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INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE DATA

This chapter will provide information on:

- the nature of qualitative research data
- ways of collecting the data
- what kinds of qualitative data exist
- some key definitions.

WHAT COUNTS AS QUALITATIVE DATA?

The book has so far introduced you to the key aspects of qualitative research in business studies. Both Research Philosophy (Chapter 2) and Research Design and Process (Chapter 3) have underlined the importance of consistency in research. The idea of research, planning phases, and the processes related to the data planning and gathering, and the possibilities you will have with different research methods all relate to the ways you know your topic and your data. This chapter will highlight some general aspects that relate to data gathering, irrespective of the method chosen for the analysis of the data. The chapter will also guide you through a few easy exercises that show you the potentiality of your data.

Most business researchers collect empirical data for their research projects and use various types of data collection methods for this purpose. Each of the data

collection methods requires some specific knowledge and skills that you can learn by studying, experimenting, rehearsing, and by reflecting on your aims and practices in collecting the data for your study. Also here, the general purpose of your research, the research approach you choose, and your research questions should be the guiding lights in terms of deciding what kind of empirical data are most useful in your study. The circularity of the process, as described in Chapter 3, emphasizes the fact that you may modify your decisions regarding the data and selection you may already have, and you can gather additional data, in order to finalize your research in the process.

In methodology textbooks, empirical data collected by researchers themselves are often called primary data. The division between ‘primary data’ and ‘secondary data’ relates to the slightly arbitrary division between the researcher-designed and researcher-gathered data, and between prior existing data in sources such as data archives, libraries, etc. Researchers can collect empirical data for their research project by interviewing and observing and by asking the participants to write (e.g. diaries, stories), draw, or present in some other way (e.g. drama). This would be considered as primary data.

Empirical data that already exists somewhere are commonly called secondary data. These include both textual data that exist without any specific collecting activities (e.g. documents, histories, newspapers, diaries, memos, stories) and visual materials (e.g. video recordings, television programmes, movies). In qualitative research, these types of materials can also be called ‘naturally occurring materials’ (e.g. Silverman, 2011) because they exist irrespective of the researcher’s actions and intentions.

In this chapter we will give a general overview of the ways to collect different types of qualitative data that are commonly available for business researchers. This chapter aims to shortly introduce you to how to collect various types of data, and you can find more detailed information on how to analyze data from the viewpoint of different methodological approaches in Chapters 11–20. You will find a more detailed description on qualitative interviews and observations in Chapter 8, on digital materials in Chapter 9, and on ways to learn to know your data in Chapter 10.

INTRODUCING DIFFERENT TYPES OF QUALITATIVE DATA

Qualitative data (or research material, as some methodology books call it) are varied: there is not just one type of qualitative data. A usual way to define qualitative data is to contrast it with quantitative data and define it through differences: qualitative data is any information that can be captured that is not numerical in nature, that is, not measurable data. Hence, often the divide between numbers and words is seen as a difference. But even words can be quantified and counted, and their frequency, presence or absence may allow for interpretations. Thus the division is not clear-cut.

One common feature for qualitative data is that it is either the textual, verbal, audio material or visual material that allows for interpretations and descriptions and does not focus on measurements. Even quantitative research uses qualitative data, and the definition there often follows the definition given in statistics for qualitative data: data collected about a categorical variable is qualitative.

It should be clear though that for any data, the importance of interpretation and the analysis of the data are crucial. Your research question should give you possibilities and indicate directions for recognizing the possible data sources, obtaining the data and thinking of possible alternatives, if your original plan for data gathering fails. The great thing about qualitative research design is that the research design is seldom built on one data source alone.

From interviews and observations...

There are different types of data available and depending on your research questions and methods chosen for the analysis, the data may be treated similarly or differently in the analysis. We can distinguish interviews, observations, texts, documents and other written materials, visual materials and even digital materials from each other, as they are differently acquired and require different types of data-gathering strategies. However, the analysis does not necessarily differentiate the data in a similar manner. Within each of these (interviews, observations, textual materials, visual materials, digital materials) there are differing categorizations and classifications for the materials, different ways to acquire data and procedures for the analysis. Therefore, throughout the book we encourage you to take exercises and practice the use of different data in your research projects.

Most often interviews are thought of as being qualitative material, and sometimes even exclusively introduced as the only qualitative research material. It is indeed the case that in the 'interview society' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001; Silverman, 2013), interviews are used extensively by the mass media and professional services (consulting, counselling, therapy) as well as by practical and academic researchers. The popularity of interviews in qualitative research is overwhelming. Therefore, a good number of textbooks and book chapters are available for a novice researcher who plans to conduct interviews in their research project (e.g. Spradley, 1979; Fontana and Frey, 2000; Gubrium and Holstein, 2001; Wengraf, 2001). We will discuss interviews in a more extensive manner in Chapter 8.

