Social Change UK
Research and marketing that matters

An introductory guide to qualitative research analysis

Before we focus on the possible approaches for qualitative research analysis, it is helpful to clarify what 'qualitative research' is and the methods used to conduct qualitative research.

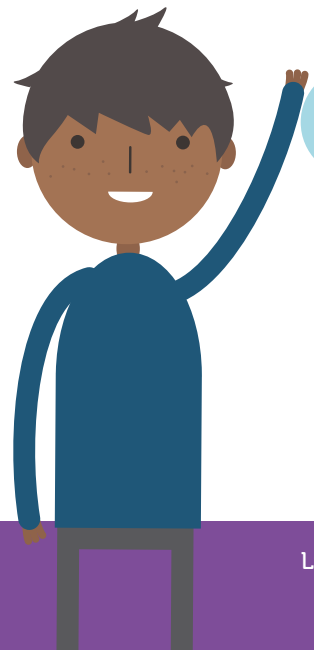
What is qualitative research?

Qualitative research is used to gain an understanding of aspects of the social world that are often subjective, such as people's opinions, attitudes, motivations and reasons for doing something. It is mainly used for exploratory research and can be used to generate insights about topics or issues of interest, uncover trends and patterns and to develop ideas or hypotheses that can be subsequently tested through quantitative research.

What are qualitative research methods?

If you are conducting research to investigate questions that relate to subjective experiences, opinions, attitudes and motivations, you are likely to be using qualitative research methods. The types of methods that are commonly used to generate and collect data from qualitative research are:

- in-depth interviews (in person, by telephone or using digital tools such as Skype);
- focus groups and group discussions;
- case studies;
- observations; and
- free-text answers in surveys and questionnaires.



When you use these research methods, the data you collect will be language based either in written format (for example, written texts or written survey answers), or in spoken format (for example, interview and focus group discussions).

What is qualitative analysis?

Qualitative analysis is the analysis of the language-based data you have collected, often through categorising this data, to identify meanings, patterns and trends. These meanings, patterns and trends can be further used to generate insights to address your research question.

There is a range of approaches you can follow to analyse qualitative data to identify patterns and trends and formulate insights.

The choice of which approach, or combination of appraoches, you use will depend on:

- the type of data you have collected;
- the context surrounding the data you have collected;
- whether you have any existing background knowledge on the topic under examination; and
- whether you intend to formulate theories from the data, or whether you intend to apply existing theories and ideas to the data.

Qualitative research analysis approaches

There are 6 main types of qualitative analysis approaches, and we will consider each in turn. These are:

1. Content analysis
2. Thematic analysis
3. Grounded Theory analysis
4. Discourse analysis
5. Narrative analysis
6. Conversation analysis

1 Content analysis

Content analysis focuses on the systematic classification of data using coding to identify the key categories issues within it.

What is coding?

Coding is where you segment a given dataset into chunks. Each chunk is then given a label or 'code' to describe what it is about. You can use colour-coding or numbering to assign different chunks of data to the same code, to enable you to group chunks of data together by their code at a later stage of analysis.

Before undertaking content analysis, you should have already established the aims of the research and have some background knowledge of the topic under examination to formulate some ideas about the likely categories and codes that will emerge from the data. Content analysis can then be used to help you to sort through a vast amount of qualitative data and reduce this down into a summary form through identifying and coding these pre-existing categories (and if appropriate new categories) in the data.

When to use content analysis

Content analysis is most appropriate for analysing written data. It is a useful approach if you have a lot of written data that you need to sort through, if you have a background knowledge of the topic you are exploring, if you have some existing ideas about what you expect to find from the data or if there is a particular theory you want to explore.

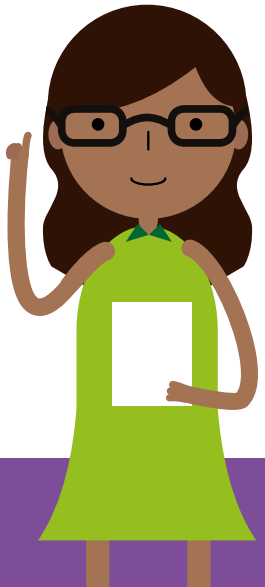
2 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis focuses on the search and generation of themes from the dataset. It is similar to content as it uses coding and also aims to reduce data down into a summary form, but it differs slightly through using coding to identify and apply themes to chunks of data.

What are themes?

Themes are patterns found in the information that are important to describe and organise or interpret aspects of the topic within the data.

If you undertake thematic analysis, it can be helpful to follow a staged process, whereby you start by familiarising yourself with the data by reading through the entire dataset in full without doing any coding. In the next stage, re-read the data and identify the main features to generate initial codes within it. These codes should then be reviewed and collated together as appropriate to generate overarching themes that group together a number of related codes. These themes should then be finalised by reviewing and revising them against the codes you have generated from the data to check for consistency.



Thematic analysis focuses on the categorising of patterns in data into themes. These themes can then be applied to either support or challenge existing theories relating to the topic under examination and use provide evidence to support this.

