

# Encyclopedia of Research Design

## Qualitative Research

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Book Title: Encyclopedia of Research Design  
Chapter Title: "Qualitative Research"  
Pub. Date: 2010  
Access Date: October 14, 2013  
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.  
City: Thousand Oaks  
Print ISBN: 9781412961271  
Online ISBN: 9781412961288  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412961288.n350>  
Print pages: 1159-1164

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412961288.n350>

Qualitative research, also known as qualitative inquiry, is an umbrella term used to cover a wide variety of research methods and methodologies that provide holistic, in-depth accounts and attempt to reflect the complicated, contextual, interactive, and interpretive nature of our social world. For example, grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, narratology, photovoice, and participatory action research (PAR) may all be included under the qualitative label, although each of these individual methods is based on its own set of assumptions and procedures. What unifies these various approaches to inquiry is their primary reliance on non-numeric forms of data (also known as empirical evidence) and their rejection of some of the underlying philosophical principles that guide methods employed in the physical and natural sciences and frequently in the social sciences. This entry focuses on the philosophical frameworks positioning qualitative research and on qualitative research designs.

## Positioning Qualitative inquiry

At the heart of the distinction between these various scientific methods are differing ontological, epistemological, and theoretical worldviews. Ontology refers to the nature of reality. Ontological questions interrogate fundamental ideas about what is real. Epistemology refers to a theory of knowledge. Epistemological discussions interrogate how we know the world, who can know, and what can be known. Theoretical perspectives are the philosophical stances that provide the logic and the criteria that organize methodology (the overall research strategy) and methods (the specific tools or techniques used in collecting and interpreting evidence). In short, basic philosophical differences [p. 1159 ↓ ] in these worldviews have a direct impact on the research design. Coherent research designs demonstrate consistent and integrated ontological, epistemological, theoretical, and methodological positions.

Most qualitative research starts from a constructivist epistemological position and from one of a variety of theoretical perspectives, such as interpretivist, feminist, or critical inquiry. Constructivists believe in the socially constructed nature of reality. This idea that reality is generated through social interaction and iterative processes has dramatic implications for addressing the basic epistemological questions raised above and thus for the methodologies and methods employed. Constructivists reject the basic premise

that an objective researcher discovers truths from preexisting data. Instead, they believe in what Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln have called an “intimate relationship” between the researchers and the phenomenon under investigation. Marianne Phillips and Louise Jorgensen argue, based on the work of Vivien Burr and Kenneth Gergen, that constructivist approaches share four basic premises: a critical approach to taken-for-granted knowledge that is often overlooked or ignored, an interest in historical and cultural specificity, a link between knowledge development and processes, and a link between knowledge development and social action.

Within the constructivist epistemological tradition, there are many different theoretical schools of thought. Interpretivism has spawned a family of related traditions such as symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. For example, in his classic work on symbolic interactionism in 1969, Herbert Blumer summarized the three basic premises underlying his work: Humans act toward things on the basis of meaning that those things have for them; meaning is derived from, or arises out of, social interaction with others; and meanings attach and are modified through an interpretative process during interactions. Note that at the heart of symbolic interactionism is a belief that reality is not stable and pre-existing but rather is socially constructed and given meaning only through ongoing interactions. Critical theorists believe that social action and social reform are an integral part of any research endeavor. Today's critical inquiry was heavily influenced by the 1972 work of Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which fueled important discussions about power relationships, oppression, exploitation, empowerment, democracy, social justice, and action-based research. Feminists in the 1970s and beyond have furthered these theoretical discussions, raising basic questions such as those posed by Sandra Harding in the title of her seminal book published in 1991, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*

In general, qualitative researchers are interested in studying social processes, how people make sense and create meaning, and what their lived experiences are like. They are interested in understanding how knowledge is historically, politically, and culturally situated. They concern themselves with notions of power, privilege, positionality, and social justice. They are likely to acknowledge research as a value-laden activity and embrace the idea that the researcher himself or herself is an instrument in the process. Often, they try to recreate experiences, understanding, and meanings from the point of

view of those being studied rather than positioning themselves as the final interpretative authority or expert.

Qualitative research is sometimes contrasted with quantitative research. It is worth considering the distinctions. Most quantitative endeavors start from an objectivist epistemological perspective and a positivist theoretical position. Because quantitative analysis and statistical techniques are consistent with positivist assumptions about both the nature of social reality (an ontological issue) and the relationship between the “knower” and the “known” (epistemological issues), they tend to dictate how studies are designed and evaluated. Positivists are apt to believe in a stable reality and attach a premium to the objectivity, neutrality, and expertise of the scientist studying it. The research process is considered value-neutral. Variables or standardized instruments are used to measure phenomena and test relationships. Research designs must be carefully constructed in order to ensure that the mathematical assumptions that underlie statistical tests are met. The goal is often to generalize findings to larger populations.

