

Qualitative Research Questions and Methodological Approaches

“Listening with the third ear...”

I. Quantitative and qualitative research questions

A. First, let’s review quantitative research questions. They can be about

1. Descriptive research, e.g. “What is the proportion of homeless people who have a mental illness?” or “How do San Jose public school test scores compare with other cities?” or
2. Explanatory research, e.g. “Is there a relationship between self esteem in adolescents and their school performance?” or “Does CBT help older adults in long term care maintain cognitive functioning?”

B. Qualitative research comes from...

1. A reaction against positivist thinking. *Positivism* is
 - a) The view that an external, objective reality exists apart from our perceptions though we may never fully understand it
 - b) Which allows us to generalize to the “unknown” population from our know sample
2. The growth of relativism, interpretivism, constructivism, feminism, queer theory, etc.
 - a) They share the view that reality is self- and culturally- determined (sometimes forced on others by the majority’s viewpoint)
3. The tradition of scientific *inductive observation*
 - a) Observed the world
 - b) Tried to make generalizations from these observations
 - c) Built theory on these generalizations
 - d) Where would we be without the inductive observations of scientist John Snow that led to eliminating cholera (discovered to be linked to contaminated water pump handles in 19th century Europe)?

II. The Five Qualitative Approaches (a.k.a. Qualitative Research Designs)

Note: qualitative research questions will mirror one of the following types of research.

A. **Narrative research**—focuses on stories of individual

- How does a Somali immigrant woman describe her life events leading up to the decision to come to the U.S.?
- What were the significant developmental milestones of an adolescent involved with the juvenile justice system?
- What is the life history of a Mexican *curandero* (healer) as related in his own words?

B. **Phenomenological research**—focuses on the meaning (or essence) of experience *with a phenomenon* for several individuals. What they experienced, how they experienced it

- What is the experience of transition to the U.S. by Somali women?
- How do adolescents describe their experiences negotiating the juvenile justice system?
- How do Mexican Americans compare their experiences with natural healers to the U.S. formal healthcare system?

C. **Grounded theory research**—focuses on discovering or building theory from data. This type of approach is often used in the early stages of developing an instrument, e.g. what are the important dimensions of the concept, and how might they be related? Also used in evaluative research, e.g. how does this treatment work to achieve the desired outcome?

- Is there a series of stages that Somali women go through in immigrating to the U.S.?
- Can we describe a general pathway by which adolescents typically get involved with the juvenile justice system?
- Why are there disparities in the U.S. formal healthcare system for Mexican Americans?

D. **Ethnographic research**—focuses on understanding a cultural or social group

- Which cultural traditions for Somali women change in the transition to U.S. society after immigrating?
- Are there subcultures that form in juvenile detention facilities?
- How do *curanderos* describe their cultural traditions, and are they different than those described by healthcare workers in formal settings in Mexico?

E. **Case study**—focuses on understanding many aspects of a “bounded system” (an event, a group, a geographic entity, a policy, etc.). A case study can be *single*, or *collective* (more than one bounded system, such as a case study of two community hospitals)

- How does a community organization prepare Somali women for the transition to American culture?
- Case study of two county juvenile detention facilities—do facility staff provide informal services to detained youth?
- Case study of a community—how do informal and formal health care providers work together in a Los Angeles community?

III. Summary

Qualitative approach	Typical Purpose/Method	Typical number of participants
Narrative	Finds themes in stories, histories	One
Phenomenological	Finds themes from shared experiences	More than one
Grounded theory	Finds relationships among themes to build theory	Small groups
Ethnographic	Finds themes of shared culture	Small to medium size groups
Case study	Study of “bounded system”—often involves mixed methods	Single (one case) or collective (a small number of cases)

Discussion of Birzer & Smith-Mahdi article “Does race matter...”

- I. What is it that makes this a phenomenological study?
- II. Why is a qualitative approach better for this study than a quantitative one?
- III. In the (“Does race matter?...”) the authors conclude that the study explored themes of racism from the participants’ perspective. Give an example of one of those themes.
- IV. What are the sources of the various themes used in the study? The authors state (p. 26, “Data Analysis”) that the themes are grouped into categories that depict multiple aspects of discrimination. Where do those categories come from? (These themes are listed on p. 27.)
- V. Were you convinced that the interviewers accurately “heard” the themes from the interviews?
- VI. Although the sampling strategies of qualitative research don’t allow for generalizability, the authors maintain that the findings here can be generalized. Do you agree?

