Qualitative Methods for Quantitative Researchers

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Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted.

(Albert Einstein)
What are qualitative methods?
What are qualitative methods?

*Not* survey methods

Many disciplines

- Anthropology, sociology, communications, political science, nursing, history, education, psychology, etc...

Extremely diverse

- Focus Groups but...
  - Lots of other options
Qualitative: Words

- Inductive: Research drives theory
  - Build theory from data

- Open-ended questions predominate
  - All responses a possibility

- Goal = encourage discussion, reflection, elaboration, FGs = brainstorming

- Less structure
Quantitative: Numbers

• Deductive: Theory drives research
  • Test theory by collecting data

• Close-ended questions predominate
  • Fixed choices, pre-coded, pre-determined responses
  • Yes, no. One word. List of choices

• More structure

* Words vs. numbers fallacy
Why incorporate qualitative methods?

Focus on locally/culturally specific information
- Emphasizes participants’ perspectives
- Better able to portray the particular, complex, gray areas

Less likely to make (incorrect) assumptions
- Explores rather than asking predetermined questions
- Utilizes follow-up questions (probes), employs a variety of modalities

Conveys complexity through (usually) textual representations
- Uses participants own words
- Contrasts themes and unique/different perspectives
Is Qualitative Research Superior?

• Yes
• and no…
  • Quantitative and qualitative research approach problems from different perspectives (e.g., positivism vs. constructivism)
  • Do different things

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<tr>
<th>Ability to capture local/cultural-specific</th>
<th>Degree of Structuring</th>
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<tr>
<td>Structured</td>
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<th>Degree of generalization</th>
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Qualitative Approaches

- Ethnography
  - Method for studying cultural groups; participant observation and interviews
- Grounded theory
  - Build theory from empirical data; interviews and observations
- Focus Groups
  - Group interviews
- Case Studies
  - Intensive study of single unit
- Content Analysis
  - Analysis of written/visual materials
- Interviews (Different types)
- Observations (Different types)
Ways to Incorporate Qualitative Methods

**Open-ended questions**
- In conjunction with other methods (i.e., add to survey)
  - Most common approach

**Qualitative interviews**
- Alone or in conjunction with other methods
  - Semi-structured or unstructured possible

**Observations**
- Alone or in conjunction with other methods
  - Semi-structured or unstructured possible

**Focus Groups??**
- Popular because efficient – Get many viewpoints in relatively short amount of time
  - But…Conducting interview with multiple people = challenging (moderating skills!)
  - Other challenges: Upfront coordination
    - Data coordination
    - Data analysis
So, you want to do focus groups anyway...

**Rationale: Why focus groups?**

**Useful:**
- Topic not overly sensitive
- Group dynamics = helpful in understanding phenomenon
- Group “building something together” is desirable (group norms/consensus).

**Not useful:**
- Sensitive topics
- Group/community = problematic (e.g., group interview increase participant risks)
- Topic requires exploration with one individual at a time (e.g., many different roles, conflicting views, etc.).

**Problem of focus group Ns:**
- Focus group of 8 ≠ 8 perspectives
- Usually 1 or 2 people have greater influence/dominance over group; some rarely speak
- 40 individual interviews vs 40 FG participants
  - Individual interviews = more data, different data
FG tips

• Get training and/or advice from someone with experience

• Focus Group References (lots) →

• Need minimum of 2 research staff, ideally 3
  • Moderator
    • Introduce project, conduct interview, pay attention to and facilitate group dynamics
  • Comoderator/notetaker:
    • Welcome people, take notes during meeting, deal with recording equipment, issue participant payments, set up snacks, assist late participants, etc.
FG tips

• Transcription = challenging. Lots of voices to contend with

• Analysis = Challenging (small N of transcripts)
  • Usually not formally coded
    • Not worth developing coding scheme
  • Employ thematic analysis

• Number crunching focus group findings = seriously problematic
  • “So many said this, so many said that...”
  • Problem of focus group Ns = does not work. How can you tabulate??
  • Number crunching should not be main point of any qualitative research
Mixed Methods

“…..researchers analyze, interpret, and write up their research in such a way that the quantitative and qualitative components are mutually illuminating” (Bryman 2007)

Genuinely integrated = very strong research design

Triangulation: Qual and Quan data collected on same aspect of problem and compared as check on validity

Complementary approach: Qual and Quan collect data on different aspects of problem

Sequencing:
- QUAL first: QUAL data informs survey by ensuring items comprehensible and relevant for population. QUAN survey helps with generalizability
- QUAN first: QUAN sample used to select smaller FU sample. QUAL FU used to help understand and interpret QUAN survey
- Iterative = ideal

Mixed = rare

Difficult to publish genuinely integrated & to overcome disciplinary biases
Questions?