

Qualitative Methods



Mary Cassatt: The Boating Party, 1893-94



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Introduction

- Before covering qualitative methods, we will address some common misconceptions about differences between quantitative and qualitative methods.
- These myths about methodology assert differences between quantitative and qualitative methods that do not exist in practice.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Introduction

- The hazards of believing in these myths are:
 1. The researcher might avoid using methods that are well suited to collecting information about a form of human experience.
 2. The researcher might unnecessarily find fault with methods used by others that are well suited to sociological data collection.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Introduction

- Also, we will address misconceptions about special forms of methodology, such as “feminist methodology.”
- These special forms of methods sometimes perpetuate myths about differences between qualitative and quantitative methods.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Myths about Methodology: Introduction

- Qualitative data collection techniques, such as participant observation, content analysis, and in-depth interviews, are highly effective procedures for learning the meanings behind people's language and behavior.
- Research that seeks to understand such meanings typically relies upon theoretical perspectives like ethnomethodology, phenomenology, and symbolic interactionism.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Myths about Methodology: Introduction

- These theoretical perspectives represent nominalist and idealist (as compared with realist) philosophical perspectives.
- That is, they presume that no *single* reality exists—instead there are multiple realities—and that concepts about reality should be recognized as constructions of the observer.
- These theoretical perspectives thereby assume that the researcher reconstructs the reality of the subject through careful observation and analysis.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Myths about Methodology: Introduction

- These perspectives on understanding meanings are well-founded in scientific logic and research experience. They work very well at guiding research on human behavior.
- Unfortunately, too often researchers make the mistake of assuming that the *methods* used to examine meanings take on the same philosophical assumptions of the *theories* used to investigate meanings.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Myths about Methodology: Introduction

- For some persons, the assumptions about reality inherent in theories that often are applied in studies that use qualitative methods unfortunately have become associated with the methods themselves, as if qualitative methods have presumptions about reality.
- It is not unusual, therefore, to hear claims about *philosophical* dichotomies between quantitative (i.e., survey research) and qualitative methods.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Myth #1: Ontological Differences

- One hears, for example, that quantitative *methods* are realist and that qualitative *methods* are nominalist, and idealist.
 - It is said, for example, that quantitative methods assume a single reality whereas qualitative methods assume multiple realities.
 - Similarly, it is said that quantitative methods assume the concreteness of concepts whereas qualitative methods take a constructivist perspective on concepts.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Myth #1: Ontological Differences

Such claims are false dichotomies.

- Yes, qualitative methods are effective procedures for examining multiple realities.
- But quantitative methods also can be highly effective for examining multiple realities.
 - Exploratory factor analysis of quantitative data, for example, is highly effective at revealing multiple dimensions in the ways people view their everyday lives.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Myth #1: Ontological Differences

- And it is true that quantitative methods can become problematic unless the concepts being measured have been shown to have validity. Therefore, survey research, for example, typically relies upon operational definitions with established support for content and construct validity.
 - But quantitative data analysis also can reveal problems not previously recognized in the researcher's definitions of concepts.
 - And quantitative data analysis can be used to operationalize new constructs.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Myth #2: Deductive and Inductive Research

- It is common that research using qualitative methods will avoid extant theories in favor of building theory inductively based upon the observations at hand.
- Because qualitative investigations often use inductive procedures, it is sometimes said that qualitative methods are *inherently* inductive and quantitative methods are *inherently* deductive.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Myth #2: Deductive and Inductive Research

This claim is a false dichotomy.

- Yes, it is true that qualitative methods are well-suited to inductive theory building.
 - But quantitative methods also can examine new concepts and forms of causality.
 - And qualitative methods work just fine at testing hypotheses derived from existing theory.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Myth #3: Differences in Validity and Reliability

- One often hears that qualitative methods, because they rely strongly upon the subjective observations of the researcher rather than upon numbers, are less scientific, less objective, less valid, and less reliable than the observations made through quantitative methods.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Myth #3: Differences in Validity and Reliability

This claim is a false dichotomy.

- Yes, it is true that it can be difficult to replicate the data recorded by a researcher by trying to repeat their field observations.
- But there is no epistemological reason to believe that these observations are less valid or reliable than the ones recorded numerically, as part of survey research for example.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Myths: Summary

Methods are tools, not philosophies.

