CHAPTER 7

Qualitative Research and Feedback

Eugene LIOW

"I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?"

(James Spradley 1979, 34)

What Is Qualitative Research?

Qualitative research has two primary objectives: (i) to be used as a means to interpret significance and (ii) to give a voice (Ragin 1994, 51), that is, providing opportunity for the subject to speak for himself/herself in relation to a particular situation so that one can understand why he/she chooses to act in a certain manner. This provides richer and more nuanced data that sheds light on aspects not answered by quantitative approaches. If someone wants to know what it is like to live on $600 a month, or the experience of being a foreign domestic worker or foreign construction worker who has to deal with discrimination and unequal power relations at the workplace in contemporary Singapore, qualitative research is most suited for this task. It uncovers aspects of social life that go unnoticed in quantitative research.

The starting point of qualitative research is to recognise that the objects of analysis are "studied in their complexity and entirety in their everyday context" (Flick 2002, 5). In particular, qualitative research looks to uncover the everyday practices and interactions of those being studied. This is because qualitative research recognises "that viewpoints and practices in the field[1] are different

---

1. The field is basically the place where the research is being carried out, better known as fieldwork. The undertaking of fieldwork is also referred to as entering the field.

because of the different subjective perspectives and social backgrounds related to them" (6). Discovering these subjective worldviews and realities are thus part of the aims of qualitative research. In doing so, it recognises that there exists a variety of perspectives regarding any social phenomena.

Reality is regarded as socially constructed (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, 3). What seems natural and unchanging—like family, religion, gender relations, crime, poverty and consumption—are created and sustained by interactions between different groups in society. Hence, qualitative research tries to make sense of these social phenomena from the perspectives of informants by unearthing how people create and give meaning to social experiences.

Qualitative research is based on a variety of theoretical approaches and methods. It is relatively unstructured and highly flexible, so that officers can choose the approach that best fits the objective of study. Hence, a research project encompassing both quantitative and qualitative research methods could present a more comprehensive picture of the social issue being studied (see **Box 1**).

Approaches of Qualitative Research

The nature of qualitative inquiry is underpinned by three approaches:

i.   Understanding the insider's interpretation and view regarding what is going on;
ii.   Understanding the underlying rationale to people's actions, i.e., how people create, sustain and attribute meaning in their interactions with the social world;[2] and
iii. Making observations of behaviour of individuals or groups of people in a natural setting.[3]

---

2. This is known as **symbolic interactionism**.

3. This is known as **ethnography**. There has been some confusion about the term ethnography. It has been equated with in-depth interviews or as a synonym for qualitative research. The former is but one of many research methods that can be used in qualitative research. As for it being a synonym for qualitative research, this is inaccurate since a structured quantitative research method (like a survey) can conceivably be used in an ethnographic study.

BOX

1

How Quantitative and Qualitative Methods Complement Each Other

Quantitative data provide macro level statistics like total numbers, proportions etc. but many questions are left unanswered. Consider the single mother experiencing poverty. How is her self-esteem affected? How does it affect her relations with her relatives, friends and larger society? How are those experiencing poverty dealing with the stigma of being poor or unemployed? How does poverty affect the chances of success in the educational realm? What is the worldview of those in poverty? How does this shape their philosophical outlook of life, and response to situations? In contrast, how will this experience and perspective of poverty differ from a civil servant's or that of the seventh richest person in the country? Questions such as these are what qualitative researchers concentrate on, and the data that is yielded contributes to the understanding of what it means to experience poverty.

When Can Qualitative Research Be Used?

When deciding on whether to use qualitative research methods, it is important to understand its objectives:

i. To understand the underlying rationale for behaviours
ii. To observe human behaviour in its natural setting
iii. To provide space for participants to express their perspectives, their thought processes, emotions et al.

It is also pertinent to note that the open-ended and inductive nature of qualitative research makes it challenging to reliably generalise the results or compare between groups and any sort of testing (Guest, Namey, and Mitchell 2013, 25).

Selected Methods of Qualitative Research

There are a variety of qualitative research methods but two of the most common ones are observation and semi-structured interviews.

Observation

In general, three modes of observation can be described:

i. Complete Observation (non-participant observation)
ii. Partial Observation
iii. Participant Observation

Complete observation (non-participant observation)

Complete observers (Flick 2002, 135–139; Dorsten and Hotchkiss 2005, 133–135) are researchers whose roles are not known to the members of the group being studied. The subjects may not even know that they are being observed. However, unlike participant observation, the researchers do not interact with the subjects. This method is used when access to the field is easily available, such as in public places. Thus, if you want to study the interactions of patrons and staff at a coffeehouse, this will be the method of choice. You can buy a cup of coffee, sit down in a corner, and observe.

Partial observation

Researchers carrying out partial observation are known to members of the group being studied, but they are not regarded as part of the group. This method is used when it is difficult to obtain access to a field without the permission of the group being studied. A potential drawback of this mode is that the subjects might alter their behaviour as they are aware that they are being observed.

