

5 Key Components of a Successful Qualitative Research Design: Insights for Beginners

By: Manpreet Kaur at Elite Research LLC



Introduction

Qualitative research uses narratives, statements, and words as the data to be collected and analyzed rather than numbers or quantifiable data. It is used to ascertain an in-depth, detailed understanding of a topic or phenomenon. Qualitative research pulls context and nuance to the forefront of the data and helps produce knowledge that often contributes to a more general understanding of a phenomenon. There are various forms of data collection used within qualitative research, and multiple methods can be used within one project to get the most accurate and meaningful data from participants. The process of conducting qualitative research is often longer than quantitative research because it requires on-the-ground, hands on data collection, it is interpretive, and there is no exact way or formula to use when analyzing the data and reporting results.

5 Key Components

There are many aspects and components of qualitative research that need to be implemented when coming up with a research design.¹

1. **Research question** – Coming up with a good research question determines the trajectory of the rest of the research design and project. Research questions must be stated clearly and concisely and differ from research aims/goals because they directly

express what the research project is trying to achieve. The research question will influence the direction of the literature review and consequently, all following steps.

2. **Theoretical/conceptual framework or paradigm** – A theoretical or conceptual framework is a foundational set of understandings that act as a roadmap or structural support for research. A paradigm is a set of beliefs, assumptions, practice, and values that are accepted and shared within the research community that provide an overarching framework for a research study. In qualitative research, it is important to have an underpinning theoretical or conceptual framework as it can be used to formulate necessary questions, can be used to make thematic or conceptual distinctions, and can assist in organizing ideas and results.
3. **Data collection method** – Decisions about the type of study, the method of data collection, and the times data will be collected are critical in determining the success of a research project. The research design should consider which methods of data collection would be the most beneficial in answering the research question and consider the type of study, the population, the sample size, and the nature of the research.

¹ Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2013). Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners.

4. **Data analysis strategy** – The methods for data analysis need to be carefully considered in any qualitative research design. Multiple methods of data analysis can be used within a study, but each method must be outlined and explained before analysis occurs. Appropriate qualitative data analysis software needs to be identified and the method for data analysis has to be appropriate for the research question and the data collected.

5. **Researcher reflexivity** – Researchers always bring a level of bias and subjectivity into research. This begins even before the research ensues, as bias is present in the selection of a research topic or phenomena. A researchers' subjective experiences of the world (their race, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, politics, passions, and perspectives) are brought into the research. It is important for researchers to acknowledge and understand how these subjectivities on part of each researcher impact the research process. This is called reflexivity. Reflexivity is a strength in research as it helps examine how each person's subjective experiences contribute to the type of data collected and the way that research data might differ or change based on who is conducting it.

Challenges to Consider

There can be many aspects and considerations to take into account when preparing a qualitative research design. Some of these include²:

1. **Determining Resource Needs** – When developing a qualitative research design, it is imperative to consider the resources that will be necessary to conduct the research at a high level. These resources can include but are not limited to technology such as audio/tape recorders, laptops, or cameras, notebooks, research personnel, travel, and participant compensation.
2. **Ethical Considerations** – Qualitative research is dynamic and the field of research is constantly shifting and changing as society does. There are many ethical considerations to think about before designing a research study and also while the research is ongoing. It is important within qualitative research to examine the impact a research study can have on a population and on each participant. It is also critical to ensure that participants are compensated for the time they spend taking part in the research project, but that the participants aren't being coerced into participation due to the compensation.

² Frankel, R. M., & Devers, K. J. (2000). Study design in qualitative research—1: Developing questions and assessing resource needs. *Education for health, 13*(2), 251-261.

3. Identifying/Negotiating Access to study Sites and Subjects – Qualitative research depends on cooperation and collaboration from community members, stakeholders, and organizations in order to get access to study sites and study participants. Because the data are collected with a hands-on approach, with the researchers existing within community spaces, building connections and rapport within the community of interest is beneficial as it fosters trust and shows a commitment to the community.

4. Data Collection and Management – Qualitative data is often identifying and personal. A qualitative research design must consider the equipment and software that data will be collected, analyzed, and stored on to ensure that data results will be deidentified and any raw, identifying information will be safely stored and managed for the length of the study and beyond.

Conclusion

This article highlights the five key components to developing a successful qualitative research design. Developing a clear and concise research question is the most critical aspect of a research design. Ensuring that the research question is explicit in portraying the goal of the study will allow the researcher to determine feasibility and will reflect in the rest of the research design. Selecting an appropriate theoretical framework or paradigm provides a strong foundational base to the research and helps organize various concepts and ideas. Choosing the best method or methods for data collection is crucial in qualitative data, as this is where all of the data you retrieve will come from. The data collection method will be a reflection of the research question selected, a cost-benefit analysis, and project feasibility. Choosing the right data analysis method is dependent on the data collected and the type of results desired. There are many methods of data analysis that can co-occur within a research project, but it is important to outline these prior to beginning. Research reflexivity is a critical aspect of qualitative research as the researcher acknowledges how their subjectivities and biases impact their research experiences and the data collected, building trustworthiness and credibility.

Take Away

This article outlines the key components for developing a successful qualitative research design and some challenges to consider when approaching a qualitative research study. Building a level of rapport within the community and viewing the world through a lens of cultural relativity are helpful when thinking about and designing a qualitative research study.

About the Author

Manpreet Kaur, MA., Qualitative Data Analyst at Elite Research, has extensive experience in qualitative research methods, coding, and analysis. In her role, she ensures accurate data analysis, contributing to community and organizational development and advancement. With expertise in project management and data analysis, she enhances understanding across diverse domains. Collaborating with researchers, organizations, and communities, she shapes qualitative research using techniques like interviews and focus groups. Holding Masters degrees in Sociology and Medical Anthropology from Case Western Reserve University, she's dedicated to applying social science research to address global issues in modern day society.



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1.800.806.5661
9901 E. Valley Ranch Pkwy, Suite 2035, Irving, TX 75063



consulting@eliteresearch.com
www.eliteresearch.com