

Qualitative Research

What is Qualitative Research?¹

- takes place in a natural setting—researcher goes to the site of the participant to conduct the research
- uses multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic—researchers seek involvement of their participants in data collection and seek to build rapport and credibility. Methods may involve open-ended observations, interviews, and documents such as journals.
- the data collected involve text (or word) data and images (or picture) data
- is emergent rather than tightly preconfigured—the research questions may change and be refined; the data collection process may change; the theory or general pattern of understanding will emerge and move toward grounded theory or broad understanding

¹ Adapted from Creswell, J.W. 2003. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (2nd Edition). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

What is Qualitative Research?

(cont'd)

- is fundamentally interpretative as researcher describes, individuals, settings, and relations; researcher filters observations through a personal lens that is situated in a specific historical moment.
- views social phenomena holistically; broad views rather than micro-analyses; visual models of the central process or phenomenon help establish holistic picture
- researcher systematically reflects on who he or she is in the inquiry (introspection); acknowledges biases, values, and interests; statements of personal reflection emerge or are embedded throughout a proposal or study;
- involves complex reasoning that is multifaceted, iterative, and simultaneous; reasoning is largely inductive but both inductive and deductive processes are involved.
- uses one or more strategies of inquiry as a guide for the procedures.

Foundational Differences

- **The major difference between qualitative and quantitative research stems from the researcher's underlying strategies.**
- **Quantitative research is viewed as confirmatory and deductive in nature.**
- **Qualitative research is considered to be exploratory and inductive.**

Foundational Similarities

- **All qualitative data can be measured and coded using quantitative methods.**
- **Quantitative research can be generated from qualitative inquiries.**
- **Example: One can code an open-ended interview with numbers that refer to data specific references, or such references could become the origin of a randomized experiment.**

Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches

	Qualitative	Quantitative
Use these philosophical assumptions	Constructivist/Advocacy/Participatory knowledge claims;	Postpositivist knowledge claims
Use these strategies of inquiry	Phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, case study, and narrative	Surveys and experiments
Use these methods	Open-ended questions, emerging approaches, text or image data	Closed-ended questions, predetermined approaches, numeric data
Use these practices of research, as the researcher	Positions himself or herself Collects participant meanings Focuses on a single concept or phenomenon Brings personal values into the study Studies the context or setting of participants Validates the accuracy of findings Makes interpretations of data Creates an agenda for change or reform Collaborates with participants	Tests or verifies theories or explanations Identifies variables to study Relates variables in questions or hypotheses Uses standards of validity and reliability Observes and measures information numerically Uses unbiased approaches Employs statistical procedures

List of Qualitative Data Collection Procedures

- Gather observational notes by observing as a participant
- Gather observational notes by observing as an observer
- Conduct unstructured, open-ended interview and take interview notes
- Conduct unstructured interview, audiotape the interview, and transcribe the interview
- Keep a journal during the research study
- Have a participant keep a journal during the research study
- Optically scan newspaper accounts
- Collect personal letters from participants
- Analyze public documents (e.g., official memos, minutes, records, archival materials)

List of Qualitative Data Collection Procedures (Cont'd)

- Examine autobiographies and biographies
- Have a participant write his or her autobiography
- Write your own (the researcher's) autobiography
- Have participants take photographs or videotapes
- Examine physical trace evidence (e.g., footprints)
- Videotape a social situation or an individual/group
- Examine photographs or videotapes
- Collect sounds (e.g., musical sounds, crowd noises)
- Collect e-mail or electronic messages
- Examine possessions or objects to elicit views during an interview
- Collect smells, tastes, or sensations through touch

Terminology in Qualitative Research

- **Grounded theory**
- **Ethnography**
- **Phenomenology**
- **Field research**

Grounded Theory

- **Grounded theory refers to an inductive process of generating theory from data.**
- **This is considered ground-up or bottom-up processing.**
- **Grounded theorists argue that theory generated from observations of the empirical world may be more valid and useful than theories generated from deductive inquiries.**

Grounded Theory (con't)

- **Grounded theorists criticize deductive reasoning since it relies upon *a priori* assumptions about the world.**
- **However, grounded theory incorporates deductive reasoning when using constant comparisons.**
- **In doing this, researchers detect patterns in their observations and then create working hypotheses that directs the progression of the inquiry.**

Ethnography

- **Ethnography emphasizes the observation of details of everyday life as they naturally unfold in the real world. This is sometimes called naturalistic research.**
- **Ethnography is a method of describing a culture or society. This is primarily used in anthropological research.**

