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## Qualitative Research Methods in Business

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- **Introduction:**

Qualitative research is a method of inquiry employed in many different academic disciplines, traditionally in the social sciences, but also in market research and further contexts. Qualitative researchers aim to gather an in-depth understanding of human behavior and the reasons that govern such behavior. The qualitative method investigates the why and how of decision making, not just what, when, or where. Hence, smaller but focused samples are more often used than large samples.

In the conventional view, qualitative methods produce information only of the particular cases studied, and any more general conclusions are only propositions (informed assertions). Quantitative methods can then be used to seek empirical support for such research hypotheses.

- **EVALUATION CRITERIA FOR QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS**

There are some differences between the evaluation of qualitative and quantitative research. The replicability of a qualitative study cannot be formulated as a problem of reliability, and the accuracy of a qualitative interpretation cannot be compared to the explanatory power of a statistical model. In the following paragraphs we propose three main criteria for evaluating qualitative studies. Since in qualitative research the analyses and reporting are very closely intertwined, the following criteria are as relevant to researchers and authors as they are to reviewers and editors: 1) significance of the data set and its social or cultural place; 2) sufficiency of the data, and coverage of the analysis; 3) transparency and repeatability of the analysis.

- 1. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DATASET AND ITS SOCIAL OR CULTURAL PLACE**

The researcher should be prepared to argue that her data are worth analyzing. It is not easy to identify criteria for the significance of data. One precondition can, however, be presented: the researcher should carefully define the social and cultural place (contextualising) and the production conditions of her material.

The production conditions can be discussed at various levels. When the data consist of cultural products, their production and marketing mechanisms should be considered.

Texts produced by individuals should be related to their social position. Furthermore, the situational aspect of the data production and the researcher's potential influence on the data should be evaluated. The relationship of cultural products to people's everyday life depends on the production and distribution network. Weekly magazines and movies represent the ambient culture at

number of levels. When doing comparisons over time it is important to bear in mind that the social and cultural place of one and the same genre may vary from decade to decade.

In international comparisons it is important to be able to exclude demographic variation as a factor causing differences. If we wish to identify the distinct characteristics of Finnish A.A. members' stories, we should make sure that we do not compare Finnish farmers to American college Professors. The criterion for selecting the target group is not demographic but cultural representativity.

Additionally, people speak of the same things in different ways on different occasions, and it is the task of the researcher to decide which discourse she wants to study and argue for her decision in the article. Informal interviews are often advocated instead of questionnaires on the grounds that they will produce more genuine information. But, on the other hand, an in-depth interview is a more exceptional situation for a presentday person than completing a questionnaire. Possible effects of the power structures and gender relations present in every social situation should be considered in the discourse analysis, since it could affect the outcomes of the qualitative research.

Study of the variations of discourse, i.e. the incorporation of the production conditions into the study design, can be rather laborious. Members of A.A. emphasise various sides of their story according to the composition of the audience, and depending on whether they talk at a closed or an open A.A. meeting. Furthermore, the life story will change in relation to how long the speaker has been in A.A. Even when variation cannot be incorporated into the actual study design, it is important to consider and discuss the conditions under which the material was produced and their place in the potential situational variation of the discourse.

## **2. SUFFICIENCY OF DATA AND COVERAGE OF ANALYSIS**

For statistical studies we are able to calculate in advance the extent of data needed to estimate the parameters accurately enough for the purpose of the analysis. We have no similar methods for estimating the extent of qualitative data required. We usually speak about data saturation: data collection can be terminated when new cases no longer disclose new features (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The difficulty here, of course, is that the limit is not always known in advance, and the collection of data is rarely a continuing process which could be terminated or extended at will.

Only in very special cases can you base your analyses on just a handful of observations.

In most cases you will need to be certain that you cover the variation of the phenomenon you are studying. On the other hand, a loose but useful rule is

that one should not collect too much data at a time. It is better to analyze a small data batch carefully first and only then determine what additional data will be needed. To divide the analyses into smaller parts also helps to end up with manageable results for a publishable report.

It is often advisable to group the collection of data according to factors which may prove important as production conditions. The goal is not to explain the variation but to make sure that the data are sufficiently varied. For example, it would be helpful to stratify the collection of A.A. members' life stories according to the members' social position, sex, age and length of sobriety (Arminen, 1998). The only difficulty is that we will have no advance knowledge of which characteristics will decide the type of life stories; they may depend more on drinking experiences than on external circumstances, and within A.A. there may be various narrative traditions which have an influence on the life stories.

A proper coverage of the analysis means that the researcher does not base her interpretations on a few arbitrary cases or instances but on a careful reading of the whole material. Qualitative reports are often loosely impressionistic because the excessive amount of material has made it unfeasible to analyze carefully enough.

### 3. TRANSPARENCY AND REPEATABILITY OF THE ANALYSIS

Transparency of the analysis means that the reader is able to follow the researcher's reasoning, that he is given the necessary information for accepting her interpretations -- or challenging them. The repeatability of an analysis means that the rules of classification and interpretation have been presented so clearly that another researcher applying them will reach the same conclusions. We may identify three ways of improving the transparency and repeatability of qualitative analysis and the report: 1) enumerating the data; 2) dividing the process of interpretation into steps; and 3) making explicit the rules of decision and interpretation.

The best method to decrease arbitrariness and increase repeatability is to enumerate all units on which the interpretation is based. To do this an analytical unit must be specified and it should be as small as possible: in other words, not a movie or a group discussion but a scene, a statement or an adjacent pair. The identification of the unit of analysis is in itself part of the process of interpretation.

The process of interpretation and analysis can never be fully formalized. It is above all a question of working step by step so that the process of interpretation can be made visible to both the researcher herself and the reader. Qualitative analysis is of necessity more personal and less standardized than statistical analysis. Thus it is even more vital that the reader is given as exact a picture as possible of both the technical operations and the chain of reasoning that have led to the reported results. The reader must not be left at the mercy of the

researcher's intuition alone. The demand for transparency in qualitative research is of crucial importance.

- **Emphasis on Qualitative Research Methods**

The research described in this document is based solely on qualitative research methods. This permits (indeed requires) a flexible and iterative approach. During data gathering the choice and design of methods are constantly modified, based on ongoing analysis. This allows investigation of important new issues and questions as they arise, and allows the investigators to drop unproductive areas of research from the original research plan.

- **Sampling**

Unlike quantitative research which uses a random sample generalizable to a larger population, qualitative research uses a purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling involves selection of informants based on an important characteristic under study, such as where they live (rural or urban), position in society (for example, community leader or ordinary householder), or specific cultural knowledge (for example, caretakers of children, farmers, traditional healers). We select informants with the assistance of local leaders and other local persons. Unlike most quantitative studies, we interview informants repeatedly in order to explore issues in-depth.

- **Types of Qualitative Methods Used**

Data gathering methods included key informant interviews, direct observations, illness narratives, and systematic data collection techniques (free listing and pile sorts). We used a variety of methods to achieve triangulation (confirmation of the same information by different methods or sources) to increase the validity of the results.

- **Conclusion:**

To publish qualitative research is as least as challenging as to get quantitative reports accepted. However, it is apparent that the addiction field as a whole is increasingly coming to realize the value of qualitative studies. We believe that in the future there will be an even greater interest in good qualitative research, and a growing demand for mixed methods studies. Those who have dug themselves down into the qualitative or quantitative trenches will come out and start communicating, for their own and everybody's mutual benefit.

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