Constructivist critiques of the objectivist perspective include concerns that these positivist methodologies tended to ignore or minimize contexts [p. 1160 ↓ ] (such as political, historical, or cultural factors); they ignored the meanings people attached to their actions or experiences; they were divorced from real-world settings; they focused on generalizable results that were of little use to individual decision makers; they tended to favor testing pre-existing hypotheses and theories rather than generating new ones; they favored deductive logic over inductive approaches; and they were reductionistic rather than holistic and thus did not adequately account for the complexity of social phenomena. An oft-repeated characterization holds that quantitative research is a mile wide and an inch deep, whereas qualitative research is a mile deep and an inch wide.

In short, it is critical to understand that qualitative inquiry starts with a very different relationship to social reality than that of most quantitative researchers. Constructivists challenge positivist views about the nature of reality, how to study it, who can know, what knowledge is, and how it is produced. This influences every aspect of the research design. So qualitative research will look markedly different—at every stage of the design and implementation process—than quantitative research.

# Qualitative Research Designs

Because a variety of different methods fall within the scope of qualitative research, it is difficult, even dangerous, to make generalizations about designs. Readers should consult methodologists who specialize in a particular form of inquiry to learn about the rules of that particular method. That said, what follows is a summary of features that tend to be associated with qualitative inquiry.

## Overall Design

Qualitative designs are emergent and flexible, standing in stark contrast to quantitative research designs in which a hallmark feature is their fixed and predetermined nature. Qualitative work is sometimes characterized as “messy,” not because the researcher is sloppy but because the process is not strictly controlled and must be adapted to the realities of the environment. Designs often rest on inductive approaches to knowledge development. They may be value-driven, acknowledge the politics of the research endeavor, be attentive to power differentials in the community, and promote social justice or social change.

## Role of the Researcher

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is often called an “instrument” or “tool” in the process. This characterization acknowledges that all interpretations and observations are filtered through the researcher, who brings his or her own values and identity to the process. Qualitative researchers talk about situating themselves relative to the research project and participants. For example, they may be insiders (share characteristics with those studied) or outsiders or some combination of both. Furthermore, the researcher's role can fall anywhere on a continuum of action from unobtrusive observer to full participant. Many designs call for the researcher to be a participant-observer. Action-based approaches to inquiry tend to characterize the role of the researcher as collaborator.

In short, qualitative research designs are more apt to require the researcher to make his or her position, role, and influence transparent. This is unlike approaches that try to minimize or neutralize the researcher's presence. Qualitative researchers are expected to critically examine and disclose their position. They do this by being “self-reflexive.” Michelle Fine has written about “working the hyphen,” a metaphor that is useful in acknowledging actors on both sides of the researcher–participant equation.

## Research Question

The framing of a qualitative research question will depend on the method. However, such questions tend to be both broad and flexible. They are not variable-driven, so they do not seek to link concepts and posit relationships. A common feature is that the research question evolves during the process. For example, Elliot Liebow, an ethnographer, started his study on homeless women by asking the research question: How do homeless women see and experience homelessness? His initial position was that he knew nothing about what their lives were like. However, in his final report, he ended up asking and answering the question [p. 1161 ↓] “How do homeless women remain human in the face of inhuman conditions?” This occurred because during the process of his data collection and analysis, he learned enough about homeless women's experiences to answer a more sophisticated, complicated, and interesting research question about their lived experiences.

## Study Site

Qualitative studies most often take place in natural environments. Researchers want to observe how people live and act in the real world, not when they are removed from these settings. For this reason, they are likely to study people and things “in the field,” which can refer to any natural environment such as social agencies, prisons, schools, rural communities, urban neighborhoods, hospitals, police stations, or even cyberspace.

## Study Sample

Qualitative researchers use very different sampling strategies from quantitative researchers. Large, random, representative samples are rarely, if ever, the goal. Qualitative researchers are more apt to use some form of purposive sampling. They might seek out people, cases, events, or communities because they are extreme, critical, typical, or atypical. In some qualitative methods, sampling may be based on “maximum variation.” So, the idea is to have as diverse a pool on the characteristics under investigation as possible. These studies are likely to be exploring the breadth and depth of difference rather than similarities. Sampling may be theoretically driven. For example, grounded theory is a method that seeks to generate mid-level theory as a research product. For this reason, it uses theoretical sampling strategies, picking new cases on the basis of the emerging theory.