When to use thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is most appropriate for written data. It is a useful approach if you have a lot of written data that you need to sort through, but you do not necessarily have pre-determined ideas and expectations about what the data will reveal in relation to the topic or your research question.

3

Grounded Theory analysis

While this approach is similar to content analysis, as it also uses coding techniques, Grounded Theory does not start with pre-determined or existing ideas, theories or themes that you search for in the data. Instead, you follow an inductive process to examine the data to see what themes emerge organically from the data itself. A key part of Grounded Theory is the on-going examination of data, rather than waiting until all of the data has been collected before you start to analyse it.

You should start by reading through and reviewing the initial data collected to note any ideas, concepts or elements that are repeated or re-emerge throughout the data. These should be labelled with codes. As more data is collected, you should review it and label with existing codes, or new codes, as appropriate. As you code the data, it is important to analyse one sentence at a time rather than attempting to analyse large chunks of data or paragraphs altogether.

You should also continually compare the codes you have generated against each other and against the data to ensure consistency. This will also help you to uncover any patterns from the codes, and group related codes into concepts and categories. These categories can then be reviewed to form the basis of a new theory or understanding about the topic under examination.

When to use Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a useful approach for written data, and is a useful approach to help you construct theories inductively, without any existing knowledge or expectations of what the data will reveal.

However, if you already have expectations and ideas about what the data will likely reveal, or you are seeking to support or confirm an existing theory, this is a less appropriate approach to use. In addition, if you have a lot of background knowledge on the topic under examination, this can be a harder technique to use as it requires you to put aside your existing knowledge to analyse the data.

4 Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis includes a range of techniques to analyse written, verbal or non-verbal communication data; for example, analysis of written sources such as emails or letters, verbal sources such as telephone interviews and non-verbal sources such as sign language and body language.

Discourse analysis focuses on analysing the language used while taking into account the social context in which the communication occurred to reveal the socio-psychological characteristics of the person or people involved. This may include any previous communication related to the data being analysed, power relationships and understanding of identity.

Elements of communication that may form a part of discourse analysis include:

- intonation and tone;
- gestures;
- syntax;
- turn-taking in conversation; and
- patterns of speech.

When to use discourse analysis

This approach is most appropriate for any data that has a wider social context that needs to be considered to fully understand the meanings within the data. Examples include political debates and speeches, organisational policies and mission statements, or discourse in a social hierarchical setting such as conversations between parents and children. Discourse analysis will help you to examine the words used and to also understand the context around those words and any additional meanings from the wider environment in which that communication occurred.

5 Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis examines the ways in which stories and narratives are constructed and told within organisations, communities, social groups and by individuals to help understand how groups are constructed and organised and the ways in which people think.

There are four main types of narrative:

- bureaucratic – where the narrative is highly structured and logical, and often focuses on imposing control;
- quest – where the narrative has a coherent and compelling story and aims to lead others to strive to succeed as part of the narrative structure;
- chaos – where the narrative is lived out, rather than told; and
- postmodern – where the narrative is lived out, but the narrator is aware of the story and what they are trying to achieve with the narrative.

When to use narrative analysis

Narrative analysis is most appropriate for a mix of verbal and written data including in-depth interviews, participant observation and any written sources detailing narratives or stories, such as organisational documents detailing the founding and history of the organisation.

The main advantage of narrative analysis is that it enables participants to present their views and express themselves in their own way. However, narrative analysis may not be enough by itself to provide evidence for conclusions and insights and may need to be corroborated by additional evidence or sources of analysis. As such, it can be a useful approach to create case studies that form a part of a research report, in addition to main findings of a report that may have been compiled using other approaches such as content analysis or thematic analysis.

6

Conversation Analysis

This approach analyses verbal communication such as conversation and verbal interviews in detail as the interaction occurs in 'real-time' (that is, analysing conversation from the perspective of the conversation taking place).
It is guided by the principle that all conversations are governed by rules and patterns that remain the same in every conversation, and that what is said can only be understood by examining what was said before and after it.

You should initially transcribe all of the data using established conversation analysis symbols to denote elements in speech and verbal interactions. The details of these symbols can be found here:

http://www.esourceresearch.org/eSourceBook/ConversationAnalysis/10TranscriptionSymbols/tabid/531/Default.aspx

You can then analyse these transcripts to examine what words are used, in what order, if there was any overlap between speakers and where they place emphasis in what they say. Through revealing the underlying structures in conversations in this way, you can analyse the data in relation to anticipated adherence to the rules that govern conversation and any violations and exceptions that may reveal interesting meanings and patterns.

When to use conversation analysis

Conversation analysis is most appropriate for any verbal communication and interactions, and can be applied to interview recordings, focus group recordings, and data from participant observation or ethnography.
It can be especially useful for analysing social interactions that take place in organisational settings including doctors' offices, helplines and educational settings such as a recording of a lesson.

Conclusion

Whichever approach, or combination of approaches, you decide to use, the analysis approach should help you to identify the core meanings from the data you have collected, so that you can relate these to the topic under examination or original research question and generate insights, construct new theories or support and confirm existing theories.

If you'd like support with conducting qualitative analysis, why not contact our research team to find out how we can help? Send an email to:

hello@social-change.co.uk

to see how we can help!