

Chapter 3

Qualitative Assessment

A VARIETY OF research approaches fit under the umbrella of qualitative assessment research methods. Qualitative research includes such studies as ethnographies, case studies, evaluations, historical research, policy research, market research (Birley and Morgan, 1998), as well as phenomenology, cultural studies, and semiotics (Gall, Borg, and Gall, 1996). Among the research techniques that are part of this research tradition are interviews (both individual and group), document analysis, and field observations of people. Although the amount of rigor attributed to this form of research has been debated, little question remains that this form of research is quite rigorous.

A number of definitions can be applied to the term *qualitative research methodology*. Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 2) define qualitative research as "multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them." For the purpose of this chapter, we wish to use the definition inspired by Patton (1990) presented in Upcraft and Schuh (1996, p. 21): "Qualitative methodology is the detailed description of the situations, events, people, interactions, and observed behaviors, the use of direct quotations from people about their experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts; and the analysis of excerpts or entire passages from documents, correspondence, records and case histories." Whitt (1991, p. 406) cautions that "a precise and generally agreed-upon definition of qualitative research is at this time—perhaps for all time—elusive."

This chapter provides a brief overview of qualitative research techniques. Many colleges and universities offer courses in qualitative methodology, and excellent books are available that discuss this topic in depth. At the end of this chapter, in addition to the References, we have added a list

of suggested readings, which provide an excellent discussion of qualitative research techniques. Besides this list, reading good qualitative studies is helpful in developing these skills.

Key Assumptions of Qualitative Methods

Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of the world and their experiences in it (Merriam, 1998). Making meaning, explaining their lives, reporting how various experiences have affected them, and other similar broad forms of how people interpret the world and their experiences are the basis for qualitative research. This form of research is not concerned with conducting studies that apply broadly to situations outside the case being studied. In this respect, this research tradition is the opposite of quantitative research, which often is interested in generalizing the findings of the study to a larger population. Qualitative research generally does not reflect this interest.

Whereas questionnaires and other kinds of instruments are used to collect information in quantitative research, in the case of qualitative methods, the researcher, often in the field, is the primary means by which data are collected and analyzed.

Qualitative research usually requires fieldwork. The persons conducting the research need to get out of their offices and into the field to collect their data. That may be accomplished through interviews on site, observing people in the field, or collecting and reviewing documents. Punch (1994, p. 83) describes qualitative researchers this way: "They should abandon the classroom in order to knock on doors, troop the streets, and join groups."

Qualitative research primarily is an inductive strategy—that is, the data lead to a theory rather than researchers' conducting an inquiry to test a theory. In going into the field to collect data, the researchers may have ideas as to what they may find, but they do not conduct the research project to test a theory. Rather, they may conduct the research project to develop a theory that explains the situation. "Theory evolves during actual research, and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection" (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, p. 273). This is the opposite of the deductive approach used in quantitative research.

The resulting product of a qualitative study should be descriptive and detailed. The report of the research findings is a rich, thick description of the situation studied in the field. Whitt (1991, p. 412) describes reports as "detailed descriptions of what was done and why, and of the phenomena

studied, including contexts, behaviors, perceptions, feelings and insights. An important element of thick description is the use, to the extent possible, of verbatim quotations. "One is never entirely sure when the project has been completed, but until a rich, thick description has been developed, the work has to continue.

Comparisons with Quantitative Methods

Qualitative methods reflect a substantially different approach to research from quantitative methods. Some individuals try to make the case that one approach is more rigorous than the other, that one is better than the other, and so on. What appears to be emerging in the literature about research methods, however, is that both research traditions are highly valued, and when they are used in combination with one another, the researcher can develop high-quality studies. Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996, p. 32), point out that "both approaches have helped educational researchers make important discoveries." Birley and Morgan (1998, p. 38) add, "It should never be forgotten that the choice of methodologies is dependent upon the subject of the research and the related aspects of the research design."

Actually, the two research traditions are not as distinctive as one might conclude. Qualitative researchers use computers, at one time thought to be the exclusive territory of quantitative researchers (Richards and Richards, 1994). Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight (1996, p. 61) offer the following observation on how the lines between these approaches to research have become blurred:

On the first consideration, the use of questionnaires as a research technique might be seen as a quantitative strategy, whereas interviews and observations might be thought of as qualitative techniques. In practice, however, it is often more complicated than that. Thus, interviews may be structured and analyzed in a quantitative manner as when numeric data is collected or when non-numeric answers are categorized and coded to numeric form. Similarly, surveys may allow for open-ended responses and lead to the in-depth study of individual cases.

