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Qualitative Research Techniques and Conduct

Introduction

Many students are concerned about using qualitative research. This is usually due to of a lack of confidence, or a lack of experience of using it, or both of these factors. It may also be a result of the tutor not feeling confident in the student's ability to use this approach. This, in turn, may result from the tutor's concern about their own ability in using a qualitative approach.

Another reason is that students may feel that qualitative research is 'inferior' to quantitative research. Such students (probably based on their tutor's reaction, other students' comments, or on their own reading) will hold the view that such research is 'soft' in comparison to quantitative research. The order of chapters in this book, and most textbooks on research methods, also reflect the conventional wisdom on qualitative research, that it is 'secondary to', and perhaps supportive of, quantitative research.

However, this chapter is presented to suggest that qualitative research should not be viewed in this way – it is an approach that is useful in a variety of contexts and should not be viewed as secondary to (i.e. at a lower level than) quantitative research. Rather, it should be viewed as an alternative way of gathering information and, in fact, students should be aware that many researchers view it, not as secondary to, but on at least an equal footing with, or indeed better than quantitative approaches.

Qualitative research

As earlier sections of this book have indicated, using a qualitative methodological approach is closely related to the way we individually know about and view the world. Hence, ontology and epistemology are very significant in guiding qualitative methodology, in the same way that these factors also guide the use of a quantitative approach. If your research is underpinned by the idea that all individuals view the world differently, but that these views each have value and by comparing these views you are gaining understanding about an issue or topic, then a qualitative approach will be appropriate.

Also, if there is little apparently known about your specific chosen topic (i.e. there is a lack of literature on the subject), there is unlikely to be much in the way of theory to apply to your research topic. Your research is therefore likely to be, as we have discussed previously, inductive rather than deductive. This means you do not start your research by applying, or testing a theory, or a number of theories in the field, but instead collect data. What you have collected in the field can then be used by you to build up theory and then this can be compared with what may have actually been published on the topic, or a closely related research topic.

Research which is concerned primarily with the individual views or attitudes of respondents, stated in their own words, is suitable for a qualitative approach. If you are intending to gather responses which will be expressed, primarily, in words and these are the words chosen by your respondents, rather than by you as researcher, then a qualitative approach is appropriate. A very common way that students gain quite lengthy word-based answers, expressed by respondents in their own words, is via interviews. Therefore, interviews are generally regarded as a qualitative research technique.

For some students who are not that familiar with the philosophy of research, as has been stated earlier in the book, the division between qualitative and quantitative research may seem artificial any way. It may also be that some approaches usually regarded as qualitative are 'common sense' to you. For example, using an interview is usually regarded as employing a qualitative technique. Interviews are also commonly used in a variety of media such as TV or radio, so you are

likely to be familiar with interviews, even if you have not used this approach. However, you may have used an interview approach before, say at undergraduate level, in an attempt to gain a detailed insight into a respondent's experience of, understanding of, or views on a particular topic. At the time you may not have been aware that you were using what is commonly regarded as a qualitative technique – this was just the advice of your tutor or you had read an article where a researcher was involved in a similar study to yours, so followed their approach.

As noted previously, an important difference between qualitative and quantitative research, is that one tends to be deductive while the other tends to be inductive. What this means is that in quantitative research the person conducting the research is frequently making use of a well-known theory and probably applying it in a new situation, such as with different respondents or a different location. For example, the work of Agarwhal (1997) applies the theory of Butler (1980) on the Tourism Area Life Cycle (which has been discussed previously) to a particular location, Torbay in the UK. Agarwhal was able to apply Butler's theory and compare her results with what Butler indicates in his theory. This type of quantitative research may also enable the researcher to predict what might happen in the context of their research, based on what a particular theory indicates. In such circumstances, a researcher can make use of hypotheses – as we have seen previously these are statements that can be tested. However, most qualitative research is not like this. This form of research, involving perhaps interviews or focus groups, is being used because it is not known or fully understood what will happen in the specific context. Usually this means that little or no research has been conducted in relation to the specific topic. Or it could be a researcher is examining an old topic, but from a new, unusual perspective. In this case, the researcher does not want to prejudice the research process by asking questions in the way that they have been asked before. If the researcher uses the same questions and the same technique, it is very likely that the results will be similar to those of other researchers who have used these questions and this technique. Therefore, in a qualitative approach, questions are posed which may then help to contribute to the development of new theory, rather than being based on existing theory.

Although the two approaches are often thought of as different and separate, a good deal of research in tourism involves both qualitative

and quantitative approaches. It is often the case, in terms of a new research theme or the re-examining of an old topic from a new angle, that a researcher starts from a position of being as open-minded as possible. Therefore, it is likely to require a qualitative approach in this part of the research. However, a researcher may want to follow up relatively open-ended research, which has involved only a few respondents, who were asked relatively few questions but required to provide in-depth, detailed responses, with an approach in which more respondents are involved. Here respondents will each be asked more questions than in the initial qualitative phase of the research, but responses are more likely to be short answers and/or closed-ended. This is, in fact, an approach often taken by PhD students and is known as a mixed methods approach – this approach is discussed in more detail at the end of this chapter. It has the advantage of allowing comparison between the techniques at different stages of the research and hence the results. It is likely that it will also allow the disadvantages of one technique to be offset or cancelled out by the use of other technique. In this way, results could and should be more reliable and the researcher can feel more confident that they are not chance findings, or that there was something unusual in the process or the actual results.

As indicated above, qualitative research is best conducted using techniques which are unlike those used to collect quantitative data. The words used by respondents, as opposed to their ‘ticks’ and ‘circles’ on a questionnaire, are the major ‘data’ gathered in qualitative research. A very important way to gather this data is via interviews. Focus groups are to a very large extent group interviews so are another way to gather qualitative data. Another technique used in qualitative research is observation. The techniques of observation, interviews and focus groups are discussed below.

Observation

Students are generally aware that they need to ask questions when conducting any form of research. However, when conducting primary research in the field, this often translates into the feeling that they must have respondents and ask these people questions. This is frequently a result of concern to get the most from those people involved, based on