

Qualitative Research.

What is qualitative research?

"The goal of qualitative research is the development of concepts which help us to understand social phenomena in natural (rather than experimental) settings, giving due emphasis to the meanings, experiences, and views of all the participants."

*Pope & Mays.
BMJ 1995; 311: 42-45.*

Where does it fit in?

In its own right.
Before or after a quantitative study.
As part of a mixed methods study.

Qualitative approaches.

Three broad approaches:

- Interview approaches.
- Observational approaches.
- Written data.

Wide range of methodologies:

- Interviews:
 - structured, semi-structured, in-depth.
- Focus groups.
- Observation.
- Analysis of written documents (content analysis).
- Conversation or discourse analysis.

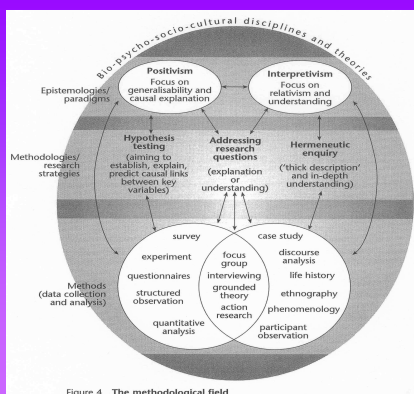


Figure 4 The methodological field

The jargon bit.

Ethnography.

The study of cultural groups in a natural setting, over a prolonged period of time. Common data collection methods are observation and interviews.

Case studies.

In-depth exploration of a programme, event, activity, process or individual(s) using a variety of data collection methods.

Phenomenological research.

Identification of the "essence" of human experiences concerning a phenomenon, as described by participants in a study. This involves studying a small number of subjects to develop patterns and relationships of meaning. Researcher's experiences also important.

Narrative research.

Study of the lives of individuals as told by the individuals. The researcher re-tells or re-stories this into a narrative chronology, combining views from the participant's and researcher's life.

Grounded theory.

Researcher tries to derive a general, abstract theory of a process, action or interaction grounded in the views of the study participants.

Involves multiple stages of data collection and the refinement and inter-relationship of categories of information.

Two primary characteristics:

1. Constant comparison of data with emerging categories.
2. Theoretical sampling of different groups to maximize the similarities and the differences of information.

The main issues.

- Rigour.
- Sampling.
- Validity.
- Reliability.
- Generalisability.

Ensuring rigour.

Good research design, data collection, interpretation and communication.

1. Clear account of the methods and data collection/analysis.
2. Plausible and coherent explanation of the phenomenon under examination.

Sampling.

Aim: To generate a sample which allows you to understand the social process taking place.

Generation: Selection of the most productive sample to answer the research question. Ongoing interpretation of the data will indicate who should be approached, including identification of "missing" voices. Often described as **purposive sampling**.

Sample size: The one that adequately answers the research question. This becomes apparent as the study progresses as new categories, themes or explanations stop emerging from the data.

Assessing validity.

- Clear account of data collection and analysis.
- Triangulation.
- Respondent validation.
- Reflexivity.
- Attention to "negative" cases.
- Cover a range of perspectives.

Reliability.

- Detailed records of interviews, observations etc.
- Field notes.
- Group approaches to analysis and interpretation.
- Independent assessment of transcripts.

Generalisability.

Can you generalise the results of the study to your own setting?

A key question for all study methodologies.....

Useful references.

Books.

Silverman D. Doing qualitative research. A practical handbook. SAGE Publications, 2000. ISBN 0 7619 5823 1.

Silverman D. Interpreting qualitative data. Methods for analysing talk, text and interaction. SAGE Publications, 2001. ISBN 0 7619 6865 5.

Creswell JW. Research design. Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches. SAGE Publications, 2003. ISBN 0 7619 2442 6.

Papers.

BMJ Series on *Qualitative Research*.

BMJ 1995; **311**: [42](#), [109](#), [182](#), [251](#), [299](#), [376](#).

Cover rigour & qualitative research, observational methods, interviews, focus groups & consensus methods.

BMJ Series on *Qualitative Research in Health Care*.

BMJ 2000; **320**: [50](#), [114](#), [178](#).

Marshall MN. [Sampling for qualitative research](#). *Family Practice* 1996; **13**: 522. [*Abstract only available online*]

Richards H, Emslie C. [The "doctor" or the "girl from the University. Considering the influence of professional roles on qualitative interviewing](#). *Family Practice* 2000; **17**: 71.

Barbour RS. [Checklists for improving rigour in qualitative research: a case of the tail wagging the dog?](#) *BMJ* 2001; **322**: 1115.