Table 3.1 compares the two research traditions. It is important to remember that the differences between these research traditions fundamentally have much more to do with assumptions about research than actual research techniques. For example, Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996, p. 30) assert that quantitative researchers "assume an objective social reality," while qualitative researchers "assume that social reality is constructed by the participants

TABLE 3.1

A Brief Comparison of Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

	Qualitative	Quantitative
Epistemological roots	Postpositivist research	Positivist research
Focus of research	Quality (nature, essence)	Quantity (how much, how many)
Philosophical roots	Postmodernism	Modernism
Key concepts	Meaning, understanding, description	Statistical relationships, prediction control, description, hypothesis testing
Associated terms	<i>Fieldwork, ethnographic, naturalistic</i>	<i>Experimental, empirical, statistical</i>
Sampling	Nonrepresentative, small, purposeful	Large, random, representative, stratified
Data	Field notes, people's own words	Measures, counts, numbers
Methods	Observations, reviewing documents	Experiments, surveys, instruments
Instruments	Researcher, tape recorder, camera, computer	Inventories, questionnaires
Data analysis	Ongoing, inductive (by researcher)	Deductive (by statistical methods)
Findings	Comprehensive, holistic, richly descriptive	Precise, numerical
Advantages	Flexibility, emphasis on understanding large groups, hard-to-explain anomalies	Ease of use, high acceptance
Disadvantages	Time, hard-to-reduce data, hard-to-study large groups, hard-to-explain anomalies	Controlling intervening variables, oversimplification

Sources: Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Worthen and Sanders, 1987; Gall, Borg, and Gall, 1996; and Merriam, 1998.

in it." (We refer readers to Gall, Borg, and Gall, 1996, for a fuller discussion of the philosophical differences between these research traditions.)

Planning a Qualitative Study

Birley and Morgan (1998) posit a series of questions that need to be considered in planning a qualitative study:

What are the research questions that are the focus of the interviews? From an assessment perspective, this question relates directly to the question, "What is the problem?" or "What is the purpose of our study?"

Who is the sample? In the development of the assessment project, this question could be reframed as, "What information do we need from our study?"

What interview structure should be used: structured, semistructured, or unstructured? The interview structure can vary from a highly structured format, with precise questions asked of the respondents, to a much more conversational approach, where only a general question might be asked (for example, "What is it like to be a student at this college?") and the interchange follows the direction the interviewees take it.

What should the format be of the different questions and any necessary prompts and follow-up questions? Generally the questions will be framed in such a way as to elicit rich, descriptive responses. Nevertheless, different types of questions generate different kinds of responses.

How will responses be recorded? Various ways of recording the data are available, including taking notes, audio- or videorecording, or some combination of these approaches.

Who should be interviewed (should they be typical of the targeted population, atypical, or both?), and how should they be interviewed? A wide variety of sampling techniques is available to the researchers. These range from simply asking people who can be identified conveniently to participate to other forms of sampling.

How are respondents contacted? Will they be invited by mail, by the telephone, in person, or through some other technique?

Where and how will the interviews be conducted? (formal? informal? at home?) Thought must go into determining where the interviews are conducted to ensure that they will not be disrupted by noise or distractions and or that the facility will prove inadequate (too small, too hot, poorly lit, or otherwise unsuitable). Especially thorough planning is necessary in providing sites for focus groups, for example (Morgan, 1998).

What protocols will be used in producing transcripts? How will the data be recorded. Will transcripts be developed? If so, will verbatim transcripts be developed (Birley and Morgan, 1998)?

Interviews: Individual or Group?

"The most common form of interviewing is individual, face to face verbal interchange, but it can also take the form of face-to-face group interviewing, mailed or self-administered questionnaires, and telephone surveys"

(Fontana and Frey, 1994, p. 361). Central to all forms of interviews "are the trust and rapport to be built with respondents" (Manning, 1992, p. 102).

