What is Qualitative Research?

Pertti Alasuutari
Academy Professor
University of Tampere
Finland

A Short Self-Presentation
My ongoing research project deals with global governance. The title of the project is:

The Moderns: A Study on the Governmentality of World Society

The OECD as an example:
- It presents itself as a neutral source of knowledge production
- It contributes to similar socio-cultural processes in its member countries

In my research I want to cross the typical abyss between macro and micro, or between "System" and "Lebenswelt". That is, I want to contextualize questions of everyday life and agency with the societal conditions of people's lives.

I have for instance studied the nation state: how the imagined community is formed and how public discourses intertwine with people's frames of sense-making. A key text, a monograph about the post-war decades in Finland (Toinen tasavalta. Tampere: Vastapaino 1996) is unfortunately only in Finnish. I have also studied how art and culture are used in building nationhood:


I also want to promote our self-reflexivity as researchers: how social research plays a role in affecting the discursive frames by which realities are produced, questioned or taken for granted. See e.g.:

Definitions of qualitative research

- qualitative research can be defined in different ways
- for instance, it is common to trace its development to ethnographic research, which anthropologists first started doing
- from this viewpoint one emphasizes interpretive practice.

Denzin and Lincoln (2002, 3) define it this way:

“Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self.”
Definitions of qualitative research

• On the other hand it can be argued that qualitative research has got influence from a number of human disciplines, such as history, folklore or linguistics.

• From this perspective qualitative research is not so strongly associated with participant observation or with one particular epistemological position.

Definitions of qualitative research

• Instead, the term refers to the nature of research materials and methods of analysis:

  “Qualitative research depicts inquiry that is based on the analysis of observations, field notes, or naturally occurring text, audio or video materials. The analysis and interpretation often makes use of typologizations and coding, but the interpretations are substantiated with other means than just quantitative relations between variables.”
Definitions of qualitative research

- This definition has two elements:
  1. all possible research materials
  2. other than just statistical reasoning
- These criteria are so broad that practically any scientific inquiry qualifies as "qualitative research".
- Therefore "qualitative research" can also be defined from a sociology of science perspective

Definitions of qualitative research

- From this viewpoint qualitative research can be defined as a term that refers to a set of ideas and practices.
- The term is used to demarcate a cross-disciplinary area of specialization and a quasi discipline used in the battles of the field of human science disciplines.
- As a term depicting academic identification it competes with terms like social constructionism or cultural studies.
The practice of qualitative research

- In the sense outlined before, qualitative research is fiction – that is, it is something made.
- There is no uniform body of knowledge called qualitative research,
- and there are no qualitative methods as distinct from all other methods and practices of research.

Yet qualitative research is a useful fiction, at least in its present-day context.
- It draws from varied research and theory traditions experience about working ways to approach and analyze different aspects of human reality
- To put it shortly, it introduces theoretically informed practice and craft of doing social research.
The practice of qualitative research

- But why call it **qualitative** research?
- Because other aspects than the formal logic of statistical analysis are the gist of social research and they have been neglected during the post-World-War-II era.
- Therefore a short definition of qualitative research is “reasoning that is based on other than just quantitative relations between variables”.
- (In more positive terms: reasoning based on the explication of the logic of action)

THE FIELD OF RESEARCH METHODS

- Qualitative research
- Qualitative analysis
- Counting cases
- Survey analysis
- Quantitative analysis
The practice of qualitative research

- Besides, in qualitative research one emphasizes that whatever the observations and in whatever way they are made, it is important to interpret them in the context of their own production.
- In other words, there are no plain facts,
- and their value as facts depends on the questions posed.

The practice of qualitative research

- To shed light on the craft of qualitative research, we also need to define research:
  - Scientific research means that by collecting evidence or by producing data we force reality to answer the questions we pose to it.
  - Scientific knowledge is more than just information.
The practice of qualitative research

- Typically scientific knowledge is presented in the form of formulas applicable to a defined range of phenomena. That is – there is a requirement of some kind of generalizability.
- In addition, scientific inquiry aims at producing new knowledge by, for instance, giving explanations to incidents or other phenomena.

