Characteristics of Qualitative Methods

- Methods include focus groups, in-depth interviews, and reviews of documents for types of themes
- Primarily inductive process used to formulate theory or hypotheses
- More subjective: describes a problem or condition from the point of view of those experiencing it
- Text-based
- More in-depth information on a few cases
- Unstructured or semi-structured response options
- No statistical tests
- Can be valid and reliable: largely depends on skill and rigor of the researcher
- Time expenditure lighter on the planning end and heavier during the analysis phase
- Less generalizable

Quantitative researchers typically start with a focused research question or hypothesis, and generally collect a sample from a population, describe the resulting data using statistical techniques, and draw general conclusions about the population. Although this is by far the most common approach to conducting empirical research, there is an important alternative called qualitative research.

Origins of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research originated in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology but is now used to study many psychological topics as well. Qualitative researchers generally begin with a less focused research question, collect large amounts of relatively "unfiltered" data from a relatively small number of individuals, and describe their data using non-statistical techniques. They are usually less concerned with drawing general conclusions about human behavior than with understanding in detail the experience of their research participants.

Consider, for example, a study by researcher Per Lindqvist and his colleagues, who wanted to learn how the families of teenage suicide victims cope with their loss (Lindqvist, Johansson, & Karlsson, 2008). [1] They did not have a specific research question or hypothesis, such as, what percentage of family members join suicide support groups? Instead, they wanted to understand the variety of reactions that families had, with a focus on what it is like from their perspectives. To do this, they interviewed the families of 10 teenage suicide victims in their homes in rural Sweden.

The interviews were relatively unstructured, beginning with a general request for the families to talk about the victim and ending with an invitation to talk about anything else that they wanted to tell the interviewer. One of the most important themes that emerged from these interviews was that even as life returned to "normal," the families continued to struggle with the question of why their loved one committed suicide. This struggle appeared to be especially difficult for families in which the suicide was most unexpected.

The Purpose of Qualitative Research

The strength of quantitative research is its ability to provide precise answers to specific research questions and to draw general conclusions about human behavior. This is how we know that people have a strong tendency to obey authority figures, for example, or that female college students are not substantially more talkative than male college students. But while quantitative research is good at providing precise answers to specific research questions, it is not nearly as good at generating novel and interesting research

questions. Likewise, while quantitative research is good at drawing general conclusions about human behavior, it is not nearly as good at providing detailed descriptions of the behavior of particular groups in particular situations. And it is not very good at all at communicating what it is actually like to be a member of a particular group in a particular situation.

Weaknesses of Quantitative Research are Strengths of Qualitative Research

But the relative weaknesses of quantitative research are the relative strengths of qualitative research. Qualitative research can help researchers to generate new and interesting research questions and hypotheses. The research of Lindqvist and colleagues, for example, suggests that there may be a general relationship between how unexpected a suicide is and how consumed the family is with trying to understand why the teen committed suicide. This relationship can now be explored using quantitative research. But it is unclear whether this question would have arisen at all without the researchers sitting down with the families and listening to what they themselves wanted to say about their experience.

Thick Description

Qualitative research can also provide rich and detailed descriptions of human behavior in the real-world contexts in which it occurs. Among qualitative researchers, this is often referred to as "thick description" (Geertz, 1973). [2] Similarly, qualitative research can convey a sense of what it is actually like to be a member of a particular group or in a particular situation—what qualitative researchers often refer to as the "lived experience" of the research participants. Lindqvist and colleagues, for example, describe how all the families spontaneously offered to show the interviewer the victim's bedroom or the place where the suicide occurred—revealing the importance of these physical locations to the families. It seems unlikely that a quantitative study would have discovered this.

Data Collection and Analysis in Qualitative Research

Interviews

As with correlational research, data collection approaches in qualitative research are quite varied and can involve naturalistic observation, archival data, artwork, and many other things. But one of the most common approaches, especially for research in the social sciences, is to conduct **interviews**. Interviews in qualitative research tend to be unstructured—consisting of a small number of general questions or prompts that allow participants to talk about what is of interest to them. The researcher can follow up by asking more detailed questions about the topics that do come up. Such interviews can be lengthy and detailed, but they are usually conducted with a relatively small sample.

Focus Groups

This was essentially the approach used by Lindqvist and colleagues in their research on the families of suicide survivors. Small groups of people who participate together in interviews focused on a particular topic or issue are often referred to as **focus groups**. The interaction among participants in a focus group can sometimes bring out more information than can be learned in a one-on-one interview. The use of focus groups has become a standard technique in business and industry among those who want to understand consumer tastes and preferences. The content of all focus group interviews is usually recorded and transcribed to facilitate later analyses.

Participant Observation

Another approach to data collection in qualitative research is participant observation.
In **participant observation**, researchers become active participants in the group or situation they are studying. The data they collect can include interviews (usually unstructured), their own notes based on their observations and interactions, documents, photographs, and other artifacts. The basic rationale for participant observation is that there may be important information that is only accessible to, or can be interpreted only by, someone who is an active participant in the group or situation. An example of participant observation comes from a study by sociologist Amy Wilkins (published in Social Psychology Quarterly) on a college-based religious organization that emphasized how happy its members were (Wilkins, 2008). [3] Wilkins spent 12 months attending and participating in the group's meetings and social events, and she interviewed several group members. In her study, Wilkins identified several ways in which

the group "enforced" happiness—for example, by continually talking about happiness, discouraging the expression of negative emotions, and using happiness as a way to distinguish themselves from other groups.