- Both qualitative and quantitative methods can be used within idealist, realist, or nominalist philosophical perspectives.
- Qualitative methods can be used to empirically test hypotheses deduced from theory.
- Quantitative methods can be used to inductively build theories.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Feminist Methodology

- Along similar lines of illogical thinking, one can read quite a bit about ill-defined techniques like “feminist methodology.”
- In fact, many books have been written about feminist methodology.
- The idea of feminist methodology is to use *methods* that empower the voices of women.
- According to some adherents of feminist methodology, quantitative methods do not adequately give women their true voices.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Feminist Methodology (Continued)

- Instead, one should use qualitative methods that allow women to express themselves outside the male-framed constraints of quantitative approaches.
- This line of thinking represents an insult to the techniques of quantitative methodology and to feminism.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Feminist Methodology (Continued)

- Feminism, as a social perspective, seeks to empower women in their careers and at home.
- Feminist theories use concepts and statements about reality to guide investigations that seek to document discrimination against women.
- Both quantitative and qualitative methods can be effective at evaluating feminist theories.
- Both quantitative and qualitative methods can give voice to women and accurately portray their experiences at work and home.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Feminist Methodology (Continued)

- A methodology does not constrain the ability of the researcher to discover/construct empirical generalizations about the lives of women.
- Also, the methodology used by a researcher does not define the researcher's philosophy.
- It is a mistake to think that one cannot conduct research aimed at empowering women by using quantitative methods.
- And it is a mistake to think that qualitative methods necessarily empower women.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Feminist Methodology (Continued)

- An in-depth interview that gives a woman a true voice about her experiences, for example, is not a “feminist” interview, it is simply a *good* interview—one conducted according to long-recognized procedures for collecting information from people during interviews.
- And survey research, using quantitative methods, can be a highly effective procedure for documenting sex discrimination, explaining causality in masculinity and femininity, etc.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Feminist Methodology (Continued)

- The hazards of adhering to the false claims sometimes made of feminist methodology are:
 1. One might incorrectly assume that quantitative methods cannot be used to discover/construct the realities of women or empower them in their roles in society.
 2. One might incorrectly assume that using qualitative methods assures that one is empowering the voices of women, when in fact, qualitative methods can be biased in their approach to understanding women.



Special Notes on Qualitative Methods

Summary

- With these special notes about qualitative methods in mind, we can begin our summary of qualitative methods.
- We will learn about methods as tools, which can be used effectively within any of the paradigms of sociology.



Topics Appropriate to Field Research

Appropriate Topics

- Qualitative methods can be used to examine:
 - Practices
 - Episodes
 - Encounters
 - Roles
 - Relationships
 - Groups
 - Organizations
 - Settlements
 - Social worlds
 - Lifestyles



Special Considerations in Field Research

Roles of the Researcher

- In many types of qualitative research (i.e., ethnographies, interviews, experiments) the researcher is in direct contact with subjects.
- Thus, the researcher is both observer and participant.
- The researcher must be aware of the demands of these dual roles.
- Conducting certain types of qualitative research, therefore, requires expertise not needed in survey research.



Special Considerations in Field Research

Roles of the Researcher (Continued)

- Dual roles tax the energy and concentration of the researcher.
- Dual roles introduce ethical issues of participation in the activities of subjects.
- The emersion by the researcher into the lives of subjects can erode objectivity while at the same time bring special insights into behavior.



Special Considerations in Field Research

Roles of the Researcher (Continued)

- Dual roles affect the behavior of subjects. Their behavior always takes place within a setting of being observed.
- Thus, the *emic* perspective (taking the point of view of the subject) provides insight, but the researcher must at all times also take an *etic* perspective of maintaining distance and objectivity.
- The balance point of emic and etic are idiosyncratic to the research and the researcher.



Qualitative Research Paradigms

1. Naturalism

- A positivist approach that assumes reality is “out there” to be discovered through field work.
- Ethnographies (i.e., participant observation) were developed from this approach, although ethnographies need not be positivist.
 - Focus on detailed and accurate description of people in a social setting.
 - Highly demanding form of fieldwork.
 - Expensive.
 - Time intensive.



Qualitative Research Paradigms

2. Ethnomethodology

- A phenomenological approach, wherein it is assumed that people construct their realities through their interactions with others.
- Exploration of the details of everyday language and behavior and the constructed meanings of everyday life.



Qualitative Research Paradigms

3. Grounded Theory

- Inductive theory building based upon direct observation and analysis of the patterns, themes, and common categories evident in people's behavior.
- Allows for creativity in science.
 - Think comparatively.
 - Obtain multiple viewpoints.
 - Periodically step back.
 - Maintain an attitude of skepticism.
 - Follow the research procedure.



Qualitative Research Paradigms

4. Case Studies

- Focus upon a few instances of some phenomenon.
- Chief purpose usually is descriptive, but case studies can be used for hypothesis testing, explanation, theory building, etc.

5. Institutional Ethnography

- Term used to describe ethnographies of institutions, particularly workplace discrimination against women.



Qualitative Research Paradigms

6. Participatory Action Research

- An integration of research and social programs.
- Research and social change take place at the same time.
- Research informs action and action informs research.



