Explain purpose (meaning/interpretation). Can via theory. Theoretical verification.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The world through a different lens

- Researchers approach the task of research differently depending on their world view

Paradigms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positivism / Post Positivism</th>
<th>Critical Theory / Social Constructivism</th>
<th>Post-structuralism / Post-modernism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objective measurable reality Value-free, one way mirror Generalise to the population</td>
<td>Emancipation of disempowered. Social change. Uncover hidden assumptions. Passionate participant transformative intellectual</td>
<td>Many discourses. No one truths – multiple stories.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Realism / post positivism

- Imperfectly apprehendable reality
- Open window which needs triangulation of observations
- ‘Confirmatory’ theory building with focus groups or interviews and/or theory testing with SEM

Paradigms draw upon Different Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Randomised controlled trials</th>
<th>Quasi-experiments</th>
<th>Grounded theory</th>
<th>Focus groups</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Narratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positivism / Post Positivism</td>
<td>Social Constructivism / Postmodernism</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Quantitative/Qualitative</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In medicine the dominant world view is strongly based in a rationalist tradition. So in approaching the world qualitatively we need to shake this off and put on a new hat…

Theoretical Traditions

Ethnography
- A picture of the "way of life" of some identifiable group of people
- Anthropology
  - "doing fieldwork"
  - "going native"
- Preoccupied with culture, and how people interact with each other
- Both a research process and a product
  - Method
    - Direct observation
    - Participant observation
    - Unstructured Interview

Ethnographic Process
- The ethnographer is the primary research instrument
- One year or more in the field setting
  - long enough to see a full cycle of activity
  - For example, a full school year
- Tension and balance between involvement and detachment
  - Outsider's broad and analytical perspective on group studied
  - Insider view, familiarity, empathy, identification with group

Phenomenology
- Analysis /description of everyday life
  - LIFE-WORLD
  - Their experience
  - 'Bracketing' off judgments about social structure
- Method
  - Interview

Symbolic Interactionism
- Making sense of experience via symbols
  - Symbols find meaning through and in interaction
  - Role taking
  - Social relationships shape self concept
  - Grounded theory
- Method
  - Semiotic analysis
  - Interviews
  - Dramaturgical
Grounded theory

- Inductive approach
- Concepts are basic units of analysis
- Concepts grouped and related to form abstract categories
- Relationships between categories identified to develop "formal theory"
- Theory building
  - concepts, categories, themes are identified and developed during the study
- Methods
  - Interview
  - Constant comparison
  - Theoretical sampling

Post structuralism

- Deconstruction
- Texts
- Method
  - Discourse analysis

Post Modernism

- Avoid grand narratives
  - Grand theory / reductionist
  - Show complexity
- Method
  - Interviews
  - Narrative

No Theoretical Tradition

- ... growth in the number of qualitative studies that have no guiding set of philosophic assumptions in the form of one of the established qualitative methodologies. This ... presents many challenges for "generic qualitative" studies, (including) ... how to do a generic study well.


- Four basic requirements:
  - note researchers' position
  - distinguishing method and methodology
  - make explicit the approach to rigor
  - identify the researchers' analytic lens

Types of qualitative methods

- Obtrusive
  - Semi structured interviews
  - In-depth interviews
  - Focus Group Discussions
  - Ethnography
  - Participatory Action Research
  - Narrative and Life History
  - Participant observation

- Unobtrusive methods
  - Simple observation
  - Document analysis (written records)
  - Audio-visual
  - Text analysis / Discourse analysis
  - Material culture
  - Auto-ethnography (object, subject and researcher)
Observation

- Most intuitive method
- Continuum of observation
- The natural world
  - Empirical
- Impact of the researcher
- In the field
  - Note taking
- Reflective stance
  - Question assumptions

Observation Continuum

Covert
Overt
Complete Observer Observer as Participant as Participant Complete Observer Complete Participant

- Data recording will be influenced by type of observation
- Video or note taking
- Overt or covert note taking

Purposeful Sampling

(Information rich cases)

- Maximum variation (wide case variation)
- Extreme (deviant) case
- Homogenous group
- Typical case
- Critical case
- Criterion
- Confirming / disconfirming

- Stratified purposive
- Snowball (chain)
- Opportunistic
- Convenience
- Volunteer
- Triangulated
- Theoretical (grounded theory)

In summary, qualitative research should...

- Be systematic, rigorous and planned
- Be strategically conducted, yet flexible and contextual
- Involve critical self-scrutiny (active reflexivity)
- Produce explanations
- Produce social explanations which are somewhat generalizable
- Not be seen as a unified body

Key readings


Journals

- Qualitative Health Research
- International Journal of Qualitative Methods
- The Qualitative Report
- Qualitative Research Journal
- Forum: Qualitative Social Research
Resources on the web

- Trent Research and Development Unit (TRIAGE)
  http://www.trentrsu.org.uk/triage.html
- The Qualitative Report
  http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/
- Qualitative Research Web Ring
  http://kerlims.net/bobbi/research/qualresearch.
- Center for Qualitative Research
  www.bournemouth.ac.uk/ihcs/?researchCQRindex.html
- Association for Qualitative Research
  http://www.latrobe.edu.au/aqr/
- QSR International
  http://www.qsr.com.au
- The Forum for Qualitative Research
  http://qualitative-research.net/fqs