In general, interviews consist of talks organized into a series of questions and answers. Qualitative interviews may also resemble open, everyday conversations, in which the distinction between the interviewer and the interviewee is not so evident, the materials and issues dealt with throughout the interviews are not so organized, they do not follow each other chronologically and are more or less quite messy.

Interviews most often take place face to face, but they can also take place over the telephone, or online using computer-mediated technologies (see Chapter 9). Most interviews are conducted between two people (the interviewer and the interviewee or the participant), but interviews made in groups of two or more participants are also common in business studies (see Chapter 14 on Focus Group Research).

Qualitative interviews, as used in scholarly research, are research vehicles, the purpose of which is to produce empirical materials for the study in question. In contrast to how you conduct everyday conversations with fellow students, teachers or business managers, a good qualitative interviewer most often prepares at least some of their questions in advance, and later analyzes and reports results in a specific way. The interviewer also focuses the interview on particular issues that are related to the topic and research questions of their study. Although you might think that qualitative interviews are easy to do, they are not. In Chapter 8 you will find examples of how to distinguish research questions from interview questions and how to organize your interviews for the analysis. There are different ways of making and gathering observations. There are also several ways of transferring observations to analyzable data: in principle they can range from systemic written notes to photographing and videoing activities. These two latter in turn require visual analysis methods (Chapter 20). All qualitative data can be analyzed in several ways and this also concerns observations (for more, see Chapter 8).

... to textual and digital data

Texts and textual data can in principle be defined as all written materials and transcribed interviews. Texts can be organized and analyzed in different ways and also with different nuances: individual words, whole sentences, meanings, activities, actors and intertextualities, connotations, rhetoric, and several other aspects can all be traced down in texts. The texts can be analyzed through counting words but also through densities, translations and meaning-makings. The several methods chapters in the following part of the book will exemplify more of the uses of textual materials. Organizing the data for the analysis is part of the research protocol and concerns all research materials, such as interviews, observations, visual materials, documents or other texts.

Much of our social life is currently mediated by written texts. In fact, society would not function without written laws and regulations, the financial system would not work without written rules and regulations for monetary transfers, and the educational system would not function without books. This is why various types of text provide increasingly relevant research data.

Textual materials that are used for research purposes include both texts that you collect for your research project (e.g. transcribed interviews, stories and jokes in written form) and texts that already exist prior to your research project (e.g. annual reports,

media texts). As was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the first types of text are called primary data and the second types of text are often referred to as secondary data.

Besides primary data, secondary data most often provide excellent opportunities for qualitative business research. For instance, in case study-oriented accounting and organization research, published texts are studied as ‘artefacts’ (Ryan, Scapens and Theobald, 1992, 2002; Belk, Fischer and Kozinets, 2013). These texts can include tangible items such as formal reports and statements, minutes of meetings, informal records, personal notes and memos.

Texts as representations of reality

The concept of textual data refers to all empirical materials that exist in textual form, be they produced through writing or through transcription from speech. The usefulness and relevance of textual data in qualitative business research is traditionally based on the idea of transparency. This means that texts are considered to represent directly what is being studied. In other words, texts are treated as suitable objects of analysis because we believe in their ability to tell us about the people and issues that they represent.

Post-structuralist view on texts

Another way of understanding texts is provided by post-structuralism, in which all human action is treated as text. This means, for instance, that interviews, when they are transcribed into texts, detach from the individuals interviewed and their social settings, and become artefacts in their own right. According to this view, the text has several distinctive characteristics that differ from the more common positivist and realist viewpoints on texts and their role in research. Post-structuralism signs for views, according to which:

1. texts do not transparently reflect or refer to the social world to be perceived in a similar way by everybody;
2. texts are not transparent and similarly read by every reader, they are open to various interpretations;
3. every text is related to other texts through intertextualities.

The production process of a text can be one relevant part of research. However, it is often useful to think about texts in a post-structuralist way and treat them as detached from the people who wrote them, or who were interviewed. By doing this, you can more easily focus your attention on the form and structure of the text and the meanings circulated by it, not on the people who produced the texts.

This, in turn, helps you to get away from ‘the sin of “trying to get inside the head” of the author’ of the text or the person who was interviewed by thinking that ‘surely she must have meant this, but she just did not say or write it’. What happens here in that process is that you start over-interpreting the materials and you start talking about intentions, what was meant by the interviewee or by the author, instead of focusing on written or spoken texts.

