

Qualitative research

Although it is well understood in academic circles, a large number of clients (and even a number of commercial social researchers) I have worked with have only a tenuous grasp on the concept of qualitative data collection and analysis. As far as data collection is concerned, most clients are fairly happy with the idea of in-depth interviews or focus groups, for example, yet when it comes to the analysis, they have a tendency to ask for the figures. It is at this point that I have to explain that there are no figures; the analysis is qualitative. This can often lead a lot of head scratching and furrowed brows, and comments such as “Well, it’s just hearsay”, or “How does that tell us anything?” So, what is the point of qualitative analysis, and what can it tell us?

Firstly, what it can’t tell us is how much, how many, who or when; that is statistical data derived from quantitative data collection and analysis, such as surveys and audits. What qualitative data tell us is why, how and what the particular research object means to the respondent. The most powerful use of qualitative methods on commercial social research is either alongside quantitative techniques, or when the statistical evidence is already known. If the quantitative data represents the skeleton of an answer to the research questions, qualitative data gives it flesh. Once we have established with the client that the figures come from a different source and the focus group or the interviews are about the meaning of the research object, the next question is “How do you know they were telling the truth, or if they have made a mistake?” That is the biggest question of all and the answer is “I don’t”. Without exclusive access into the head of another person it is impossible to know if they are telling the truth. More prosaically, they may be telling the truth as they see it but be mistaken. This leads clients to then question the value of qualitative research, feeling that there is no ‘scientific’ element to it. But they are wrong.

Qualitative research can be as rigorous as quantitative research. Take the example of in-depth interviews. The researcher uses a basic script or aide-memoire to ensure that all the pertinent tissues are discussed with the respondent, but the respondent is allowed to ‘ramble’ to a limited extent as he or she may then introduce other pertinent issues that the researcher had not thought of. These issues then enter the script and are used when interviewing the next respondent. This tends to ensure that all issues are dealt with in the data collection. The analysis of the data begins immediately upon completion of the first interview. The researcher develops a series of themes and perspectives that can be best thought of as mini-theories about the issues being researched. After each interview he or she reviews and amends those themes and perspectives, and possibly adds new ones. At some point during the process, it becomes clear that now new ideas are coming from the interviews. This is the signal to the researcher that all the issues have been explored and the interview process can end. He or she then goes back through the collected data and his or her themes and perspectives and comes up with the final analysis.

Back to the issue of truth. Max Weber (1863 to 1920) basically stated that unless we know that someone is lying we must assume that they are telling the truth, and in some ways all social research depends upon that commonsense idea. In a more refined way, it would be nonsensical to believe that 20 or 30 people would all tell the same set of lies to the researcher. In our own practice we do however, part from Weber on this issue to some extent. From experience we can tell if we have a rogue respondent, as they will project a series of answers and ideas that are completely at odds with those of the other respondents. This can actually create something of an ethical dilemma in some cases. If, for example, the respondents are workers within a

specific project, it could alert us to the fact that one individual is at odds with the team. We cannot report this to the client as it would be a breach of confidentiality, but we need to report in a generic way that there may be an issue, using phrases such as ‘a small minority of respondents felt that..’

To sum up, qualitative research is valid and useful in its own right or as part of a mixed methods approach with quantitative research, as it gives us insights into the meanings of specific objects or activities, but it is the job of quantitative research to come up with the numbers.

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