## “Data” or Empirical Evidence Collection

In general, the empirical evidence used in qualitative inquiry is non-numeric and is collected in one or more of three basic forms: through *interviews and/or conversations* (either one-on-one or in groups), through *observations* (either unobtrusive or as a participant), and/or through *documents and artifacts* (either pre-existing or generated as part of the research process).

*Interviews* can be unstructured, semi-structured, or structured (although this is rarely favored). Questions are usually open-ended and seek to give the participant an opportunity to answer fully. Their purpose is often to explore meaning, understanding, and interpretations rather than to treat the interviewee as a vessel for retrieving facts. Interviews can be conducted with multiple individuals, such as in focus groups. They are often audiotaped or videotaped. These tapes can then be transcribed (using any number of different formats and transcription techniques) for easier analysis.

*Observations* occur in natural settings. The researchers must spend considerable time recording observations (through memos, jottings, and field notes) to preserve them for future use. It is critical that these notes be written during field observation or as soon

thereafter as possible while they are fresh in mind because they serve as the empirical evidence for use during analysis.

*Documents or artifacts* used in qualitative work can be pre-existing, such as newspaper articles, client case files, legislative documents, or policy manuals and are collected by the researcher. Alternatively, documents or artifacts may be generated as part of the research process itself, such as asking subjects to keep journals, take photographs, or draw pictures. For example, in a neighborhood safety study, children might be asked to draw a map of their route between home and school and to mark the scary places. In an action-based method known as photovoice, participants take community-based photographs that are then used as a springboard for advocacy efforts.

## Empirical Evidence Analysis

Obviously, the form of empirical evidence analysis must be appropriate for the methods employed. Some common methods of qualitative analysis include thematic analysis, constant comparative methods, discourse analysis, content analysis, and narrative analysis. For example, some researchers conduct thematic analysis where they closely examine their texts (interviews, field notes, documents), apply codes, and develop themes. Researchers engaged in narrative analysis look at the way life stories are structured, such as the [p. 1162 ↓] divorce narratives studied by Catherine Reissman. Discourse analysis seeks to reveal patterns in speech. Similarly, conversational analysis looks closely at the structure, cadence, and patterns in ordinary conversations such as Douglas Maynard's study on how "good news" and "bad news" are delivered in clinical medical settings. Ethnographers review their field notes, interview transcripts, and documents and may take an interpretative approach to analysis. Action-based research methods often call for the study participants to play an active role in co-constructing information, so the analysis and interpretation do not reside solely in the hands of the "expert" researcher. Many qualitative researchers employ a procedure known as "member checking," where they take their preliminary interpretations back to participants to check whether those interpretations ring true.

Some qualitative researchers use computer software programs to aid them in their work; others do not. There are a number of different software packages available, such



as HyperResearch, NVivo, <http://Atlas.ti>, QDA Miner, and AnSWR, among others. They can be useful in helping the researcher manage, organize, and retrieve large amounts of text, videos, images, and other forms of qualitative evidence. However, unlike statistical software, it is important to recognize that qualitative programs are not designed to “analyze” data itself. Virtually every aspect of qualitative analysis process relies heavily on the interpretative and analytic procedures carried out by the researcher.

## Findings and Writing Reports

Qualitative research reports often read very differently from traditional scientific reports. For example, it is common for qualitative researchers to use the first person in their writing rather than the third person often found in quantitative reports. These voice preferences are traceable to the epistemological roots discussed above. First-person narrations may appear odd to those trained to read and think about the researcher as a detached, objective, neutral observer, but they are consistent with epistemological and theoretical worldviews that posit that the researcher plays an active role in the process. Furthermore, because qualitative researchers do not attempt to measure phenomena, they rarely report quantity, amounts, intensity, or frequency and are more likely to present their findings as complicated and detailed narratives. In 1973, Clifford Geertz first introduced the term *thick description* to describe the rich and contextual writing that is often the product of ethnography or other cultural studies. However, this can be controversial. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln have noted the “crisis in representation” that first occurred among anthropologists, who worried about the politics and ethics of their textual representation of “others.” Qualitative researchers often speak of “giving voice” to their study participants and attempt to stay close to the words and meanings of their informants.

## Quality and Rigor in Qualitative Research

It is important to evaluate the quality of qualitative studies relative to standards that are applicable to the specific research method used. Sometimes, qualitative

researchers refer to negotiated validity, trustworthiness, transferability, transparency, and credibility as quality indicators. For example, Joseph Maxwell has argued for a broad understanding of validity with multiple dimensions such as descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, internal generalizability, and evaluative validity. Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba argued for judging case studies based on resonance, rhetoric, empowerment, and applicability.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412961288.n350>

*See also*

#### Further Readings

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