

Sociology Factsheet



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Qualitative Research

This Factsheet considers the nature and analysis of qualitative data, its strengths and its weaknesses, including issues of subjectivity and objectivity.

What is qualitative data?

- Qualitative data is expressed in detailed descriptions, words or images and is concerned with describing behaviour, experience and feelings.
- It often allows participants to give their response in their own words.
- Qualitative data is more likely to be drawn from open questions/case studies/real world settings.

Exam Hint:- It is important that you can explain the terms qualitative and quantitative and that you can explain the difference between them. Because they are very similar, it is easy to get them muddled up in an exam question so read the question carefully to make sure you are writing about the correct term. Remember qualitative data is concerned with letters/words while quantitative data is concerned with numerical data.

Research methods that use Qualitative Techniques

Qualitative data can be obtained using many different methods.

1. Naturalistic observations where behaviour is watched and/or recorded but not manipulated.

Observations can be either:

Overt Observation. Participants do know they are being observed

OR

Covert Observation. Participants do not know they are being observed



Example of research using observations

BBC TV documentary MacIntyre Undercover (1999) secretly filmed different organisations and groups of people in order to expose abuses or criminal behaviour.

2. Interviews which involve asking questions to participants.

Interviews can be either:

Structured interviews with set questions

OR

Unstructured interviews with no set questions

Example of research using interviews

Hope 2000 conducted interviews with students who were receiving EMA at a college in Truro to explore whether the receipt of EMA affected participation in further education. It was found that the majority of EMA students did not believe that the EMA affected their participation in Further Education. Interview data suggested that many were unaware of the EMA before starting college, or that they would have gone to college regardless of any financial incentive.



3. Questionnaires. A set of written questions given to all participants

Example of research using questionnaires

Lees 1986 conducted a survey and found that girls are more career oriented but still wanted to become wives and mothers. Davie 1972 conducted a survey of 17000 children and found a consistently lower educational performance by children from working class homes

4. Case study. This is an in-depth investigation of a single person, event or group.

Example of research using case study Bowlby

1944 conducted a case study with juvenile thieves to determine whether there is a correlation between maternal deprivation in infancy and adolescent delinquency.

5. Experiments. Whilst experiments mainly produce quantitative data, qualitative data is often collected too (e.g., how participants behaved/felt during the testing).

Example of research using experiment

In research conducted by Stewart, participants were asked to rate the physical attractiveness of 74 defendants in criminal court, covering a broad range of offences. For 67, attractiveness was predictive of both minimum and maximum sentences -the more attractive the defendant, the less severe the sentence imposed.

Exam Hint:- You may be asked to explain qualitative methods and to do this you would need to use examples of the different methods that would provide qualitative data. Using examples would clearly show that you understand qualitative methods.

Remember: Most of these methods can produce both qualitative and/or quantitative data. What makes research one or the other depends on how the study is carried out and the type of data collected. For example, questionnaires may require responses to be on a set scale (quantitative data) or open-ended questions (qualitative data).

What are the advantages and disadvantages of Qualitative data?

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close to reality. Individual responses give a good reflection of how people feel about issues, often reflecting reality • More personal. Qualitative data focuses on individual responses • In depth feelings and meanings. Qualitative research tries to achieve what is called 'verstehen' - they try and see the world through the eyes of those involved. • Sociologists not imposing their view of the world. Individual responses are reflected in the data, rather than a collective summary. • Rich description. Detailed responses can be obtained from individuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subjective. Outcome of research can be affected by personal opinions, experiences and biases of the sociologist • Unreliable. Qualitative research methods e.g. observations often depend on personal relationships being established between the respondent and the researcher and are difficult to be repeated by other researchers with similar results • Not measurable. Qualitative data includes feelings and opinions which are not measurable statistically • Not scientific. Qualitative research methods do not follow scientific methodology • Cannot generalise. Samples studied by qualitative methods tend to be small because the methods are more time consuming and therefore the sample is less likely to generalise to the larger group to which the sample belongs. • Mis-interpretation. Sociologists involved in qualitative research methods e.g. observation may mis-interpret what they see and hear

Overcoming weaknesses of qualitative research

Triangulation may be used to give more credibility to qualitative research findings.

The use of more than one research method when carrying out a piece of research so that the different kinds of data complement each other.

Study

Eileen Barker was interested in 'How Moonies become Moonies?' Moonies are members of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church, now almost universally referred to as "Moonies." Do they join the church as an act of conscious will? Or are most of them just vulnerable youngsters, lured away from their families, and cleverly brainwashed. British sociologist Eileen Barker, dean of Undergraduate Studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science, set herself the task of finding out over a period of nearly seven years. She used many different research methods including interviewing in depth and/or issuing probing questionnaires to Moonies, ex-Moonies, "non-joiners," and control groups of uninvolved individuals from similar backgrounds, as well as parents, spouses, and friends of Moonies. She also attended numerous Moonie workshops and communal facilities to investigate what it was like to live as a Moonie.