Texts as artefacts

The ways to understand texts are several, ranging from realist to post-structuralist viewpoints. In qualitative research the texts are understood mostly as artefacts: gathered and related to the research topic for a specific reason. Intertextuality exists also not only through researchers’ interpretations and re-readings but also increasingly, through the Internet, where any search for information gives, creates and re-creates new linkages and intertextualities. In this sense, all textual data are artefact: assimilated and related through and with the help of various interests. For research purposes, texts – gathered either through traditional interviews or through Internet data mining and net-observations – are culturally compiled and usable research materials.

WAYS OF DOING TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

In general, the varieties of and possibilities for textual analysis are abundant, as you will see in Part III of this book. The specific methods of analysis vary from content analysis to conversation analysis and from narrative analysis (Chapter 16) to discourse analysis (see Chapter 17). While content analysis is more concerned with the content of the text, and even frequencies within the text (e.g. number of words and expressions), conversation, narrative and discourse analyses are more concerned with the form, structure and meanings of the text. Internet and digital interviews, textual materials, online observations, etc. offer increasing and rich data sources for qualitative analysis.

One way of thinking about the variety of methods available is through your research questions. Does your research question call for very detailed and sophisticated methods of analysis? If qualitative materials are complementing other materials, such as quantitative data used in the study, an informal approach may be the best choice of method (Peräkylä, 2005: 870).

Johnson and Duberley (2000: 59) identify three approaches to textual analysis that they call positivist, linguistic and interpretative approaches. In each of these, the nature of the text, the role of the researcher, and the research method vary in a more detailed manner compared with the division between the more traditional and the post-structuralist views of texts. In the positivist approach, the nature of the text is objective and the research method is close to identifying the non-random

variation in the material. The role of researcher is that of an outsider. In the linguistic approach, the text is considered to be emergent and again the role of researcher is that of an outsider. This approach differs from the positivist because it investigates the relationship between language and reality, that is, how language produces reality. However, in the interpretative approach, the text is considered subjective, the role of the researcher is that of an insider, and the research method focuses on the cultural influences of the text.

From a qualitative research point of view texts are also always artefacts and new ways in Internet data mining may also produce interesting contextualized qualitative data in the future. The recording, organization and governing of the data becomes even more important when the use of the Internet as a source for data has become more common, as webpages change and expire, and their content changes and disappear. Keeping a log, copying and keeping data records, with various versions, detailed data gathering of information and recording is a crucial part of using the Internet as a data source, as also for all data and diaries of various kinds. This importance of documenting concerns also the progress in data gathering, and the various steps taken in the analysis and reporting of the data. Detailing this to one's own use is beneficial if and when you need to re-visit earlier decisions made in the progress of the research. Revisiting earlier decisions concerning data gathering can often help in further decision making, and help in explicating various steps taken in the data-gathering and analysis processes. The diaries are not necessary if the research questions do not require complex or complicated data, or several analyses. The more complex the research topic, the data gathered and the analyses planned are, the more decisions need to be made in the process that concern the data and their forms and functions, so keeping a diary is immensely helpful in the record-keeping process.

Prior to the steps into the analysis, in the initial data-gathering phase, it is also good to think about and recognize when to stop gathering the data. As this is dependent on the research questions you have, the types of data you have planned to collect and the ways you have designed your research, there is no universal or unequivocal answer to this question. The circularity of the research process gives you more possibilities to be flexible about the start and end processes. For case studies, where a case can consist of several types of data, you may need to think more carefully about what type of data you require, and from which sources you gather that data. In case studies you may also pay attention to designing the exit, that is, when and how to exit the data gathering process.

THE CIRCULARITY OF DATA GATHERING AND ANALYSIS

In qualitative research, the initial research design is crucial for the data-collecting process. Your research questions should indicate what type of data you require

and how much you would need to gather. After the initial design, you may have decided to do interviews, perhaps gather documentary materials, or gather observation data. You may have originally decided to do six to eight interviews, gather a few years' documentary materials and for one week gather on-site observation data. Yet, the design may fail you, and if you feel, after the initial analysis, that you have not enough research material, it is very often possible to re-think your research design and/or gather additionally more data. This can happen, for example, if you have not taken into account or if you have not been aware of all those crucial aspects that may affect the quality of the data you gather. Thus, 'going back' to gather more data is sometimes necessary in qualitative research. The circularity of the research process in qualitative research makes it easier to revisit your initial research plan, if needed.

