

Introduction to the range of qualitative research methods and techniques

Social Science and Global Health Website



Learning Objectives

Overall by the end of the session users should be able to:

- Describe key characteristics of qualitative methods.
- Discuss the ways in which qualitative and quantitative research can complement each other.
- Recognize core techniques used within qualitative research.

Qualitative research methods

- “Qualitative research begins by accepting there is a range of different ways of making sense of the world and is concerned with discovering the meanings seen by those who are researched and with understanding their view of the world rather than that of the researchers” (Jones 1995: 2)



What are the main differences
between qualitative and
quantitative research?



Differences between quantitative and qualitative research

Quantitative research characteristics

Largely draws on positivist paradigm

Extensive (large sample)

Statistical sample of the population

Techniques - questionnaire; measurement

Focus: How many; determine single/causal relationships

Analysis – mainly deductive

Qualitative research characteristics

Largely draws on naturalistic paradigm

Intensive (small sample)

Symbolic' representatives of groups

Techniques - interviews, group discussions, observation

Focus: Why, how, understand multiple inter-relationships

Analysis – mainly inductive

From qualitative to quantitative...

- Qualitative research as preliminary to quantitative research:
- Discover most comprehensible terms or important issues for a questionnaire (improve the quality/validity) e.g.
- Qualitative research to construct the terms used in the British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Pope & Mays, 1995)
- Qualitative research was to understand the range of health problems workers experienced; a questionnaire was then designed to assess prevalence (Theobald, 1999)

From quantitative to qualitative....

- Using qualitative research to explore or explain the findings from a quantitative study:
- Using qualitative research to explore/explain/describe the findings from a quantitative study
- Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) Britten (1995)
- Quantitative – statistical correlates of national and regional variations in incidence showed differences amongst ethnic groups
- Qualitative – Gantley et al interviewed mothers of young babies in different ethnic groups to understand their child rearing practices and hence discover possible factor contributing to low incidence of SIDS in Asian population
- Study of pre-term birth in Malawi (Tolhurst et al, 2005) – epidemiological study found unexpected high rates of pre-term birth, followed by qualitative research to explore community perceptions of the phenomenon

Qualitative and quantitative together...

- To add breadth to analysis by bringing different perspectives to a research question or problem – e.g. nature and numbers, process and outcome (Ritchie, 2003)
- Triangulation
- Adherence to drug treatment (Jones, 1995):
- Quantitative - to determine the proportion and demographic characteristics of patients taking a certain percentage of prescribed drugs over a given period
- Qualitative - to answer questions about the reasons for variations in adherence and the meaning of drug treatment in the lives of patients

Qualitative research stand alone

- Some areas not amenable to quantitative research, e.g. areas or issues that are:
 - Ill-defined
 - Deeply rooted
 - Complex
 - Specialist
 - Sensitive
- (Ritchie, 2003)
- Increasingly recognised in health service organisation and policy

Qualitative Research: Core techniques

- There are different ways to generate qualitative research data these are considered the core techniques:
- Individual interviews
- Paired or triad interviews
- Focus groups or group discussions
- PLA (Participatory Learning and Action/Participatory Appraisal) Methods

Qualitative Research: Core techniques

- Naturally occurring data
- Direct observation
- Participant observation
- Documentary analysis
- Conversation analysis
- Discourse analysis

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