Introduction to Writing Method Sections—Components for Writing Assignment #3

A few general tips:

- Remember—you are writing a proposal. In the Method section use the future tense (“I plan to...” “Respondents will be asked to...” “The research design for this study will be...”)
- Follow format for headings given in Instructions
- Double space, double space, double space....
- Make sure the right things go in the right places (e.g. information about your sample under “Sample”)

This outline is from the Written Assignment #3 description (*a few additions in italics*). Use this outline for your paper, and **review Chapters 9 and 10 of the Pyrczak & Bruce book** for stylistic guidelines. **The headings in bold are required in your paper**.

A. **Research Design:** Identifying and describing the specific design or method for the quantitative and/or qualitative components of your study, i.e., cross-sectional survey research, classical experimental design, phenomenology, ethnography, etc. (*Note: It might be helpful to begin with labeling the study as either exploratory, descriptive, explanatory, evaluative, or a combination. A study involving both quantitative and qualitative components is a mixed methods study*).

B. **Sample** – Identifying and describing:

1. Sampling frame, specific sampling method with procedures (i.e., simple random sampling, convenience sampling, etc.), and your anticipated sample size. *Don't forget to describe the sampling frame (list) if your study site has one available.*
2. Demographic description, in general, of your prospective participants

C. **Study Site** – Identifying and describing where your study will take place

D. **Variables and Measurement, and/or Themes** – Including

1. Operational definition for all quantifiable variables (including controls) and/or description of qualitative themes consistent with your study's model
2. Description of quantitative and/or qualitative instruments, for example, a detailed description of the survey and example items for a quantitative measure, and/or the questions asked in an interview. *Note: finding an existing survey for your study would be helpful, but not required. Some topics are not developed enough to have already developed instruments.* Also include a discussion about the reliability and validity of these instruments, and/or procedures for establishing the credibility, trustworthiness, and verification for qualitative data. Also refer to the appendix where sample items and/or copies of your instruments (*if available*) will be placed as part of the paper. *You don't have to develop an instrument for this project. However, you will have to develop operational definitions for variables which may require you to give examples of survey questions.*

E. **Human Subjects Considerations** – Describing how you will obtain informed consent, ensure participants' confidentiality or anonymity, protect them from harm, and submit your proposal to an IRB for review and approval (*Note: you will not have to write and submit an actual IRB application until ScWk 298.*)

F. **Procedures and Data Collection Techniques** – Describing the procedures of your study, and if as part of the study you would be administering an intervention, program, or treatment, a description of *these procedures*. *For evaluative research, this is where you would describe*

the intervention procedures. Also, describe specific proposed data collection strategies (e.g. interviews, focus groups, surveys, etc. Also include the timeframes of data collection, e.g. once for a cross-sectional study, or in multiple waves for a longitudinal study. If your study will involve recruiting respondents, describe the recruitment procedures. If your study involves random assignment, describe that here.

G. Study Design Limitations – Discuss the potential limitations of your method. (*For studies hypothesizing causality, a discussion of potential threats to internal validity would be appropriate in this section.*) Also, discuss limitations in generalizing your study to a larger population or a different population.

Group Exercise—Formulating Qualitative Research Questions

Scenario: You are conducting research in a county mental health clinic on the impact of a group intervention designed to help adults with mental illness improve their overall wellness in the areas of nutrition, exercise, and social relations, among others. The research design utilizes a quasi-experimental pretest posttest non-equivalent comparison group design, measuring outcomes in each of the wellness areas. You also want to design a qualitative component in addition to the quantitative one.

1. Write a research question for each of the five qualitative approaches. Decide who will be in your sample.
2. Each small group will be assigned one of the qualitative approaches. Write five interview questions that fit your assigned research approach.

Important concepts and definitions to learn

- Positivist thinking
- Theoretical bases for qualitative research
- Narrative approach
- Phenomenological approach
- Bounded system (case study)
- Case study approach & types (single, collective)
- Ethnographic approach
- Grounded theory approach

Study questions, next week:

Article: “Women’s voices on recovery...”

1. Identify the main research questions. **Student report**
2. This is a mixed methods study. What methods are being mixed? **Student report**
3. How is “resilience” use as a theoretical foundation for the study?
4. Although the authors describe the study as “exploratory” there are explanatory aspects of the quantitative analyses. What are the dependent and independent variables for the explanatory research question?
5. Give a specific example how were qualitative findings added something important to the quantitative methods? **Student report**
6. What are the implications of the study for social work practice?
7. What did you find especially convincing about this study?