

An Introduction to Qualitative Research Method

The general principal of a research approach is that it will guide your research. John Creswell states that “Research approaches are plans and the procedures for research that span the steps from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection, analysis and interpretations” (62). This means that a research methodology is about how a researcher designs a specific study to ensure valid results that at the same time aims at addressing the research aims and objectives. Your master dissertation has to have a methodology chapter that, in simple terms, explains to your examiners and audience how you have conducted your research.

There are three types of methodologies: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods. In order to better understand each method we need to understand the differences between them first.

Understanding the difference between Qualitative and Quantitative Research:

Qualitative Research: this approach examines attitudes, behaviour and experiences through conducting interviews. In other words, qualitative research looks at textual data; this means collecting and analysing words either written or spoken:

- It is concerned with how people think and feel about the topics of concern to the research.
- Gather broader, more in-depth information from fewer respondents (micro-analysis)
- Open questions for greater depth and personal details

Quantitative Research on other hand is concerned with generating statistics through the use of questionnaires and structured interviews. This method is used when the research objectives are confirmatory in nature.

- Use a structured survey instrument that asks all respondents the same questions in the same order to allow for statistical analysis.

- Gather a narrow amount of information from large number of respondents
- Closed questions for quantification, can be coded and processed quickly.

This lesson aims to focus on Qualitative Research method. Quantitative Research Method will be covered in the next lesson.

To begin with, Qualitative Research Method is used when your research is exploratory in nature. This means that this method explores people's perceptions about certain events and also examines their behaviour and experiences. This is achieved through data collection methods such as interviews, focus groups and ethnography.

What are the main data collection methods?

Interviews: the most commonly used type of interviews in qualitative approach is semi-structured interviewing. For this type of interview, the researcher uses open-ended questions to collect in-depth information from respondents. With this type of interviews, the researcher is enabled to compare and contrast the information collected from the different interviews under study.

Focus Groups: this data collection method is also referred to as discussion groups or group interviews. Here, a number of research participants are brought together to gather their views about the topic being studied at one time. The discussion has to be led by a moderator or facilitator who introduces the topic to the group and speaks with them about issues related to the research questions. Focus groups can be either tape-recorded or video-recorded.

Ethnography: Also referred to as observation, ethnography is about "describing and interpreting cultural behaviour" (Dawson 17). Researchers who apply this method have to immerse themselves in the group that they are examining. The ethnographer, thereby, observes their behaviour and attitudes and takes notes as he does so. This is called field notes. These are written observations recorded in the field (the place where data collection takes place).

How to Conduct Interviews:

When conducting interviews, the researcher will need to consider how they are going to record their interviews, what questions need to be asked and how they can get more information from the participants. In doing so, the research must ensure that their questions are clear enough, state clearly the objectives and aims of the interview to the participants and also use open-ended questions to get in-depth information.

The most commonly used research method in the field of education is conducting semi-structured interviews. Hence, it is necessary to go through methods of recording. This means that the researcher must decide about which sort of recording equipment he would use for their interviews. Therefore, it is necessary for the researcher to familiarize themselves with its use throughout the practice. Some researchers prefer using the method of note taking instead. It is advised, in this case, that the researcher

should practice taking notes in interviews as they make sure to maintain eye contact with the interviewee and taking notes at the same time. ¹

Data Analysis:

In Qualitative method, the process of analysis is an on-going process that takes place throughout the data collection process. This means that researchers can start their data analysis right after they have finished with one interview. This enables the researcher to reflect upon the emerging themes and they can, hence, change methods if necessary. An example can be found in Dawson's chapter on data analysis of Qualitative method: "a researcher might conduct three interviews using an inter-view schedule she has developed beforehand. However, during the three interviews she finds that the participants are raising issues that she has not thought about previously. So she refines her interview schedule to include these issues for the next few interviews. This is data analysis. She has thought about what has been said, analysed the words and refined her schedule accordingly" (112).

Formats for analysis

Before starting with analysis of the collected data, the data has to be produced in a certain format that can be easily analysed. This means that audible data should be represented in a written form that is referred to as transcript. In addition to this, it is advisable that the researcher writes memos and notes at the beginning of the data collection as this will help them to stay focused and to observe significant points that might emerge. These memos and notes can also be analysed along with the transcripts.

There are different ways of analysis qualitative data such as thematic analysis, comparative analysis, content analysis and discourse analysis but the most commonly used method of data analysis is thematic analysis.²

Thematic analysis: this is a method of analyzing qualitative data. Here, the researcher carefully examines the interview data (transcripts, memos and notes) to derive common themes and ideas that come across repeatedly. These themes "emerge from the data and are not imposed upon it by the researcher" (Dawson 117). As can be noticed here, the advantage of this method of analysis is that it is explorative. So, the researcher does not have to know exactly what themes they are investigating as these resurface automatically throughout the analysis.

¹ I focused on interviews in my lesson because this is the method that is widely used in your field, However you can find details on how to conduct the other methods that are Focus Groups and Ethnography in Catherine Dawson's book *Practical Research Methods* Pp 76-101.

² You can find details on the others methods (comparative analysis, content analysis and discourse analysis in Dawson's book *Practical Research Methods* Pp 117-120.

Bibliography:

Creswell, John. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Sage: California. 2014.

Dawson, Catherine. *Practical Research Methods: A user-friendly guide to measuring research*. How To Books: London. 2002.