Test yourself

1. What different research methods did Barker use in her research?
2. What were the advantages and disadvantages of the different research methods?

Exam Hint:- It is important that you know how qualitative research differs from quantitative research, the relative strengths and weaknesses of each approach, where one may be more appropriate than the other or where both approaches would be appropriate. You need to give full examples to show that you understand the difference between the two types of research. Remember that unlike qualitative research, quantitative research is easy to replicate, can identify cause/effect and involves numbers and statistics.

Theoretical perspective

Phenomenologists favour qualitative data. They argue that quantitative approaches are unsuitable for the study of human behaviour. Questionnaires and structured interviews are based on questions which are relevant and important to sociologists but they may be irrelevant and unimportant to those who answer them.

Sometimes the questions give people little opportunity to say what they really mean. In many cases the required response is simply a tick in one of several boxes. The data may look neat, tidy and scientific when quantified but lacks quality and validity. Qualitative data gives more information and provides data on views and opinions which is much more informative when trying to understand society.

Analysis of qualitative data

It is not as easy to analyse qualitative data as quantitative data.

However, qualitative data could be analysed in the following way

1. Are there trends/themes in the data collected?
2. Use headings to summarise the trends/themes
Quotes may be used to highlight key trends
3. Data may be converted into quantitative data to display in charts or graphs
or for further analysis. For example, it may be possible to summarise the number of times boys and girls played with 'boys' and 'girls' toys in the observational study

Exam Questions

- (a) Explain what is meant by qualitative data.

Examiner's comments

The majority of candidates were able to accurately explain the concept of 'qualitative data'. The better answers offered a clear and succinct definition, referring to the data being descriptive. The best responses displayed a range of knowledge and understanding of the term by adding examples of qualitative data, making theoretical links, or explaining advantages/disadvantages. The vast majority of candidates offered a core definition, followed by an appropriate example. Very few candidates scored low marks on this question; those who did were usually confusing quantitative data for qualitative data.

- (b). Outline and explain the research method you would adopt in collecting qualitative data to find out whether year 11 students in an ethnically diverse town feel they are receiving good advice on the options available to them after their GCSEs

Examiner's Comments

Most candidates were able to select accurate methods with most opting for unstructured interviews. A significant minority chose 'unstructured questionnaires'; it was understood that these were questionnaires with open ended questions, rather than blank sheet of paper (which would be the only way a questionnaire could be 'unstructured') but the Examiners – while crediting such responses – were concerned that such an inappropriate terminology was chosen so frequently.

Many candidates were able to explain why their chosen method was appropriate for their data collection giving examples of the type of data they may collect.

Too many candidates however, confused qualitative and quantitative data.

- (c) Assess the potential weaknesses of your research proposal, briefly explaining how you intend to overcome them

Examiner's Comments

A significant number of candidates produced shorter and less detailed answers here in comparison to part b, despite the fact that it is worth 50% more marks. This indicates a failure of candidates to allocate time efficiently.

Good candidates were able to cue into the context of the question when evaluating the research design; 'finding out about whether Year 11 candidates felt they had been given good advice on their options post GCSE'. Many however ignored the context completely, including those who gave very 'contextualised' answers to part [b]. For example, most candidates identified that participants might lie in interviews, but few stated that this might be because, 'they were worried about what their school might think' or 'that they might want to make their old school look bad'.

Likewise while many saw researcher bias playing a part in the way in which data was selected or analysed and its impact on the validity of the data, few were able to apply this to the context. Few identified the issue of particular types of respondents – those with strong views – as being more likely to agree to take part in interview nor did many identify how this would impact on the type of answers generated. Good responses identified those who had received very good or very bad advice as wanting to respond and consequently over-/under-exaggerating the quality of advice they had received, and those candidates as not wanting to take part in an interview. Weaker candidates did not refer to, or explain, key concepts of validity, reliability, representativeness or generalisation accurately. These were either not mentioned at all, used incorrectly (often apparently randomly) or lumped together in one short paragraph or even sentence; i.e. any problem or solution was identified as having an effect on the validity, reliability, representativeness and generalization of the data.

Some candidates used the technique of triangulation as a solution to all their methodological problems. Few really seemed to engage or understand this technique, with very few clear explanations about how this could overcome the weaknesses of the research method being discussed.

Test Yourself

1. Identify and describe three methods which you could use to collect qualitative data.
2. Explain the difference between qualitative and quantitative data
3. Identify three strengths of qualitative research?
4. Identify three weaknesses of qualitative research?
5. Explain how the weaknesses of qualitative data could be overcome

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