Individual and group interviews have advantages and disadvantages. Individual interviews give each person interviewed an opportunity to answer each question completely. Rapport can be established more quickly in an individual interview, and the interviewer can focus completely on the respondent's comments rather than having to be concerned about the dynamics of the group. However, interviewing the entire pool of subjects individually can take a great deal of time. Moreover, if a person does not show up for the interview, the interviewer will be wasting an entire interview time period.

Focus group interviews are a structured process for interviewing a small group of individuals. They had their origins in market research but now are used widely in education and social science research (Witkin and Altschuld, 1995).

Group interviews are more efficient than individual interviews for obvious reasons. Among the advantages, according to Fontana and Frey (1994), are that this form of data collection is relatively inexpensive, data rich, flexible, and stimulating to respondents. The group can be conducted even if several people who were expected do not attend. However, group dynamics can be a bit difficult to manage if people are talking to each other, reading, or engaging in disruptive behavior. Fontana and Frey (1994) point out that this form of interviewing takes greater skill on the part of the interviewer, can be dominated by one person, and can lead to groupthink. On the other hand, people in a group can stimulate the thinking of each other, a process that can make for a very rich discussion.

Sampling

Miles and Huberman (1994) have described several key features of sampling. Sampling in this research tradition tends to be purposive, as opposed to random. Samples also tend to be small in number, as opposed to large data sets more commonly found in quantitative inquiries. Patton (1990) identifies a number of different kinds of purposeful sampling approaches:

Typical sampling—samples are selected because they reflect the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest (Merriam, 1998). Key informants may be useful in identifying such subjects.

Extreme or deviant case sampling—cases that are rich because they are unusual or special in some unique way.

Intensity sampling—cases that are information rich but are not unusual.

Homogeneous sampling—a small sample of individuals who share common characteristics and describe it in depth.

Stratified, purposeful sampling—consists of taking a sample of above-average, average, and below-average cases.

Criterion sampling—selects subjects on the basis of certain predetermined criteria.

Confirming or disconfirming case sampling—includes subjects who will confirm what has been learned already, or will disconfirm what has been learned; that is, they will disagree with what has been learned.

Opportunistic sampling—requires that the researchers include an unexpected case in the sample because of something that occurs unexpectedly.

Politically sensitive case sampling—included because of the politically sensitive nature of the situation. In a study of student leaders, for example, it would make sense to make sure that the most prominent student leaders on the campus are included on the basis of the positions they hold.

Convenience sampling—a form of sampling that involves selected individuals because they are easy to identify and invite to participate in the study. These students, however, may or may not be able to contribute much to the study.

Snowball or chain sampling—respondents are asked who else among the potential respondent group may be knowledgeable about the subject under study. Merriam (1998) also refers to this form of sampling as *network sampling*.

Regardless of the sampling technique used, the sample should be information rich (Morse, 1994), that is, in a position to be knowledgeable about the topic under consideration.

Weiss's observations (1991, p. 228) are particularly instructive in drawing a sample for a study: "I am also heartened by the widespread recognition today among evaluators, as well as policy researchers and social scientists generally, that research has a political dimension." What this suggests is that in drawing a sample, important political considerations must be taken into account. Failure to do so can doom a study, no matter how pristine the methodology.

One of the questions that arises in sampling is how many individuals should be sampled before enough subjects have been identified. Mathematical formulas can be helpful in answering this question for quantitative

studies, but the situation is more ambiguous for qualitative studies. Merriam (1998, p. 64) cites Lincoln and Guba (1985) on this matter and concludes that sampling continues until "a point of saturation or redundancy is reached." (This issue is developed in detail in Chapter Four.)

Developing Interview Questions

Interviews can range from being highly structured to having no structure at all. "Structured interviewing refers to a situation in which an interviewer asks each respondent a series of preestablished questions with a limited set of response categories" (Fontana and Frey, 1994). The nature of the interview structure will depend to a great extent on the nature of the problem. (Chapter Four on developing focus groups provides more information on this topic.)

The moderator of the interview needs to be well prepared for the session and have specialized skills. Not just any person can walk into a room with a group of people and conduct a focus group skillfully. People with academic course work in counseling or other forms of listening skills have good preparation for conducting focus groups. Merriam (1998, p. 85) observes, "Skilled interviewers can do much to effect positive interaction. Being respectful, nonjudgmental, and nonthreatening is a beginning."

