

Research Skills

Module 8

Qualitative research methods

This resource is freely provided for teaching and learning purposes and cannot be on-sold or used for commercial purposes (original authors of cited sources exempted).

© Natasha Radcliffe 2018
Registered Nutritionist (NSA)
Registered Teacher (SA TRB)

Qualitative research methods include:

Focus groups (*a group of people assembled to participate in a discussion about a product or issue/topic*)

Interviews (*a conversation where questions are asked and answers are given*)

Recording behaviour (*writing down what occurs, usually monitoring for previously specified behaviours/actions and documenting the number of times they occur*)

Unstructured observation (*watching what people/animals/plants do*)

Qualitative research methods

Qualitative methods

The method selected depends on:

- Research issue or question;
- Approach (tradition);
- Type of information required;
- Time frame; and
- Resources available.

Commonly used methods for obtaining qualitative data

- Focus groups and group interviews;
- One-on-one interviews (structured, semi-structured and unstructured);
- Participant observation;
- Documentary sources such as reports, texts and journal articles;
- Written material such as files, diaries and journals;
- Pictorial sources eg. photographs and drawings;
- Concept mapping and visualization exercises.

Focus groups

The interviewer usually asks a series of open-ended questions and encourages participants to explore the issues in their own words pursuing their own questions and priorities.

One-on-one interviews

Structured: Questions asked in a standardized manner. Data can sometimes be used quantitatively.

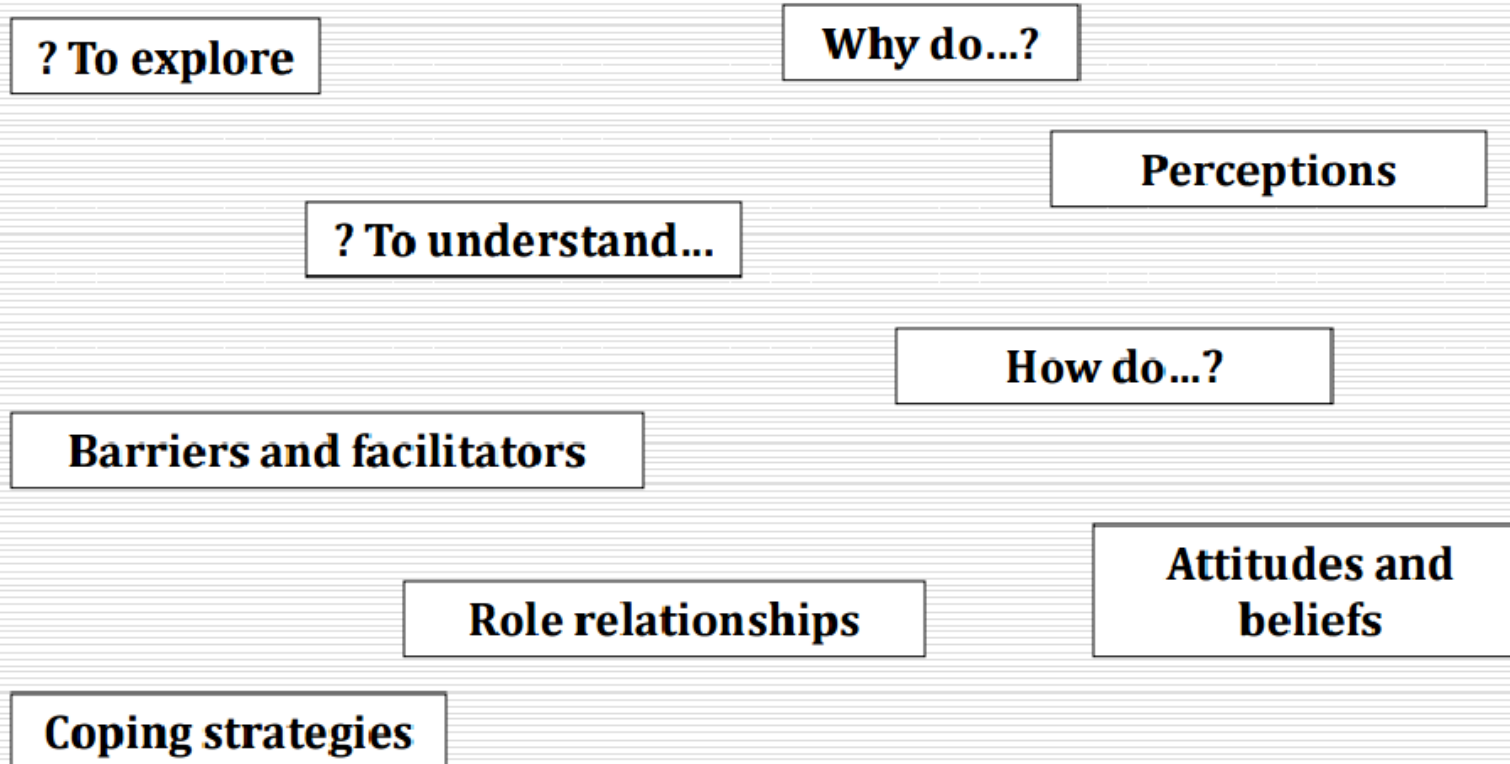
Semi-structured: A series of open-ended questions that define the area of interest

Unstructured (in-depth): Fewer issues covered in greater detail. Interview might begin with a single open-ended question e.g. "Can you tell me about...?"

