Qualitative Research

What is qualitative research?

Qualitative Research is collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data by observing what people do and say. It emphasizes the quality of meaning in consumer perceptions and attitudes; for example, in-depth interviews and focus groups.

The purpose/significance of the study

The researcher should explain why the needs to be undertaken and what he/she expect to accomplish from it. The researcher should also state why the study will be of significance and how it will add to the general body of information on the phenomenon. The researcher should also justify the use of a qualitative approach and the qualitative methodology to be used.

Literature Review

The function of a literature review in research studies is to provide an objective account of what has been written on a given subject. Qualitative research follows the naturalistic paradigm based on the assumption that multiple realities exist and such realities are constructed by the research participants.

Research question

In qualitative research, a research question that reflects the identified phenomenon of interest is used to direct the course of the research. A research hypothesis is never used in qualitative research, unlike quantitative research. Depending on the qualitative approach adopted, the research question may be modified as new data bring new direction to the phenomenon of interest.

Theoretical framework

A theoretical framework is a collection of interrelated concepts, like a theory but not necessarily so well worked-out. A theoretical framework guides your research, determining what things you will measure, and what statistical relationships you will look for.

Cases and variables

Cases are objects whose behavior or characteristics we study. Usually, the cases are persons. But they can also be groups, departments, organizations, etc. They can also be more esoteric things like events (e.g., meetings), utterances, pairs of people, etc.

Variables are characteristics of cases that we measure and record. They are attributes. For example, if the cases are persons, the variables could be sex, age, height, weight, feeling of empowerment, math
ability, etc. Variables are called what they are because it is assumed that the cases will vary in their scores on these attributes. For example, if the variable is age, we obviously recognize that people can be different ages. Of course, sometimes, for a given sample of people, there might not be any variation on some attribute. For example, the variable 'number of children' might be zero for all members of this class. It's still a variable, though, because in principle it could have variation.

In any particular study, variables can play different roles. Two key roles are independent variables and dependent variables. Usually there is only one dependent variable, and it is the outcome variable, the one you are trying to predict. Variation in the dependent variable is what you are trying to explain. For example, if we do a study to determine why some people are more satisfied in their jobs than others, job satisfaction is the dependent variable.

**Independent and dependent variables**

**Independent Variable:**

An independent variable is the variable you have control over, what you can choose and manipulate. It is usually what you think will affect the dependent variable. In some cases, you may not be able to manipulate the independent variable. It may be something that is already there and is fixed, something you would like to evaluate with respect to how it affects something else, the dependent variable like color, kind, time.

Example: You are interested in how stress affects heart rate in humans. Your independent variable would be the stress and the dependent variable would be the heart rate. You can directly manipulate stress levels in your human subjects and measure how those stress levels change heart rate.

**Dependent Variable:**

A dependent variable is what you measure in the experiment and what is affected during the experiment. The dependent variable responds to the independent variable. It is called dependent because it "depends" on the independent variable. In a scientific experiment, you cannot have a dependent variable without an independent variable.

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**Sampling**

In qualitative research, participants are usually recruited to a study because of their exposure to a study because of their exposure to or their experience of the phenomenon in question.
This type of sample tends to ensure richness in the data gathered and is known as purposive or purposeful sampling.

**Ethical Considerations**

In qualitative research the most common tools used for data collection are interview and participant observation. The participants are therefore known to the researcher and anonymity is not possible. The researcher must therefore assure participants that their identities will not be revealed to the reader and the raw data collected will not be released to any third party. Both interviews and observations in qualitative research can give rise to ethical dilemmas. Participants should always have the right to give informed consent regarding their participation in any research study. In order to do this, participants should be fully aware of the purpose of the study, what sort of information is being sought how it will be used and the implications for them as contributors to the research.

**Data Collection**

In a qualitative study any number of strategies can be adopted when collecting data, including non-numerical questionnaires with open-ended questions, interviews (semi-structured and unstructured), participant observation, written text such as diaries or emails, historical or contemporary documents. The researcher should outline the rationale for the chosen method of data collection and offer sufficient information of the process.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis is undertaken is fundamental to determining the credibility of the findings. Essentially it involves the transformation of raw data into a final description, narrative, or themes and categories. The researcher should demonstrate an understanding of concurrent data collection and analysis, the processes of organizing and retrieving data as well as the steps in coding and thematic analysis. If verification strategies such as an expert panel or member checking (verifying with participants). Several computer assisted packages are available to assist the qualitative research during analysis, e.g. Ethnograph (http://www.qualisresearch.com), Nvivo (http://www.qsrinternational.com), Xsight (http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_xsight.aspx), and ATLAS.ti (http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_xsight.aspx).

**Rigour (trustworthiness)**

Rigour is the means of demonstrating the plausibility, crediability and integrity of the qualitative research process. The rigor, or trustworthiness, of a study may be established if the reader is able to audit the actions and developments of the researcher. Rigour in documentation ensures there is a correlation between the steps of the research process and the study in question, commencing with the phenomenon of interest and following through to the recommendations and implications for practice.
Findings and discussion

Findings from qualitative studies can be represented as a narrative (story), themes, description of the phenomenon under study or an interpretive account of the understanding or meaning of an experience. Regardless of how the final outcome is presented, the researcher should discuss findings in the context of what is already known. For many this will involve further literature review related to the final outcome. The reviewer should be aware of exaggerated claims as to the significance of the research.