Conducting Qualitative Field Research

1. Preparing for the Field

- Thorough review of the literature.
- Even in grounded, inductive theory building the researcher is highly familiar with existing theories and concepts.
- Ask key informants about the setting and people.
- Contact gatekeepers and establish initial contacts.



Conducting Qualitative Field Research

1. Preparing for the Field (Continued)

- Covert identification
 - Subjects do not know you are a researcher.
 - Subjects might act “more naturally.”
 - Ethical issues.
 - Logistic issues.
 - Legal issues.



Conducting Qualitative Field Research

1. Preparing for the Field (Continued)

- Overt identification
Subjects know you are a researcher.
 - Fewer ethical, logistic, and legal issues.
 - Subjects might be more inclined to reveal sensitive information.
 - Subjects might feel intimidated.



Conducting Qualitative Field Research

2. Qualitative Interviewing

- Typically, one uses unstructured questionnaires.
- In-depth discussions with subjects.
- Difficult to listen and take notes.
 - An hour is a very long time!
- Sometimes, with the subject's permission, one can record conversations.



Conducting Qualitative Field Research

3. Recording Observations

- Rely as little as possible upon memory.
- Ask to record, if feasible.
- Take notes in stages and as often as possible.
- Keep three sets of notes:
 - **Raw Data:** What the subjects say and do.
 - **Interpretation:** Your opinions about relationships, patterns, trends, concepts, theories.
 - **Personal:** Your notes to yourself about your feelings and opinions.



Conducting Qualitative Field Research

4. Focus Groups

- Focus groups are collections of 12-15 individuals who discuss topics as a group.
- The important feature of focus group research is that one gathers *group-level* data.
- A key principle of sociology is that people behave differently in groups.
 - Ideas and behavior emerge from interaction with others.
 - The opinions expressed in groups will be different than opinions expressed as an individual.



Conducting Qualitative Field Research

4. Focus Groups (Continued)

- Ask the group just a few, general questions.
- Facilitate conversation by all members of the group.
- Encourage respect for everyone's opinions.
- Use a professional focus group moderator.



Conducting Qualitative Field Research

4. Focus Groups (Continued)

- Socially-oriented research.
- Flexible.
- High face validity.
- Speedy results.
- Relatively low cost.
- Less control over the conversation.
- Difficult data to analyze.
- Need professional moderators.
- Difficult to assemble persons to participate.
- Need a good setting.



Ethics in Qualitative Field Research

Informed Consent

- Do subjects actually give informed consent, especially in covert research?
- Do you ignore severe needs for help to maintain your role as an observer?
- Should the researcher take sides on important issues?
- Is it ethical to “use” people for research?



Strengths and Weaknesses

1. Validity

- Some persons believe that field research provides better validity because the researcher can observe behavior directly.
 - This belief might be inaccurate because the researcher might be biased.



Strengths and Weaknesses

2. Reliability

- Some persons challenge the reliability of qualitative research because one must rely upon the subjective opinions of the researcher.
 - Actually, these opinions might be more reliable than found in quantitative research.



Unobtrusive Research

1. Introduction

- Unobtrusive research refers to collecting information from elements without directly contacting them.
- Examples:
 - Articles and letters to the Editor in newspapers and magazines, photographs and films, voice recordings, minutes of meetings, diaries, trash, wear from use, any type of artifact “left behind” from human behavior.



Unobtrusive Research

1. Advantages

- Collecting information from elements without directly contacting them presents several advantages for the researcher:
 - No intervention effects: The researcher does not disturb the behavior of the subjects.
 - No recall problems: The artifacts represent the “raw data” or “reality” to be observed. The researcher can observe these data without having to rely upon how well people can recall their behavior.



Unobtrusive Research

1. Advantages (Continued)

- Longitudinal research: Researchers can examine artifacts over time to understand trends, significant events, social change, etc.
- Error correction: The raw data already exist. The “research data” are being created. Corrections can be made after “collecting” the research data.
- Cost: Because the records already exist, content analysis can be a relatively low cost form of research.



Unobtrusive Research

2. Disadvantages

- Incomplete records: Artifacts do not offer a complete accounting of events.
- Distorted records: Artifacts represent the public display, not necessarily an accurate portrayal, of events.
- Severed records: Artifacts might be removed from their context.



Content Analysis

1. Introduction

- The analysis of existing documents that can reveal important information about human behavior.
- Content analysis can be use for exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory research.
- Content analysis can create qualitative or quantitative data.
- Content analysis can be used for deductive or inductive research.



Content Analysis

2. Operationalization

- Concepts of interest must be operationalized, as with any method.
 - Content analysis allows for revisions to operationalization.
 - After examining the first 10 of 50 documents, for example, the researcher might decide to revise the operational definition of one or more concepts and then restart the analysis.



