



THE STUDY OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

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Abstract

Qualitative research is a type of scientific research. In general terms, scientific research consists of an investigation that : seeks 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.

Keywords: *Research, Qualitative Research, Levels of Design.*



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Introduction :

A common feature of qualitative research is that they aim to create understanding from data as the analysis proceeds. This means that the research design of a qualitative study differs from that of a study that starts with an understanding to be tested, where often the hypothesis literally dictates the form, quantity, and scope of required data. This sort of design preempts other ways of looking at the research question. Qualitative research is usually not preemptive. Whatever the study and whatever the method, the indications of form, quantity, and scope must be obtained from the question, from the chosen method, from the selected topic and goals, and also, in an ongoing process, from the data. Thus research design is both challenging and essential, yet it is the least discussed and least adequately critiqued component of many qualitative projects. Freedom from a preemptive research design should never be seen as release from a requirement to have a research design. We established how a research purpose points to a research question and how the question informs the choice of method. But these choices do not remove the task of designing a qualitative project. Therefore we start looking first at the levels of design and then at the goals of designing to specify the ultimate scope of a research and the type of data required. We end with practical advice on how you can tackle the ongoing tasks of designing your research so that you

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develop a research topic into a researchable question; we discuss the different levels and ways of planning, and the pacing of the research as a whole.

The Levels of Design :

Research design is created by the researcher, is molded (rather than dictated) by the method, and is responsive to the context and the participants. Creating research design involves seeing the project at different levels. Once you have located your project methodologically, you need to design the pacing of processes and strategies to be used, and at the same time you need to see the project as a whole. The pacing of the project involves planning the sequencing of its components and the movement between data gathering and data analysis. This requires ongoing decisions during the research: When should you stop interviewing? When do you return to observing—as processes of analysis show that more data are needed to verify, or when thin areas in analysis are revealed? The selection of method informs selection of research strategies, but these are also chosen in the context of the research question (i.e., what you want to find out) and the research context. For example, in studying the experience of menopause in a Newfoundland village, Davis (1983) relied on interviews rather than observational data. Richards, Seibold, and Davis (1997) were investigating the social construction of menopause, so they used observation of women's support groups and information centers as well as many forms of interview. The overall design of the project must be aimed at answering your research question, and we look at detailed examples of design below. You need to design a project that both fits and is obtained from the question, the chosen method, the selected topic, and the research goals. You should treat research design as a problem to be considered carefully at the beginning of the study and reconsidered throughout—it is never a given.

Planning Design :

Where to start? If the questions, problem, and method are to guide design, then this becomes a highly conceptual and complex process. It is helpful to start with two questions: What is the scope of this project? and What is the nature of the data required?

The Scope :

By scope, we refer to the domain of inquiry, the coverage and reach of the project. Scope involves both the substantive area of inquiry (the limits of the research topic) and the areas to be researched. Definitions of the topic and the relevant concepts and theories as perceived by other investigators in part delimit the area of inquiry. Consideration of the scope

of the study continues in the process of gathering and analyzing data. You must work carefully and in depth, without losing sight of the research goals; remain flexible, self-critical, and, at all times, analytic; and use the literature as a comparative template. Coding decisions demand that you constantly ask: “Is this an instance of this category, or is it something different?” During the project, you must continually revisit the substantive scope of inquiry. If the data do not fit the question, analysis is likely to lack clear focus; the project may take too long to saturate and conceptualize and so, frustratingly, may achieve very little. On the other hand, if the scope is set too rigidly too early, the study will be severely limited. Avoid preemptively committing your study to definitions of the phenomenon of interest and concepts from the literature, thereby predetermining meanings of concepts; avoid making decisions too early in the study and drawing conclusions too quickly. Such preemptive scoping will result in premature closure.

The scope of the sample and the selection of the setting are driven by two principles. One is that setting and sample are purposively selected. This may involve choosing the ‘best,’ most optimal example of the phenomenon and the setting in which you are most likely to see whatever it is you are interested in. It may involve observing or interviewing experts in that particular topic or experience. Alternatively, you may select a setting because it allows you to obtain examples of each of several stances or experiences. The study may proceed by snowball sampling .

