

Designing Qualitative Research

Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks California, 2006

I Introduction

Qualitative research uses multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic. It focuses on context, is emergent rather than tightly prefigured and is fundamentally interpretive. The qualitative researcher views social phenomena holistically. She systematically reflects on who she is in the inquiry. She is sensitive to her personal biography and how it shapes the study. She uses complex reasoning that is multifaceted and iterative. (Marshall C. and Rossman G.B., 2006, p.3, adapted from Rossman and Rallis, 2003). The challenge is to design a study that will contribute to the ongoing conversation in a certain field of study. The study should be do-able with your resources and capacities, and you should really want to do it: you have sufficient energy and interest to go through with it. The book is structured around building the argument to support your research proposal. This proposal needs to explain the logic behind the proposed research and demonstrate your competence as a researcher.

II The What of the Study: building the conceptual framework

The first step in qualitative research is building the conceptual framework. You present this in the research proposal. The research proposal is a plan for engaging in systematic inquiry to bring about a better understanding of a phenomenon. The finished research proposal should demonstrate that the research is worth doing, the researcher is capable of doing it correctly and the study is carefully planned. Typically a proposal includes an introduction, a discussion of related literature and the research design and methods. Reserve some flexibility in your plan because this is likely to change. Describe the topic, the purpose and the significance of the study for practice and theory in your field, and introduce the potential contributors. In the proposal you also formulate the research questions. These should be general enough to permit exploration but focused enough to delimit the study. The question can be theoretical, it can concern particular populations, or it can be site-specific.

III The How of the Study: Building the Research Design

The section of the research proposal devoted to describing the research design and methods should discuss the reasons for using the particular qualitative genre, the overall strategy and the specific design elements. A study focusing on individual lived experience mostly uses an in-depth interview strategy, to capture the deep meaning of experiences in the participants' own words. Case studies are often used in studies focusing on society and culture in a group, a program, or an organization and entail immersion in the group. Case studies may entail multiple methods like interviews, observations, document analysis and surveys. Qualitative research on communication typically involves microanalysis or textual analysis for which events are recorded, often videotaped, and often complemented with interviews. This data is then analyzed afterwards. In-depth interviews are simpler in design than microanalysis, case studies are the most complex. In-depth interviews are the most up close and personal, while the degree of interaction in case studies is much more diffuse. Be careful to choose a research design that does not significantly disrupt the setting and that will produce the information that you seek. Consider doing a pilot interview to test your planned strategy and design.

Once you decided to focus on a specific site, population or phenomenon, you'll have to decide on the "sample selection": the people and events that you will interview or research. The research proposal should include how you are planning to deal with the degree of

participation of the interviewer (you?), the degree of disclosure and the amount of time you plan to spend. Also plan your role and degree of engagement, as well as an exit plan: how to thank the interviewers afterwards, will you keep in touch,...

IV Data Collection Methods

There are different qualitative data collection methods. Primary methods of data collection are observation, observation as participant and in-depth interviewing. You'll also have to gather background and context information, being cautious about analyzing the source of the material. Supplemental data collection methods and sources of data that you could include are the use of focus groups, life histories, narrative inquiry, historical analysis, interaction analysis, questionnaires, dilemma analysis, psychological tests, and photos, videos and film. Using video and film seems very objective but they are always shot from the viewpoint of the filmmaker. Also filming can be very intrusive and can not be included in a book or journal. Many qualitative studies combine several data collection methods. Consider if the method that you'd like to use provides the required information and if it fits into the research plan. Many qualitative studies combine several data collection methods. You can do this when they all work with research question and the setting, because you'll always have to look for the most practical, efficient, feasible and ethical methods. Also plan your methods of recording and managing data in such a way that it eases the data retrieval later on for analysis.

V Managing, Analyzing, and Interpreting Data

For data analysis it's up to the researcher to discover categories, themes or patterns in the data. When this typology is created after the first analysis of the data, it's called inductive analysis. The typology can be expressed by participants or introduced by the researcher, based on the gathered data. When you start your research with categories stipulated beforehand, it's deductive analysis. The researcher applies codes to mark passages in the text according to the chosen categories and themes.

Then begins the process of interpreting, of "telling the story", attaching significance to what was found. Don't forget to look for alternative explanations and demonstrate why your explanation is more plausible. Interpretation of the collected data can be validated by another researcher or by participants.

You conclude with a written report in which you link the gathered data with your findings. When writing the final report remember that its usefulness to other researchers or to the public may be more important than methodological rigor, especially in the case of action research where the aim is to trigger a certain action or effect.

VI Planning Time and Resources

Time and resources must be carefully planned. Think through resource issues like time, personnel and money, in advance. Try to split these up in different aspects so you and your financiers have a clear overview. Think about the scope of the study, the implementation and how those will affect time and budget. Be practical and realistic. Time and resources for a dissertation study can be very different than those needed for a broad qualitative research plan.

VII Articulating Value and Logic

Articulating the value and logic of the research is necessary to convince people of its usefulness and credibility. These largely depend on the presentation of the chosen methodology. You will have to establish the 'truth value' of the study, its applicability, consistency, and neutrality. Thinking ahead about how one's final research product will be judged as 'good' is a useful exercise for this. In the final written report the design and methods should be explicitly detailed so the reader can judge whether they are adequate and make sense. Research questions and the data's relevance should be explicit and rigorously argued. The study should be situated in a scholarly context and records should be kept.

Ideally the report should demonstrate that you are able to move from data collection to analysis and from interpretation to writing.