Phenomenology

- **Phenomenology is a school of thought that emphasizes a focus on people's subjective experiences and interpretations of the world.**
- **Phenomenological theorists argue that objectivity is virtually impossible to ascertain, so to compensate, one must view all research from the perspective of the researcher.**

Phenomenology (con't)

- **Phenomenologists attempt to understand those whom they observe from the subjects' perspective.**
- **This outlook is especially pertinent in social work and research where empathy and perspective become the keys to success.**

Field Research

- **Field research is a general term that refers to a group of methodologies used by researchers in making qualitative inquiries.**
- **The field researcher goes directly to the social phenomenon under study and observes it as completely as possible.**

Field Research (con't)

- **The natural environment is the priority of the field researcher. There are no implemented controls or experimental conditions to speak of.**
- **Such methodologies are especially useful in observing social phenomena over time.**

Methods

- **Participant observation**
- **Direct observation**
- **Unstructured or intensive interviewing**
- **Case studies**
- **Focus Groups**

Participant Observation

- **The researcher literally becomes part of the observation.**
- **Example: One studying the homeless may decide to walk the streets of a given area in an attempt to gain perspective and possibly subjects for future study.**

Direct Observation

- **Direct observation is where the researcher observes the actual behaviors of the subjects, instead of relying on what the subjects say about themselves or others say about them.**
- **Example: Observing people in a National Park visitor center as they interact with various interpretive displays.**

Unstructured or Intensive Interviewing

- **This method allows the researcher to ask open-ended questions during an interview.**
- **Details are more important here than a specific interview procedure.**
- **Here lies the inductive framework through which theory can be generated.**

Example—Deep Play and the Flow Experience in Rock Climbing

The physical and mental requirements involved in staying on the rock act as a screen for stimuli of ordinary life....

“When I start on a climb, it’s as if my memory input had been cut off. All I can remember is the last thirty seconds, and all I can think ahead is the next five minutes....with tremendous concentration the normal world is forgotten.”

“When you’re [climbing] you’re not aware of other problematic life situations. It becomes a world unto its own, significant only to itself. It’s a concentration thing. Once you’re into the situation, it’s incredibly real, and you’re very much in charge of it. It becomes your total world.”

“You’re moving in harmony with something else, you’re a part of it. It’s one of the few activities in which you don’t feel you have all sorts of different kinds of conflicting demands on you.”

Case Studies

- **A particular case study may be the focus of any of the previously mentioned field strategies.**
- **The case study is important in qualitative research, especially in areas where exceptions are being studied.**
- **Example: A national park may have crowding conditions that are not experienced at other national parks. Visitor behavioral problems are unique to the setting and potential managerial solutions have not been researched.**

Strengths and Weaknesses

- **Objectivity**
- **Reliability**
- **Validity**
- **Generalizability**

Objectivity

- **It is given that objectivity is impossible in qualitative inquiry. Instead the researcher locates his/herself in the research.**
- **Objectivity is replaced by subjective interpretation and mass detail for later analysis.**

Reliability

- **Since procedure is de-emphasized in qualitative research, replication and other tests of reliability become more difficult.**
- **However, measures may be taken to make research more reliable within the particular study (such as observer training, or more objective checklists, and so on).**

Validity

- **Qualitative researchers use greater detail to argue for the presence of construct validity.**
- **Weak on external validity--results for the most part, do not extend much further than the original subject pool**

Generalizability

- **Sampling methods determine the extent of the study's generalizability.**
- **Quota and Purposive sampling strategies are used to broaden the generalizability.**

Summary

- **There are always trade-offs in research.**
- **Are you willing to trade detail for generalizability?**
- **Will exploratory research enable you to generate new theories?**
- **Can you ask such sensitive questions on a questionnaire?**

Summary (con't)

- **Will the results add any evidence toward any pre-existing theory or hypothesis?**
- **Is funding available for this research?**
- **Do you really need to see numbers to support your theories or hypotheses?**
- **Are there any ethical problems that could be minimized by choosing a particular strategy?**

Coding Qualitative Data

What is Coding

Coding is the process of organizing the qualitative data [usually text or image] into “chunks” before bringing meaning to those chunks.

Coding is analysis. To review a set of field notes, transcribed or synthesized, and to dissect them meaningfully, while keeping the relations between the parts intact, is the stuff of analysis.

Miles and Huberman, An Expanded Sourcebook: Qualitative Data Analysis, p. 56.