Observation

Often used for studies of social roles and formal organizations. People are studied in their natural environment with minimal interference from the researcher.

Qualitative Research Questions



Source: Samsi, K. Critical Appraisal of Qualitative Research. Available from:
<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/policy-institute/scwru/pubs/2012/conf/samsi26jul12.pdf>

Qualitative research designs

	Ethnography	Grounded theory	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis	Discourse analysis	Content Analysis	Framework analysis
Aim & Research Question	Immersion in natural setting to gain insider experience; <i>e.g.</i> service evaluations, uptake of medications	To generate theory from empirical data; <i>e.g.</i> stigma in mental health; beliefs and perceptions of mental in different ethnic groups	To understand individual in-depth experience; <i>e.g.</i> lived experience of coping with dementia	To capture nuances of text or public discourse; <i>e.g.</i> understanding political theory, social change, cultural contexts	To capture the meaning at descriptive level; <i>e.g.</i> why do carers access services for their relatives with anorexia?	Mainly used for "problem-oriented" methods in health services research; <i>e.g.</i> what are the training needs for primary care staff?
Sampling & Methods	Observational studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Range of perspectives and stay true to research question; unstructured questionnaire •Theoretical sampling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Homogenous sample and stay true to participants' stories; unstructured questionnaire •Purposeful sampling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Documents, speeches, newspapers, mass media •Purposeful/Theoretical sampling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Documents, <i>e.g.</i> newspapers, mass media •Purposeful/Convenience sampling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Interviews with semi-structured questionnaire •Purposeful/Convenience sampling
Analysis	Data-driven; but no fixed commitment to developing new theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Data-driven •Constant comparison and iterative approach 	Identification of descriptive and interpretative themes, that actively engages the researcher and participants	Detailed, thorough analysis of discourses – speeches, conversations, written text	Deductive approach as categories are identified in advance; involves counting of frequencies, <i>i.e.</i> number of times a topic arises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Theory driven •Deductive approach starting with questions on interview topic guide
Researcher's position	R's skill and neutral position vital	R's position or potential 'bias' is managed	R's position is paramount; importance of reflexivity	High level of interpretation or abstraction expected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •R's position neutral •Inter-rater reliability often calculated 	Neutral position of researcher; limited interpretation

Source: Samsi, K. Critical Appraisal of Qualitative Research. Available from:
<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/policy-institute/scwru/pubs/2012/conf/samsi26jul12.pdf>

Qualitative data analysis

Some qualitative research traditions (or approaches which provide a framework to inform the research)

Phenomenology - Examines how individuals experience a particular phenomenon within their socio-cultural context. *E.g. What is the lived experience of being diagnosed with breast cancer?*

Ethnography - The descriptive study of the culture or subculture of a group of people (can be a particular situation within that culture). Explores the roles, rules and processes that influence behaviour. *E.g. What are the main health-related issues of elderly Vietnamese patients?*

Grounded theory - Can be both an approach and outcome of research. Usually applied to the study of processes. Uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory (outcome) about a phenomenon. *E.g. What are the processes doctors use to bring about medication compliance?*

Action research - Explores what happens when change is introduced into a system. Its focus is usually on finding solutions to practical problems. With the aid of the researcher, participants identify problems, work towards implementing solutions and evaluate the process and outcomes of the change. *E.g. How can practice nurses improve outcomes for patients with chronic respiratory disorders?*

Discourse analysis - Explores what can be learnt about something by the way people talk or write about it; focuses on the expressions they use. *E.g. What are some of the ways in which patients and doctors claim power in the medical encounter?*

Case studies - Not really a methodology, but a focus. Can be examined both qualitatively and quantitatively. Valuable where experimental designs are not practical e.g. for understanding where interventions succeed or fail. *E.g. How do GPs document practice for patients presenting with depression?*

Source: What is qualitative research?. Research Bites (Dec 2002). University of New South Wales.
Available from: http://www.phcris.org.au/phcred/research_bites/research_bites_5.pdf

Questionnaire design

The following seven steps have been taken from <https://www.b2binternational.com/b2b-blog/2006/05/12/the-key-principles-of-effective-questionnaire-design/> and will help you when designing a questionnaire: Use these seven steps in conjunction with the SACE “RESEARCH PROJECT Question Check”. Read <http://www.analytictech.com/mb313/principi.htm> on ‘Principles of questionnaire construction’ for fantastic help on designing your questions. (Debrief this article in class to ensure it is used.)

Step 1: Decide what information is required

The starting point is for the researcher to refer to the proposal and brief and make a listing of all the objectives and what information is required in order that they are achieved.

Step 2: Make a rough listing of the questions

A list is now made of all the questions that could go into the questionnaire. The aim at this stage is to be as comprehensive as possible in the listing and not to worry about the phrasing of the questions. That comes next.