Participant observation

Participant observation entails "diving headlong into the field, observ[ing] from a member's perspective but also influenc[ing] what is observed due to his or her participation" (Flick 2002, 139). The point is to better the knowledge of the field through an increased assimilation into that world as a participant. Aside from observations, participant observation is also a field strategy that simultaneously combines document analysis, interviewing of respondents and informants, direct participation and observation (Denzin 1989, 157–158). It also entails being cognisant of the researcher's own conscious thoughts, thought processes and emotions. Erving Goffman *Asylums* (2009) provides one of the best examples of participant observation (see **Box 2**).

BOX
2

Method in Madness

Erving Goffman, a Canadian sociologist, undertook a year of fieldwork from 1955 to 1956 at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington DC. He posed as an assistant to a director (Goffman's activities were only known to the hospital's top management).

Goffman spent his days with the patients and actively avoided sociable contact with the staff members and the carrying of a key (because only staff members do so and he wanted to experience the asylum as how the inmates did). He did this to understand a mental patient's social world because it is a "world that is subjectively experienced by him" (Goffman 2009, xvii).

This quote by Goffman aptly underscores the reasons for engaging in participant observation:

[A]ny group of persons—prisoners, primitives, pilots, or patients—develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable, and normal once you get close to it, and that a good way to learn about any of these worlds is to submit oneself in the company of the members to the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject (xviii).

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews comprise open-ended questions to allow subjects to freely express their views, thought process and feelings. An interview guide is used to frame the interview situation, but the questions are not standardised (as in a survey), and further probes can be made to responses. This enables some comparability of the data from the interviews, as the guide provides some general structure without removing the merits of openness and contextual information.

Challenges and Limitations

Resource Intensive

A drawback to qualitative research is that doing proper analysis of text is a time-consuming affair. Aside from having to interview the informant, which can take tens of hours, one also needs to transcribe, code and analyse the data (Guest, Namey, and Mitchell 2013, 25). The level of detail that goes into qualitative research is one of its main strengths. The trade-off though is that due to the intensity of time and energy needed in the data-collecting process, the officer usually deals with a much smaller sample size as compared to quantitative research.

To get round the resource intensive issue, researchers can consider using a software[4] to help with the coding of qualitative responses. This is especially useful when the sample size of respondents is sizable, and where the interviews can number in the hundreds.

Ethical Concerns

As public service officers undertake qualitative research, it is also important to understand that being a government employee means that there are greater sensitivities at hand. Officers need to be keenly aware of the power they hold over informants, especially if the latter perceive that they are already taking a risk in being open with the former. This is especially true for informants who are disadvantaged (e.g., foreign workers and foreign domestic workers) and vulnerable. By opening up to the officer conducting the research, the informant is entrusting information that can affirm the latter's rights, interests and sensitivities; conversely, the information can be used against the latter or be used to violate them (Spradley 1979, 36). Officers can thus inadvertently do enormous damage towards the informant if they are not careful. They should also guard against becoming overly aggressive and presenting a situation where informants may feel obliged to provide responses because of the perceived power that a public officer holds.

In addition, public officers should be cognisant that responses from informants may be skewed to what they think the officer wants to hear. Consequently, the data obtained may not reflect their honest views and perspectives. Thus, public officers should seek better ways to frame and position their interviews and surveys to minimise such effects.

---

4. An example of such software is NVIVO.

Access to the Field

The question of gaining access to the field is a critical factor in doing qualitative research, as this determines the researcher's choice of research methods. Insurmountable barriers to any study include factors such as a researcher's ascriptive[5] status (e.g., an ethnic Jew wanting to study a neo-Nazi group will likely not get very far, and will in fact end up endangering himself/herself) or the nature of the field itself (many social settings are interesting but impossible for most researchers to study, e.g., top one percent income earners in a country).

Conclusion

Qualitative research is carried out to answer the *why* and *how* of the way people think and act. It can thus provide greater depth and insights to broad patterns and trends observed. Its strength lies in bringing about an understanding of the reasons and motivations behind choices, decisions and behaviour. Having such information will in turn enable us to better design public policies.

References

Denzin, N. K. *The Research Act*. 3rd ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989.

Dorsten, L. E., and L. Hotchkiss. *Research Methods and Society: Foundations of Social Inquiry*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005.

Flick, U. *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002.

---

5. An ascribed status refers to a social position that is assigned to you at birth, or which is imposed upon you later on in life. You do not have a choice over whether or not you want that status, nor can you earn it. Examples include ethnicity and sex. Ascribed status is often contrasted with *achieved* status, which refers to a social position that you earn on the basis of merit. Thus, you have a choice whether or not you want that status. An example will be that of a world-famous football star.

Goffman, E. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009.

Guest, G. E. E. Namey, and M. L. Mitchell. 2013. *Collecting Qualitative Data: A Field Manual for Applied Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ragin, C. C. *Constructing Social Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1994.

Further Readings

For greater detail into specific qualitative research methods:

Spradley, J. P. *The Ethnographic Interview*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1979.

———. *Participant Observation*. New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1980.

Wengraf, T. *Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage 2001.