Content Analysis

3. Unit of Analysis

- Content analysis can be conducted on the population of events (e.g., all letters to the newspaper Editor within a three-month period) or on a sample of the population.
- One or more units of analysis can be investigated.
 - For example, unit of analysis might be the letters to the Editor, or paragraphs within letters, or sentences within paragraphs, or any of these three during the analysis.



Content Analysis

4. Sampling

- Content analysis can utilize any type of sampling design.
 - Cluster sampling is common in analysis of text, wherein the researcher identifies paragraphs, for example, and then draws a sample of paragraphs.



Content Analysis

5. Coding

- Coding—the process of transforming raw data into a standardized form using some conceptual framework—can be qualitative or quantitative.
- The researcher can code the data manually, use computer software packages to help store and organize codes, or use sophisticated software that codes text.



Content Analysis

5. Coding (Continued)

- Qualitative coding involves assigning artifacts to one or more categories.
 - Consider, for example, the phrase, “The state constitution should be amended to ban same-sex marriage,” that might appear in a letter to the newspaper Editor.
 - This phrase might be classified as:
 - Same-sex marriage: opposed.
 - Constitutional amendment.
 - Policy suggestions.



Content Analysis

5. Coding (Continued)

- Sophisticated computer software packages, such as N-Vivo, facilitate qualitative coding of artifacts.
 - Text, for example, is scanned into the program.
 - Then, the researcher assigns one or more markers to each unit of analysis.
 - Later, the researcher can sort the text by markers (e.g., all text related to “same-sex marriage: opposed”) for further analysis.



Content Analysis

5. Coding (Continued)

- The researcher might chose to use quantitative coding of artifacts.
- Artifacts can be coded as nominal-, ordinal-, or interval-level data.
- The researcher can apply numerical codes or use sophisticated computer software packages to conduct the coding.



Content Analysis

5. Coding (Continued)

- Both manifest and latent content can be coded during content analysis.
 - For example, the *latent* content of the phrase, “There should be a constitutional ban against same-sex marriage” might be coded as “respectful objection,” whereas the *latent* content of the phrase, “Those damn [enter bad word here] should not be allowed to marry,” might be coded as “hateful objection.”



Content Analysis

6. Inductive and Deductive Research

- As is the case in many instances of research—both quantitative and qualitative—the researcher might pursue both deductive and inductive processing of the data.
 - The researcher might begin by using the data—in either qualitative or quantitative form—to test hypotheses.
 - Then, the researcher might try altering an existing theory or positing a new theory during content analysis.



Content Analysis

7. Reliability

- The reliability of coding schemes used in content analysis typically is assessed by using the method of *inter-rater* reliability.
- That is, multiple researchers will code the raw data and compare notes with one another.
- Discussion among researchers results in a consensus opinion about how to code certain artifacts.
- This approach provides intersubjectivity to the analysis but also might create group-level bias.



Analysis of Existing Statistics

1. Introduction

- The analysis of existing statistics involves examining statistics—not data—computed by others.
- Existing statistics can provide helpful supplemental support to any type of study.
- Existing statistics are essential for designing sampling and data weighting procedures.
- Existing statistics can serve as data in themselves to examine, for example, trends, cross-societal differences, and so forth.



Analysis of Existing Statistics

2. Units of Analysis

- The units of analysis typically are not the individual, but the statistics themselves of patterns of behavior aggregated across many individuals.
- One needs to be cautious about making an ecological fallacy.
 - The aggregation of data to create statistics might obscure or distort the behavior of individuals used to create the statistics.



Analysis of Existing Statistics

3. Validity

- The researcher needs to be cautious about the validity of the statistics.
 - Content validity might suffer if the questions covered do not easily match the concepts of interest.
 - The questions asked to generate data for the statistics might differ across place and time.



Analysis of Existing Statistics

4. Reliability

- The analysis of statistics assumes that the data accurately represent the behavior of individuals.
- Also, the quality of record collection and keeping might affect the quality of data used to generate statistics.

5. Sources of Statistics

- Nation-states.
- Local regions.
- Public and private organizations and agencies.



Comparative and Historical Research

1. Introduction

- The collection and analysis of data for the purpose of recognizing and interpreting long-term historical trends.
- Differs from longitudinal research, which seeks understanding of changes in individual behavior over time. This form of research seeks to understand macro-level historical processes.



Comparative and Historical Research

2. Examples

- The history of class struggle.
- Evolutionary theories of human development.
- Development and change in:
 - societal well-being.
 - global capitalist system.
 - awareness of environmental issues.
 - feminist thought and behavior.



Comparative and Historical Research

2. Sources of Data

- National-level statistics.
- Raw documents and artifacts.
- Books, films, photos, diaries, etc.

3. Analytical Techniques

- Analysis can be quantitative or qualitative.
- Analysis can be exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory.
- Analysis can be inductive or deductive.

Questions?