Step 3: Refine the question phrasing

The questions must now be developed close to the point where they make sense and will generate authentic answers.

Step 4: Develop the response format

Every question needs a response. This could be a pre-coded list of answers or it could be open ended to collect verbatim comments. Consideration of the responses is just as important as getting the questions right. In fact, considering the answers will help get the questions right.

Step 5: Put the questions into an appropriate sequence

The ordering of the questions is important as it brings logic and flow to the interview/questionnaire. Normally the respondent is eased into the task with relatively straightforward questions while the more difficult or sensitive ones are left until they are warmed up.

Step 6: Finalise the layout of the questionnaire

The questionnaire now needs to be fully formatted with clear instructions to the interviewer/respondent, including a powerful introduction, sequencing through questions and probes. There needs to be enough space to write in answers and the response codes need to be well separated from each other so there is no danger of marking the wrong one.

Step 7: Pre-test and revise

The final step is to test the questionnaire. In theory the questionnaire should be tested using the method that will be used in the field (over the phone if telephone interviews are to be used; self-completed if it will be a self-completion questionnaire). At the very least it should be tested on one or two colleagues for sense, flow and clarity of instructions. The whole purpose of the test is to find out if changes are needed so that final revisions can be made. When carrying out the testing it is best to run through the questionnaire with the guinea pig respondent and then go back over the questions and ask for each one, "what went through your mind when you were asked this question?".

Source: The key principles of effective questionnaire design. B2B International, 2006. Available from: <https://www.b2binternational.com/b2b-blog/2006/05/12/the-key-principles-of-effective-questionnaire-design/>

Example check-list for student researchers, sourced from SACE Research Project

RESEARCH PROJECT Question Check – for Interviews, Surveys, Phone Calls, Emails etc.

	Description	Student/teacher comments
PLANNED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The student understands the difference between OPEN and CLOSED questions. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The student has PLANNED which type of question to use to get answers of appropriate simple/complex detail. A mix of different question types may be used in the same survey or interview. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If responses/answers are QUANTITATIVE (e.g. to be graphed) questions have been designed to make analysis simple: yes or no, checkboxes, Likert scales, or use electronic survey analysis tools like Survey Monkey to analyse responses. ALSO → An appropriate sample size of respondents has been determined. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If responses/answers are QUALITATIVE, sufficient space has been allowed for a longer response. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> You have planned the right time and place to ask the questions (whether electronic or face-to-face). <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> You have carefully planned WHO to direct these questions to; what do they know about your topic? 	
RELEVANT	Every question helps you answer a distinct part of your RP question. The questions may not cover ALL parts of the topic (depending on expertise of respondent) but none of the questions are irrelevant.	
IMPARTIAL	None of the questions are “leading” questions. None of the questions are written in such a way to prompt a particular response, or anticipate what the respondent might choose to say.	
CLEAR	The wording of each question is unambiguous and can only be understood in one way. Check this by giving a draft copy to someone who knows nothing about your topic first before asking others.	
SPAG	Spell-check your work and make sure the spelling/grammar/syntax has been checked by a teacher as well.	
SAFE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> All planned questions are safe and not personally revealing in any way. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If you are to interview someone off school grounds, you have considered a safe time and place to do this. You may choose to take someone with you for the interview. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Your teacher has been informed about any off school grounds research activities. 	
ETHICAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> All questions have been authorised by a teacher before any survey/interview has been conducted. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> None of the questions to be asked could potentially upset, offend, confront or embarrass anybody. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Questions are appropriate for a school student to ask (you are not a trained psychologist, for example). <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Your questions include a request for PERMISSION to use the respondent’s answers in your RP. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Respondents can choose to be ANONYMOUS if they want to be. 	

	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The questions don't ask respondents to reveal unnecessarily personal information about themselves. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Respondents can choose not to answer some or all of the questions if they don't want to.	
RESPECTFUL	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The wording of your questions is polite. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If the questions are to be asked in an interview, the way you speak will be polite. Please rehearse this first. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Your questions are appropriately formal/professional in their tone. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The number of questions and anticipated length of responses isn't arduous for the respondent. Respect the time it will take to answer all the questions you have planned. Remove any unnecessary questions.	
LAYOUT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Give some careful consideration to the layout of your questions, particularly if presented as a survey. The formatting should make the questions easy to read. Don't use a mix of fonts, or a font size that is too small. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Allow enough space for each question to be answered.	
DETAILS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Make sure you include your name and contact details (school contact details, not your personal details). <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Is it clear where or who to return the surveys to?	
		Your Checklist
My questions have been properly PLANNED		YES / NO
My questions are RELEVANT to my research topic		YES / NO
The wording of my questions is IMPARTIAL		YES / NO
The meaning of my questions is CLEAR		YES / NO
I have checked the SPELLING AND GRAMMAR of my questions		YES / NO
My questions (and how I plan to ask them) are SAFE		YES / NO
My questions are ETHICAL		YES / NO
My questions and planning are RESPECTFUL		YES / NO
I have given consideration to the LAYOUT of my questions		YES / NO
I have included appropriate DETAILS for my set of questions		YES / NO