

# Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods

## Qualitative Research

Contributors: Margarete Sandelowski

Editors: Michael S. Lewis-Beck & Alan Bryman & Tim Futing Liao

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Qualitative research is an umbrella term for an array of attitudes toward and strategies for conducting inquiry that are aimed at discerning how human beings understand, experience, interpret, and produce the social world (Mason, 1996). Although typically juxtaposed with quantitative research, qualitative research is not a unified form of inquiry clearly differentiated from it, but rather home to a variety of scholars from the sciences, humanities, and practice disciplines committed to different and, sometimes, conflicting philosophical and methodological positions.

These philosophical positions include, but are not limited to, interpretivism, hermeneutics, social constructionism, and critical theory, as these are variously defined. Methodologic approaches include, but are not limited to, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, participatory inquiry, and narrative and discourse analysis, as these are variously defined (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000a). History, literary criticism, ethics, and cultural and material culture studies are examples of disciplines often viewed as wholly defined by qualitative research. Yet demographic history, for example, is largely quantitative, and scholars in these fields do not typically refer to themselves as qualitative researchers or to their work as qualitative research, or even as research at all. Qualitative researchers in the social sciences have turned to the arts and humanities to learn how to read and perform texts like artists and humanists, whereas qualitative researchers in the humanities have turned to the social sciences to learn how to theorize and conduct fieldwork like social scientists (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000b). In short, *qualitative research* is a term that tends to obscure both difference and commonality. Qualitative research cannot be understood and, indeed, is often misunderstood and misrepresented by simply contrasting it with quantitative research, which is, in turn, similarly misrepresented by efforts to reduce its diversity and complexity.

## Qualitative Research versus Qualitative Data and Techniques

What is collectively referred to as qualitative research should be distinguished from other research and other works that merely contain qualitative data, such as descriptive survey studies and journalistic accounts, and from data collection and analysis

techniques commonly viewed as qualitative research techniques, such as focus groups and content analysis. Both focus groups and content analysis have their origins in, and are still widely used in, quantitative research. That is, there is no qualitative attitude or strategy necessarily inherent in these techniques. Moreover, all quantitative behavioral and social science research with human subjects depends on qualitative data in the questionnaires employed. The mere fact that words are used or produced in a project, or that words prevail over numbers, does not make a work qualitative research, just as the mere fact that numbers are used or produced in a project does not make a work quantitative research.

## Defining Features of Qualitative Research

What makes a work deserving of the label *qualitative research* is the demonstrable effort to produce richly and relevantly detailed descriptions and particularized interpretations of people and the social, linguistic, material, and other practices and events that shape and are shaped by them. Qualitative research typically includes, but is not limited to, discerning the perspectives of these people, or what is often referred to as the actor's point of view. Although both philosophically and methodologically a highly diverse entity, qualitative research is marked by certain defining imperatives that include its case (as opposed to its variable) orientation, sensitivity to cultural and historical context, and reflexivity. In its many guises, qualitative research is a form of empirical inquiry that typically entails some form of purposive sampling for information-rich cases; in-depth interviews and open-ended interviews, lengthy participant/field observations, and/or document or artifact study; and techniques for analysis and interpretation of data that move beyond the data generated and their surface appearances. Qualitative research is typically directed toward producing idiographic (as opposed to nomothetic) knowledge because its emphasis is on the penetrating understanding of particular phenomena, events, or cases.

In contrast to what are collectively referred to as quantitative researchers, who aim for a disciplined objectivity in their attitude toward subjects and their collection and treatment of data, qualitative researchers [p. 894 ↓ ] aim for a disciplined subjectivity that embraces even as it makes explicit the partiality inherent in all inquiry. The emphasis in what is collectively referred to as quantitative research is on the control of research

conditions to minimize bias and threats to the validity of findings, and commitment to a research design developed prior to entering the field of study. In contrast, the emphasis in what is collectively referred to as qualitative research is on naturalism—that is, observing events as they unfold without manipulating any conditions—and the ongoing development and refinement of the research design after entering the field of study. As Mason (1996) insightfully noted, qualitative research requires people who are able to “think and act strategically,” flexibly, and creatively while in the field to “combine intellectual, philosophical, technical, practical (and ethical) concerns” (p. 2). Qualitative research is also characterized by adherence to a diverse array of orientations to and strategies for maximizing the validity or trustworthiness of study procedures and results, as well as the use of expressive language and more expressly literary representational styles for disseminating findings.

## Many Approaches, One Feeling Tone

Although what is collectively encompassed in the term *qualitative research* resists simple definition, it still manages to convey one “feeling tone” (Sapir, 1951, p. 308) of reverence for individuality, diversity, and everyday life, and the hope that inquiry can bridge the gaps that divide people. Qualitative research thus designates not only a domain of inquiry but also a site of protest and reconciliation.

Margarete Sandelowski

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