

Second lesson: Qualitative Methods

Qualitative research

Social scientists often want to understand how individuals think, feel or behave in particular situations, or in relations with others that develop over time. They use in-depth interviews, participant observation and other qualitative methods to gather data. Researchers might watch a school playground to observe and record bullying behaviours, or ask young people about exactly what they understood by being bullied, and how they thought it affected them.

Qualitative methods are scientific, but are focused more on the meaning of different aspects of people's lives, and on their accounts of how they understand their own and others' behaviour and beliefs.

Case studies (where researchers examine a small number of specific examples) and narratives (where researchers study respondents' stories in depth) are just two examples of methods used in qualitative research.

Case studies can help researchers to explore life in different families, cultures and communities. However, in order to examine how far we can generalise the specific cases for wider society, some form of quantitative methods are often needed.

Qualitative methodologies

Some of the most common qualitative research methodologies are described here. These methodologies are widely-used in ESRC-funded research.

Semi-structured interviews

In semi-structured interviews the researcher has a small core of questions or areas they wish to explore, but will then take the questions in different directions, depending on the answers they receive. Flexibility is important with this type of interview. This method is used when seeking richly descriptive information, for example what makes a good teacher.

Unstructured interviews

Unstructured interviews are open-ended and informal. The researcher is seeking a detailed picture and tries to bring no preconceptions. This type of interview is often used in narrative research.

Generally, the researcher asks one question and then leaves the interviewee to talk or 'tell their story'.

Observation

Observation relies heavily on the skills of the researcher to understand and interpret what they are seeing in an unbiased way. It might be used, for example, in education research to see how much time young people spend 'on task' and what they do when distracted. In this method, the researcher observes what is happening and makes field notes either at the time or soon afterwards.

Open questionnaire survey

Unlike questionnaires in quantitative research, which offer a limited range of choices, open surveys seek opinion and description in response to open-ended questions. They may be used to gather information and ideas from more people than one-to-one interviewing would allow.

Keeping logs and diaries

Researchers and participants can keep logs or diaries as a way to collect details about daily life. Participants are asked to keep detailed records of some aspect of their life, such as social activities or exercise, so the researcher later can analyse this material. Researchers also keep diaries during the period of data collection on aspects of the research, such as the context in which interviews or observation takes place. This is then used alongside other data to help them to broaden their understanding of the research findings.¹

Questions:

- What are research methods?
- According to your master thesis topic, which type of methods do you prefer to use it in your work? Why?
- What are the 5 types of qualitative research and give an example of each type?

¹ <https://www.ukri.org/who-we-are/esrc/what-is-social-science/qualitative-research/>