The practice of qualitative research

- In the social sciences explaining is almost without exception of the interpretative (Verstehen) type:
- One explains the facts by pointing out how they relate to what they mean to the people involved and what is the inherent logic of their activity.
The practice of qualitative research

- In making such explanations, one treats the facts in case as traces or clues to be used in reconstructing the human logic involved.
- In a way this is similar to the logic of survey analysis or a scientific experiment, but in those cases a pre-existing hypothesis is typically put to a well-designed test.

The logic of quantitative analysis

- Variables, nominal or numeral values
- Independent and dependent variables
- Control for intervening variables to isolate real factors
- experiment group and control group
- test or intervening variables
  - how to study the effect of isolation from a parent on children?
- survey as a simulation of a scientific experiment
  - instead of experiment and control groups compare real-life variation: people with different background variables
  - Control for intervening factors such as the data collection situation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High Education</th>
<th>Low Education</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Young</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Young</td>
<td>Old</td>
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<tr>
<td>Listen to Religious Programs</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>9%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>91%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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</table>
The logic of quantitative analysis

- average relations between variables used as clues or proof
- Common features cannot be addressed and are considered as results of poor question design
- The status and reification of findings such as causal chains?

How does qualitative analysis differ?

- Limited number of observation units or “cases”
- Plenty of aspects in regard to each unit
- average relations do not pass as evidence:
  - Qualitative analysis needed
  - all observations must fit into the interpretation
How does qualitative analysis differ?

- One understands the material as facts belonging to a single case (or a limited number of cases):
- Each clue is unique, of its own kind
- Absolute explanation: no aberrant clues tolerated

Special features of qualitative research process

- Data collection and analysis are parallel processes
  - Research questions become more specific along with data collection
  - No idea of a (statistically) representative sample; the case or cases selected are examples
  - Theoretical sampling
  - Maximum variation (despite which a rule holds)
Special features of qualitative research process

- Local explanation
  - observations in the data are made sense of and explained at the case level
  - this is where a mystery is formulated and solved
  - a second case may be compared with the previous, thus checking how cases differ and how they give evidence of a more general rule
  - instead of generalizing to a larger population we can talk about showing the relevance of local level explanations to other reality.

Special features of qualitative research process

- qualitative and quantitative reasoning as a continuum
  - the calculation of frequencies requires that there are enough comparable cases at the level at which frequencies are counted.
  - the breakdown of cases into different types may support an interpretation, but the numbers need to be big enough.
  - the bigger the N, the more complex statistical analyses are possible.
  - in qualitative analysis, the more aspects of a case are explained by the interpretation, the stronger the argument.
**Figure 2.1**
Cases, Aspects of Cases, and Research Strategies*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects of Cases</th>
<th>Qualitative Research</th>
<th>Comparative Research</th>
<th>Quantitative Research</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Few</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Many</td>
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</table>

*The three research strategies are qualitative research on commonalities, comparative research on diversity, and quantitative research on relationships between variables.

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**Table 2.1**
The Goals and Strategies of Social Research*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Qualitative Research</th>
<th>Comparative Research</th>
<th>Quantitative Research</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Identifying broad patterns</td>
<td>secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td>primary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Testing/refining theory</td>
<td>secondary</td>
<td>secondary</td>
<td>primary</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Making predictions</td>
<td>secondary</td>
<td>secondary</td>
<td>primary</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Interpreting significance</td>
<td>primary</td>
<td>secondary</td>
<td>primary</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Exploring diversity</td>
<td>secondary</td>
<td>primary</td>
<td>secondary</td>
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<td>6. Giving voice</td>
<td>primary</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Advancing new theories</td>
<td>primary</td>
<td>primary</td>
<td>secondary</td>
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</table>

*The three research strategies are qualitative research on commonalities, comparative research on diversity, and quantitative research on relationships between variables. Primary indicates that the strategy is a very common way of achieving a goal; secondary indicates that the strategy is sometimes used to achieve a goal.
EXERCISE

Form groups of 3-6 persons and discuss the particular features and problematic aspects of qualitative research. What kind of problems have you faced in your own research? What is unclear, difficult, or what would you like to learn more about? Choose a secretary among you who writes down the points made in your discussion and communicates them to others during the feedback discussion.