The Coding Process¹

1. Get a sense of the whole. Read all the transcriptions carefully. Perhaps write down some ideas as they come to mind.
2. Pick one interview or document—the most interesting, or shortest, or one on top of the pile—and read through it asking yourself what it is about. Do not think about the “substance” of the information but its underlying meaning. Write thoughts in the margin.
3. After completing this task for several informants, make a list of all topics. Cluster together similar topics (e.g., place in same piles). Form topics into columns that might be arrayed as major topics, unique topics, and leftovers.
4. Take list of topics and go back to data. Abbreviate the topics as codes and write the codes next to the appropriate segments of text. Try this preliminary organizing scheme to see if new categories and codes emerge.
5. Find the most descriptive wording for your topics and turn them into categories. Look for ways of reducing your total list of categories by grouping topics that relate to each other. Perhaps draw lines between categories to show interrelationships.
6. Make a final decision on the abbreviation for each category and alphabetize these codes.
7. Assemble the data material belonging to each category in one place and perform a preliminary analysis.
8. If necessary, recode your existing data.

Example of Coding

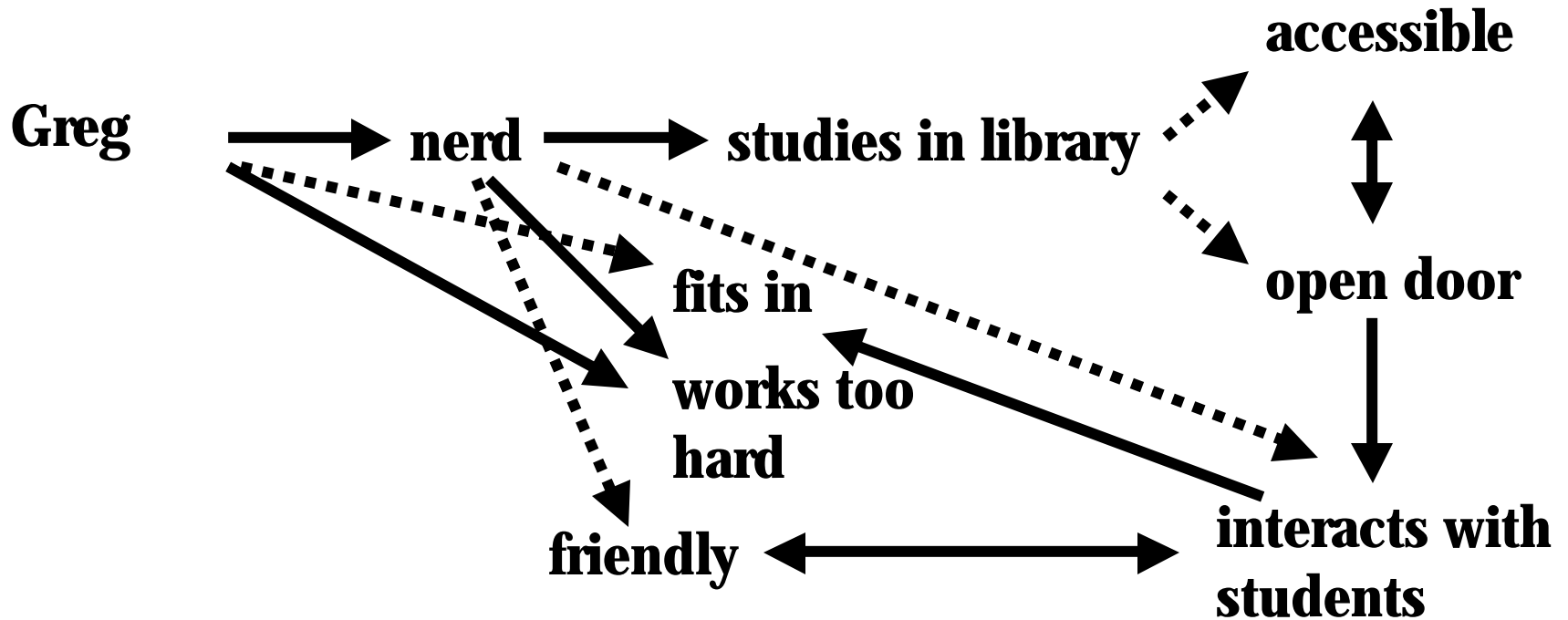
Question: *“What in this course has helped you the most?”*