The second principle of sampling is that once you have begun to understand whatever it is you are studying, your sampling strategies normally are extended through theoretical sampling (Glaser, 1978). This means that your selection of participants is directed by the emerging analysis, and the theory being developed from data is subsequently modified by data obtained from the next participants. The scope of a study is never just a question of how many, but always includes who, where, and which settings will be studied; in what ways, by whom, and for how long they will be studied; and what can be asked and answered. All of these questions must be asked repeatedly as the project progresses. The research question may require that you seek out negative cases (examples of experiences that are contrary to cases that support the emerging theory, and that provide new dimensions, perhaps as indicated by the theory but not yet encountered) or thin areas from participants who have experienced special conditions that have been identified as significant. The scope of a research is bigger than its sample, for participants provide information about others like them

or unlike them. Such ‘shadowed data’ (Morse, 2001) provide you with further direction for your theoretical sampling. When sampling, you must be aware of when you are working inductively and discovering and when you are working deductively and verifying. The interrelationship of the two components of scope becomes clear during the processes of data gathering and analysis. You need to ask constantly, ‘What scale of data and what range of settings and sources of data will give the strands required for this question, this topic, this method, this audience, this disciplinary or political context?’ Asking and answering these questions about the project will help you to locate it, to establish the bounds of the question to be addressed and the goals to be rethought and realistically revised.

Designing the Scope :

Scoping is an ongoing process in a research. It is rare for a qualitative researcher to set a scope and stick to it. Adjustments to the mode of making data are frequently required so that the project can be data driven. But this does not mean that such changes can ‘just happen.’ Changes ideally build upon the researcher’s growing understanding of the situation. We recommend that you always keep in mind the following issues regarding scoping: The substantive scope of a project involves issues of comparison and intervention. How many perspectives are needed? It is hard, for example, to study relationships only by observing interaction. If your question is about the relations between management and staff, you need to observe, if possible, but you must interpret your observations strictly in terms of your presence. You will also need other data sources; you need to talk to the managers and the staff, and you should examine relevant documents. These data sources will provide conflicting information—and you as the researcher have to make sense of the contradictions. Scoping for change involves asking if this is a study of a process (most qualitative studies are) and, if so, what time period it involves. Beware of studying a process with static data. One-off interviews, for example, will give interviewees’ accounts, or the versions they see as appropriate in the interview situation, of what happened in the past. Is this the process and are these the perceptions you need? Scoping for diversity involves examining the sample, asking questions like ‘Is the research question comparative? If so, how do I achieve an adequate comparative base?’ As you come to understand gender, race, or class divisions, new issues of scope will emerge. Scoping for diversity involves considering the scale of the research question. It requires attention to representation. It also requires attention to the areas to be covered. As you reevaluate each of these issues, the answers will shift in response to your

discovering, theorizing, and constructing theory. Scoping the project almost always shifts the question in the interplay between what can realistically be asked and what can properly be discovered. The process moves the question from a research question to a researchable one.

The Nature of the Data :

How will you create data, and how will you ensure a fit of data to the research task? These are different questions. They require you to explore the possible ways of constructing data within a setting and to select methods that will combine to ensure that the data will be sufficiently rich, complex, and contextual to address the question and support the required analysis. Thus, rather than preparing a research instrument for use throughout the project, in undertaking the design of a qualitative study, you need to consider carefully the variety of approaches available and the sorts of data they generate. Predesigned research instruments may be useful for some tasks. But because the goals of the project include learning inductively from the data, instruments designed entirely in advance will rarely support an entire project. You should expect that an interesting research question will usually require several strategies for making data. Relying on one technique may produce homogeneous data, which are highly unlikely to provide enough sources of understanding and ways of looking at a situation or a problem. Commitment to one sort of data makes the techniques of theoretical sampling very difficult to follow, so you need to resist the easy route of selecting one technique and building in the assumption that you will do focus groups or do in-depth interviews. Keep asking, Why would this one way of making data suffice to answer my question? We share a concern with other scholars regarding the increasing homogeneity of data in qualitative projects as the dominant mode of uniform, as 'in-depth' interviews take over from the previous speckled diversity of qualitative data. Our advice is that you not look first for a technique of making data with which you are familiar or that you have been trained to do, but rather ask how, in this situation, you can best access accounts of behavior and experience, best weigh the different versions of 'reality,' and best interpret them. You should expect that the nature of the data will change during your project. The importance of knowing a budget and timeline can easily overtake the requirement of growing a project informed by the data. Starting with the assumption that they are 'doing interviews,' researchers are easily led to see as the only relevant question the issue of how many respondents they should 'do.' Even the most expert researchers cannot answer the sample size question without involvement in the project. What constitutes a large enough sample will be determined in the