Document Review

Documents can provide a rich source of information in the development of a qualitative study. Suppose you were studying the culture of a residence hall and noticed that a large percentage of students had moved to other residence halls on the campus. A review of the forms the students completed giving reasons for choosing to move potentially would be a useful source of information. The data might not provide a complete picture, but they would provide a good place to start the inquiry.

Documents can be divided into two categories: public records and personal documents (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 277). Public records are such items as enrollment reports, magazines, and newspapers; personal documents include letters and photographs (Whitt, 1991, 1992).

Documents have advantages and disadvantages, as is the case for other qualitative methods. Among the strengths of documents are that they are readily available, provide a stable source of data, and are grounded in the setting in which they are found. Conversely, they may be incomplete, reflect the bias of the author, and be nonreactive, meaning that the researcher may not be able to sit down with the author and ask questions about the document (Upcraft and Schuh, 1996).

Determining the authenticity of a document is a crucial step in the use of this form of data for an assessment project. Authenticity refers to whether or not a document is reliable and can be trusted. A number of questions can be raised in determining the authenticity of a document, including the following, based on Whitt (1992) and Merriam (1998):

What is the history of the document?

How did it come into my possession?

What assurances are there that the document is what it purports to be?

Is the document complete? Has it been altered in any way?

Who was the author?

What is the author trying to accomplish?

What were the author's sources of information?

Are any biases evident?

Are there other documents that could provide additional information about the topic?

Additional questions related to documentary analysis are included in Exhibit 3.1.

In conducting a document review, one of the sources that should not be overlooked is the institution's database. The records of many offices can be very helpful in document review. For example, the office of financial aid has

EXHIBIT 3.1

Questions to Ask When Analyzing a Document

- What is the complete title of the document?
- Who produced the document?
- For what purpose was the document produced?
- What information is contained in the document?
- Do themes and patterns emerge from the document that are related to the questions guiding the investigation?
- What is the significance of the document for the study?
- Does the document generate further questions?
- Is the document consistent or inconsistent with other sources of information about this investigation?

Source: Adapted from Whitt, 1992, with permission of the American College Personnel Association.

information about the relative financial health of the student body, the registrar has materials related to the academic progress of students, and the student health service can provide information related to the physical health of students.

Observations

The third form of data collection that is used commonly in qualitative analysis is observations. "Observational research can vary considerably in its character among different practitioners, through the stages of a research project, in various settings, and depending on the relationship of the researchers to their subjects" (Adler and Adler, 1994, p. 379). Merriam (1998) distinguishes observations from interviews in two ways: observations take place in the field rather than in an interview room, and they reflect an encounter with the phenomenon of interest rather than a second-hand account of the circumstance through the view of an interviewee. Observations may take the form of attending special events, routine activities, or both, depending on the nature of the research (Whitt, 1991).

Researchers can be engaged with the subjects along a wide-ranging continuum. For example, the researchers simply might choose to observe their subjects in the setting and have no interaction with them. At the other end of the continuum is the participant observer, who is immersed in the setting and is engaged with the subjects intensively. Moffatt (1988), for example, lived with students in a residence hall for an extended period of time.

Merriam (1998, pp. 97-98) has identified the elements present in virtually any setting. These provide a good list of items of interest in conducting an observation and include the following:

The physical setting. What is it like, what is its context, how is the space allocated, and what objects are in the setting?

Participants. Who is on the scene, and what are their roles?

Activities and interactions. What is going on, and is there a sequence of activities? How do the people interact with one another?

Conversation. Who talks to whom, and what is the content of the conversation?

Subtle factors. What are the informal and unplanned activities, the symbolic meaning and connotation of words, and the nonverbal communication?

The observer's behavior. What role did the observer play in this setting, and how did he or she affect it?

Conducting an observation is a complex task because so much occurs simultaneously. As a consequence, it is useful to have a way of recording the observations quickly and accurately. At times, videorecording can be helpful, although the value of the use of this equipment has to be balanced with the presumed effect of the recorder on the people to be observed. Also, conversations might not be recorded without sophisticated microphones.