Response	Initial Coding	Focused Coding
<i>I appreciate how much the</i>	Encouraging expression of viewpoint	Encouraging student participation
<i>instructor encouraged us to</i>		
<i>voice our opinions and to ask</i>	Encouraging questions	
<i>questions in class. As much as</i>	Responded to questions	Presentation of content
<i>possible, he took the time to</i>		
<i>respond to everyone’s</i>	Explained content	Student empowerment
<i>questions and opinions, to</i>		
<i>explain concepts, and then to</i>	Check for understanding	
<i>make sure everyone</i>	Student feels valued	
<i>understood his answers. This</i>		
<i>helped me because I felt like I</i>	Student feels involved in own learning	
<i>was being heard and I became</i>		
<i>more involved in learning the</i>		
<i>material.</i>		

List of Possible Types of Codes

- **Setting and context codes**
- **Perspectives held by subjects**
- **Subjects' ways of thinking about people and objects**
- **Process codes**
- **Activity codes**
- **Strategy codes**
- **Relationship and structure codes**
- **Preassigned coding schemes**

Concept Mapping



Legend

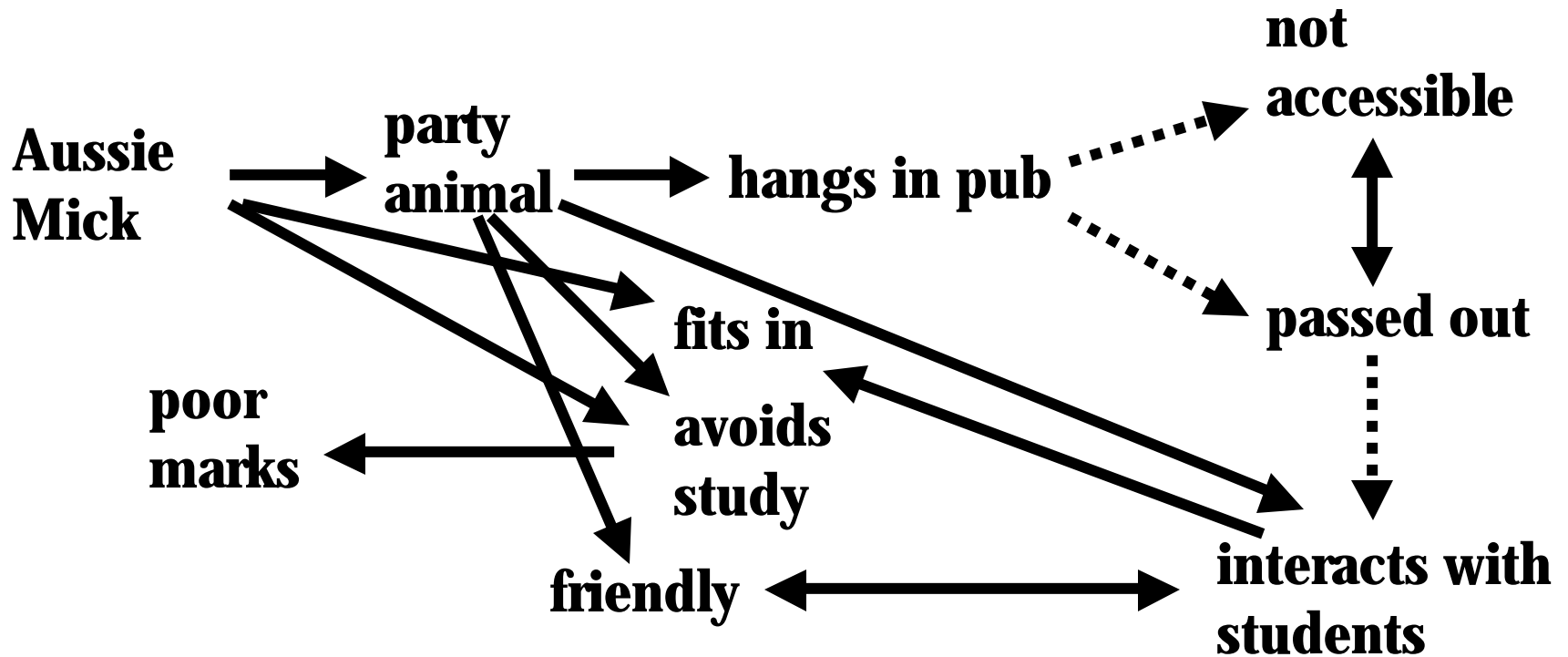


Positive relationship



Negative relationship

Concept Mapping



Legend



Positive relationship



Negative relationship