

The Merits of Qualitative Research

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Beyond How Often and How Many

Human beings have always been difficult to research. Unlike the natural sciences where we can use quantitative methods to capture how often things occur and how we go about replicating results through repeated experiments by other researchers, social research requires objective observation and documentation without any expectation of [replication](#) in order to achieve understanding.

Inductive Rather than Deductive

If we start with the premise that qualitative methods work best but can't be used, we are immediately released from the obligation to manipulate variables, compare them against a control, and run multiple scenarios in order to deduce a replicable solution matrix.

The emphasis on observation with an expectation to just describe and understand facilitates research into opinions, feelings and experiences (variables that would confound a traditional quantitative study). In addition, the lack of a manipulated study environment allows the retention of the dynamic nature of the [interview](#) or group discussion process. Researchers are not tied to pre-approved survey questions, and have the freedom to probe beyond initial responses with follow-up [questions in real-time](#). The direct presence of the researcher, either as a hidden observer or focus group leader, allows non-verbal communication to be observed also.

Qualitative Theories

- *Phenomenology* – describing the “lived experience” of a phenomenon through narrative interviews with people who survived or experienced a particular event or period in time.
- *Ethnography* – typically used in anthropological research to develop a “portrait of a people” through descriptive studies and direct interviews in cultural settings.

- *Grounded Theory* – first proposed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, grounded theory follows a stipulated data collection procedure in order to develop distinct conceptual categories. It continues to generate discussion as to whether or not it should be labeled as a qualitative methodology. Advocates argue that since the methodology is inductive, it belongs in the qualitative camp. Critics, in contrast, argue that since the objective is the development of a theory that can be further developed with alternative research methodologies, Grounded Theory should be recognized as a *general* method, rather than qualitative.

Accepted Limitations

Qualitative research methods come with two major limitations. First, since the traditional data collection methodology is through direct observation or interviews, there is no dataset to “number crunch,” which makes this [type of research](#) very labor intensive.

Second, since the data collection is based on individual researcher observation or interviews of specific groups in real time, the potential to generalize broader themes from qualitative data is more limited than [quantitative data](#). As such, we would categorize the data as descriptive rather than prescriptive.

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