Data Analysis

Analyzing qualitative data is not an easy task. Although computer programs are available to assist in this activity, the process is dissimilar to the way that quantitative data are analyzed. Krueger (1998, p. 5) observes, "Consider the distinction between analysis of words and analysis of numbers. Analysis of numbers can be seductive, because the researcher gains a sense of accomplishment and confidence by knowing the exact nature of the results." On the other hand, Krueger asserts, "The analysis process is like detective work. One looks for clues, but in this case, the clues are trends and patterns that reappear among various focus groups" (p. 6).

Remember that qualitative research takes an inductive approach. That is, theories and hypotheses for explaining behavior and how people make meaning of their circumstances emerge from the data. The data are not gathered to test the hypotheses. As a consequence, looking for patterns and trends among the data, much like Krueger's detective, results in broad concepts about the case. But in the beginning, the data can be messy and difficult to sort.

Among the ways that Merriam (1998) identifies for analyzing data is the constant comparative method. The basic strategy of this method, according to Merriam (p. 159), "is to do just what the name implies—constantly compare." Bits of data are compared across interviews, documents, or observations, and the comparisons that emerge are used to develop categories that are compared with each other. "Comparisons are constantly made within and between levels of conceptualization until a theory can be formulated" (Merriam, 1998, p. 159).

As the interviews are conducted, it is important to look for trends and patterns in the responses from the interview participants. These preliminary constructions can be tested in other interviews and either confirmed or discarded.

Although the process of analyzing data may seem complex, our experience has been that depending on the complexity of the assessment, categories emerge without much difficulty, and trends and patterns are fairly

easy to identify. When groups of people are engaged in the assessment, the power of stimulating each other is very helpful in identifying conclusions to draw from the study. As we asserted in our previous book on assessment, "All we can say is that in most instances, it is in fact easier done than said" (Upcraft and Schuh, 1996).

Ensuring Rigor

The question of whether qualitative methods are sufficiently rigorous has been raised from time to time. Lincoln and Guba (1994, p. 651) describe the situation in this way: "Clients and program funders ask whether naturalistic evaluations are not so subjective that they cannot be trusted." They define trustworthiness in this way: "The basic issue in relation to trustworthiness is simple: How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of?" (p. 290). Scott (1991, p. 421) adds, "Some confusion exists concerning the criteria for rigor in naturalistic research. It has been erroneously said that either naturalistic research or laboratory-experimental research is more rigorous than the other. Scientific rigor, however, lies not in the use of one method *versus* another, but in the soundness with which a given method is applied."

Scott (1991) recommends several principles in establishing rigor for a qualitative study:

- The research must be systematic, meaning that it is logical and orderly.
- The research is internally consistent.
- The specific procedures used should be at the highest level and be consistent with the question being asked.
- The research should be open to public inspection, that is, written down and subject to critique.

Adhering to these principles can involve a variety of techniques, among them the following (Lincoln and Guba, 1994):

Prolonged engagement—lengthy and intensive researcher contact with the phenomena or respondents in the field

Persistent observation—in-depth pursuit of salient elements through prolonged engagement

Triangulation of data—the cross-checking of data through different sources, methods, and investigators

Peer debriefing—exposing oneself to a disinterested professional to assist in working through hypotheses and developing and testing the emerging design

Negative case analysis—the active search for negative instances relating to developing insights and adjusting to them until none further are found

Member checks—the continuous testing of information by soliciting the reactions of respondents to the investigator's reconstruction of what has been found and a formal testing of the case report with stakeholders

For transferability, the narrative needs thick descriptive data. Thick descriptions are "detailed descriptions of what was done and why, and of the phenomena studied, including contexts, behaviors, perceptions, feelings, and insights" (Whitt, 1991, p. 412). With a thick description, judgments can be made about whether the findings could be applied in other cases.

To ensure dependability and confirmability, an audit trail needs to be established—that is, a person not associated with the study could review the evidence assembled by the researcher and would reach essentially similar conclusions. Among the elements of the evidence are raw data, products of data analysis, and process notes and intentions of the researcher (Whitt, 1991).

Conclusion

Qualitative methods are extremely effective in the use of assessment projects in student affairs. Although these studies are time-consuming, present challenges in data analysis, and require special skills, they will generate special insights into the object of the assessment. When used in combination with quantitative approaches, qualitative studies will produce assessment projects that will serve student affairs practitioners and the students they serve very well.

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