Data Analysis in Quantitative Research

Although quantitative and qualitative research generally differ along several important dimensions (e.g., the specificity of the research question, the type of data collected), it is the method of data analysis that distinguishes them more clearly than anything else. To illustrate this idea, imagine a team of researchers that conducts a series of unstructured interviews with recovering alcoholics to learn about the role of their religious faith in their recovery. Although this sounds like qualitative research, imagine further that once they collect the data, they code the data in terms of how often each participant mentions God (or a "higher power"), and they then use descriptive and inferential statistics to find out whether those who mention God more often are more successful in abstaining from alcohol. Now it sounds like quantitative research.

The quantitative-qualitative distinction depends more on what researchers do with the data they have collected than with why or how they collected the data.

Grounded Theory

But what does qualitative data analysis look like? Just as there are many ways to collect data in qualitative research, there are many ways to analyze data. Here we focus on one general approach called **grounded theory** (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). [4]

This approach was developed within the field of sociology in the 1960s and has gradually gained popularity. Remember that in quantitative research, it is typical for the researcher to start with a theory, derive a hypothesis from that theory, and then collect data to test that specific hypothesis. Grounded theory takes another approach.

The Theory Evolves from the Data after the Fact

Using grounded theory, the researchers do not start with a theory. The theory evolves from their analysis of the data. In qualitative research using grounded theory, researchers start with the data and develop a theory or an interpretation that is "grounded in" those data. They do this in stages. First, they identify ideas that are repeated throughout the data. Then they organize these ideas into a smaller number of broader themes. Finally, they write a **theoretical narrative**—an interpretation—of the data in terms of the themes that they have identified. This theoretical narrative focuses on the subjective experience of the participants and is usually supported by many direct quotations from the participants themselves.

Grounded Research in Action

As an example, consider a study by researchers Laura Abrams and Laura Curran, who used the grounded theory approach to study the experience of postpartum depression symptoms among low-income mothers (Abrams & Curran, 2009). [5] Their data were the result of unstructured interviews with 19 participants (remember that one hallmark of qualitative research is the use of a small number of participants, which will generally generate a large amount of data that will have to be analyzed). Often times, the researchers will not use a structured interview because they want to go into the research with a minimum, or no, preconceptions of what they will find. The results were five broad themes the researchers identified and the more specific repeating ideas that made up each of those themes. In their research report, they provide numerous quotations from their participants, such as this direct quote from one participant:

> Well, just recently my apartment was broken into and the fact that his Medicaid for some reason was cancelled so a lot of things was happening within the last two weeks all at one time. So that in itself I don't want to say almost drove me mad but it put me in a funk. Like I really was depressed. (p. 357)

Below are the five themes they found in the interviews along with a representative quote from one of the participants.

Five Themes of Postpartum Depression

- Ambivalence: "I wasn't prepared for this baby," "I didn't want to have any more children."
- Caregiving overload: "Please stop crying," "I need a break," "I can't do this anymore."
- Juggling: "No time to breathe," "Everyone depends on me," "Navigating the maze."
- Mothering alone: "I really don't have any help," "My baby has no father."
- Real-life worry: "I don't have any money," "Will my baby be OK?" "It's not safe here."

Their theoretical narrative focused on the participants' experience of their symptoms not as an abstract "affective disorder" but as closely tied to the daily struggle of raising children alone under often difficult circumstances.

The Quantitative-Qualitative "Debate"

Given their differences, it may come as no surprise that quantitative and qualitative research in psychology and related fields do not coexist in complete harmony. Some quantitative researchers criticize qualitative methods on the grounds that they lack objectivity, are difficult to evaluate in terms of reliability and validity, and do not allow generalization to people or situations other than those actually studied. At the same time, some qualitative researchers criticize quantitative methods on the grounds that they overlook the richness of human behavior and experience and instead answer simple questions about easily quantifiable variables.

In general, however, qualitative researchers are well aware of the issues of objectivity, reliability, validity, and generalizability. In fact, they have developed a number of frameworks for addressing these issues (which are beyond the scope of our discussion). And in general, quantitative researchers are well aware of the issue of oversimplification. They do not believe that all human behavior and experience can be adequately described in terms of a small number of variables and the statistical relationships among them. Instead, they use simplification as a strategy for uncovering general principles of human behavior.

Mixed Methods and Triangulation

Mixed Methods Research

Many researchers from both the quantitative and qualitative camps now agree that the two approaches can and should be combined into what has come to be called **mixed-methods research** (Todd, Nerlich, McKeown, & Clarke, 2004).[6] (In fact, the studies by Lindqvist and colleagues and by Abrams and Curran both combined quantitative and qualitative approaches.) One approach to combining quantitative and qualitative research is to use qualitative research for hypothesis generation and quantitative research for hypothesis testing. Again, while a qualitative study might suggest that families who experience an unexpected suicide have more difficulty resolving the question of why, a well-designed quantitative study could test a hypothesis by measuring these specific variables for a large sample.

Triangulation

A second approach to combining quantitative and qualitative research is referred to as **triangulation**. The idea is to use both quantitative and qualitative methods simultaneously to study the same general questions and to compare the results. If the results of the quantitative and qualitative methods converge on the same general conclusion, they reinforce and enrich each other. If the results diverge, then they suggest an interesting new question: Why do the results diverge and how can they be reconciled?

Summary:

- Qualitative research is an important alternative to quantitative research. It generally involves asking broader research questions, collecting more detailed data (e.g., interviews), and using non-statistical analyses.
- Many researchers conceptualize quantitative and qualitative research as complementary and advocate combining them. For example, qualitative research can be used to generate hypotheses and quantitative research to test them.