future by the situation studied and the quality of data. But the fact that the question is asked should alert you to its corollary: ‘What else could or should I be doing to create a strong and rich data set?’ Focus on the end, not only on the beginning, of the project, and particularly on the claims to be made. Try to foresee the adequacy of likely results. Ask your self about your own ability to create the data. Try also to foresee limitations. At this earliest stage, it is helpful to think backward from possible outcomes. What sort of a study of this issue would be convincing? What ground do you want to be able to claim? Who do you want to persuade and how would they be persuaded? How will you know, at that wonderful final stage of reporting, if you were wrong?

Doing Design :

We have emphasized the importance of allowing the questions, problem, and method to inform the scope of the project and nature of the data, and also the importance of the researcher’s actively designing and controlling the project. How do you do both? A good place to start is to read other studies critically. What is it about particular studies and their designs that convinces you. Do those authors persuade you that they were not wrong? The qualitative studies that you find exciting are likely to be convincing because the projects had the scope of design and the nature of data necessary to answer the research questions with the methods chosen. Unconvincing projects are those in which the researchers try to make claims where there is no justification or try to stretch thin data beyond their capacity to hold an argument. If the task of starting is daunting, we recommend that you approach it by taking the five steps outlined below. As you prepare your proposal, you will find it helpful to keep an account of these steps and your thinking as you proceed, and of the puzzles that confront you and the ideas that occur. Many researchers commence their projects with proposals that avoid critical questions, which also often means that they avoid design—a very problematic stance.

Step 1: Establishing purpose.

What are you asking?

Why are you asking it?

Who has asked it or something like it before, and how and why did those studies not satisfy your curiosity?

What are you doing that adds to what they did?

What is your intent? What do you want to come out of this? What do you know, and what advantage and disadvantage is this?

Step 2: Methodological location.

What is the appropriate fit of qualitative method to this question and topic? Never start with the method and then seek a topic. Does the method point you in the direction of research design? Particular methods usually require certain sorts of data—what sorts of data are you going to need to do your project this way? .

Step 3: Scoping.

Now move on to the task of defining the scope of your project. What is it that you want to make statements about?

Do you know enough about the field to determine who you should sample? If not, build in preparatory fieldwork—this is *not a pilot* but a stage in itself.

Do you know enough about the issues?

If not, build in preparatory identification of them. Are you comparing anything?

If so, design for comparison. Are you intervening?

If so, how, and are you planning for this?

Step 4: Planning the nature of your data.

What sorts of data will be relevant?

What sorts are available?

How, and in what order, will they be combined?

Are you able to handle those sorts of data?

The design should include your data-handling methods and the ways you will use software.

Step 5: Thinking ahead. How satisfying will this study be?

How robust?

Why should it be believed?

How will you know if you were wrong?

Present your proposal to skeptical audiences and become a skeptic yourself. The goal is to start your study knowing that it will be convincing at the end.

Designing for Validity :

Validity is a term too often avoided in qualitative research, because it is mistakenly seen as an indicator of attitudes to analysis or to interpretation that do not fit with qualitative methods. In the literature of every method you will find debate about the term's possible meanings in qualitative research, and sometimes alerts about "the crisis of validity or complex suggestions about specially 'qualitative' terminology. As you prepare your research

design, it is important to be aware of how the issues are considered in your chosen method. However, it is also important to ensure that you are designing a project whose outcome will be appropriate and fully justifiable, as properly based in the data. This is the commonsense and dictionary meaning of ‘validity’: a valid assertion is ‘well founded and applicable; sound and to the point; against which no objection can fairly be brought’ (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, in Richards, 2005, p. 139).

Two general rules guide research design for validity in all qualitative projects. The first is the theme of this book: Pay attention always to the fit of question, data, and method. This will ensure that the data are appropriate and appropriately handled and the question addressed fully and responsibly. From this requirement, it may follow that you should set up specific ways of checking how the data and method are performing. For example, it may assist a team project to check the reliability of coding. However, those checks should always be designed and carried out consistently with the method (Richards, 2005, pp. 139–144). The second general rule is to ensure that you can properly account for each step in your analysis. All qualitative projects get their claim to being trustworthy from the ability of the researcher to account for the outcome (Maxwell, 1992). From this requirement, it follows that from the design stage, you should set up processes by which you can log each significant decision and the interpretation of each discovery. To do this as you work will be very important. Remember that qualitative analysis builds theory out of the data, one interpretation providing the platform for another enquiry. Your log of that journey will be the prime source of your justification of where you arrived and what you discovered (Richards, 2005, pp. 22–26). At the research design stage, consider what your research design needs now to ensure that your conclusions will be regarded as sound and well founded.

Research Pacing :

What does a good design look like? The sort of evolving design described above will be less tidy than one for a survey research, where properly collecting data is the first stage, followed in turn by coding and analyzing. A qualitative research design is more like a journey in which each of the stages builds on previous experiences. Planning flexibly for these stages helps you to confront the work that is often not factored into a design, to budget time and money, and to distribute workloads and manage relationships with your significant others. One of the interesting results of planning this way is that you discover that no stage ends

neatly so another can begin. Whether or not you are required to make a formal proposal with timelines, it is worthwhile to draw up a schedule that includes the five stages.

Conceptualizing Stage :

Plan and budget for careful thinking through of the research, the literature review, and critiques of other studies. Plan to do this early—and keep doing it. You will need to continue to read and critique the literature throughout the study as new relevancies appear and new studies emerge. Handle the literature review data as data—using the data-handling method you intend to use later for the interviews or field notes.

Entering the Field :

Treat entering the field as research work: Prepare and budget for it. Your field may be a location (such as a school), or it may be entering a topic . In many disciplines, the emphasis is on making data through direct, obtrusive methods such as interviews or focus groups, where researchers are deprived of the insights of ethnography. If you do not know the literature on field research, explore it now. It will alert you to the observer’s task of preparing for, gaining entry to, and becoming accepted in a setting. If you are working in a familiar area, be especially careful. A useful mind-set is to regard your self as reentering the field as an observer.

Assume that the advantage of understanding problems and perspectives is at least partly balanced by the disadvantage of the insider’s taken for-granted assumptions, commitments, labels, and ways of seeing. If you are studying a familiar topic (a problem or group you know) by more obtrusive methods, such as interviews, be particularly cautious on entering the field. When you spend only a couple of hours with an interviewee, your assumptions can go unchallenged. Setting Up and Managing a Data Management System For obvious reasons, any research design must include the ways in which you intend to handle data. We hope that by now it is clear that selection of a data-handling system must be done very carefully: The system you choose must be tailored to the task and adequate to the scope of the project and the varieties of data and analysis expected. (The literature is often silent on this essential stage, but for exceptions, see Dey, 1995; Lofland & Lofland, 1995.) You need to plan for the data-handling system you will use from the beginning of the research; you must be sure that you are familiar with it and that it is working from the start..Your research design should allow for the time you will need to develop a system that works for you and for the time it will take for you to learn any skills, particularly computer skills, that the project

will require. Now is the time to learn the software skills that you will need throughout the project. You should at this stage make decisions about the software you will use, learn to use it competently, and become familiar with the range of processes it will support. Then, as soon as possible, you should start using it. To delay working with your software risks serious disadvantage. If material piles up on paper, waiting to be entered on your computer, the workload of managing your data will grow, as will your anxiety about being able to handle your data. To bring the early material immediately into the computer will give you confidence, time to learn software techniques, and the ability to integrate research design materials with the data records you will soon start to create. This chapter, and each of the next three, concludes with a section on software tools relevant to the chapter's content. Sampling and Theoretical Sampling Allow time in your design for the process of locating and evaluating the ways you can sample the studied area. This can be very demanding; never assume a sample is waiting for you like apples to be plucked from a tree. Analysis Any research design must allow for the cognitive processes of research.

Conclusion :

Qualitative research adopts a holistic perspective in which units of analysis are particular kinds of events, occurrences, incidents, institutions and so on. Conclusions are drawn about some events on the whole in which group comparisons have no meaning as is done in quantitative research. Qualitative inquiry typically focuses in depth on relatively small samples-even single cases (may be one child, one institution or one event) which are selected purposefully. These cases are information rich cases from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance. The variety, meaning-fulness, insights generated from qualitative inquiry depends more on the information richness of the cases selected and the observational and analytical capabilities of the researcher than with the sample size, etc. as is the case with the quantitative research.

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