The sequencing of data gathering and analysis may also be part of the initial plan. This means in practice that you gather data, and then analyze them in order to gather more data. This type of circularity or sequencing of the gathering and analysis may prove to be helpful, especially if you do processual research or action research with time span. Unfolding complex questions in the analysis may also require this type of layering of data gathering and data analysis. Thus, thinking rigidly in terms of 'sample size' and 'saturation' prior to the analysis (e.g. Charmaz, 2003, 2006) proves many times more difficult, if not impossible, as qualitative research most often is complex and the results of the data analysis are not known prior to the analysis.

Sample size

In qualitative research the sample size simply explains the possible size of the empirical materials and sources. The term 'sample size' originates from quantitative, exact sciences and refers to the accuracy of defining the data collection source and materials prior to the collection. But as we know, one interview is never like another: the amount of information or data you are able to obtain is not known prior to the interview. Thus, defining the qualitative research sample size equivalent to x number of interviews works against the qualitative research logic. For this reason, the term 'sample size' is not regularly used in qualitative research, and when used, it is with the general understanding of its nature. In practical terms the number of interviews is used to give an approximate size of the study, or time needed for interviews, but not as a predetermined pool of data.

Even if you would not use term 'sample size' there are factors that affect the potential size of the empirical materials gathered. First, in your research design and research question do state whether you aim for in-depth analysis of one case, for example, or comparative analysis of several questions using several criteria for data collection. Thus the intensive vs. extensive design, and the type of data collection methods you will use have an effect on the potential source of the data. Additionally, the practical questions of budget and the resources you will have for use for the study

are important. You can have several other selection criteria that you will need to take into account, depending on your research design.

Saturation

The much-used term, ‘saturation’, relates to the similar type of setting as the ‘sample size’. In this type of qualitative research the factual orientation is the starting point, and the researcher wants to find out about facts. In such an approach, the term ‘saturation’ makes sense: interviews are not interesting for research as sources of discourses or narratives, for example, but as statements with facts or issues with a factual purpose. Still, the point of saturation of the data is difficult to define as new data will always add something new to the existing data. Saturation is not used when the purpose of the qualitative study is not factual. When qualitative research is concerned with meanings and not with making hypothesis statements, then the term ‘saturation’ is not useful, and some researchers even argue it is inappropriate (Dey, 1999). In Grounded Theory, for example, Strauss and Corbin (1990) argue that saturation is a matter of degree. For them, the issue of time is crucial, as they argue that the longer researchers take to learn about and know their data, familiarize themselves with and analyze their data, the better the results are as there will always be the potential for ‘something new to emerge’ in the analysis. Our suggestion is that if and when using the term ‘saturation’, it is necessary to know the type of qualitative research it relates to, as it is not used in all qualitative research.

KEY POINTS OF THE CHAPTER

There is an abundance of qualitative research data that you can use and combine in qualitative business research; the appropriateness of each type of data for your own study should be evaluated on the basis of its ability to provide answers to your research questions through analysis.

Although qualitative interviews are the most common type of qualitative data gathering in business research, you should consider using other types of relevant data as well; there are also different types of qualitative interview, and it is your job to choose the most relevant type for your own study.

Each of the data collection methods requires specific skills and attention to different types of issues, you can learn from these by experimenting, rehearsing and being reflective about what your aims and practices concerning data collecting are.

FURTHER READING

The Handbook of Interview Research. Context and Method, edited by Gubrium and Holstein (2001), is a comprehensive compilation on the subject of interviewing containing a number of excellent articles by well-established qualitative researchers.

DeWalt and DeWalt's (2002) *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers* is an excellent and easy-to-read source book on how to do participant observation.

Belk, Fischer and Kozinets' (2013) *Qualitative Consumer and Marketing Research*. London: SAGE presents online observations as part of the consumer research.

EXERCISE 7.1

What annual reports tell us about the company

The purpose of this exercise is to familiarize you with the analysis of textual and visual materials and to show their potential and usefulness in business research.

Choose two or three annual reports of business companies or other organizations. You can either use print versions of them or download them from the Internet. Try to choose companies or corporations that are competitors in the same business sector.

Look at the pictures used in the annual reports, read the texts and analyze both the text and the pictures. You will find more information on the visual analysis in Chapter 20. Use the following points as your guideline when making the analysis:

- Categorize the images of the pictures in some way (e.g. according to type: human beings, products, interaction situations, buildings; according to focus of the picture: faces, interactions, groups of people, products, landscapes; according to colour schemes used; age, ethnicity and gender of people in pictures, etc.).
- Analyze the ways the images relate to the text and/or the production or services of the corporation.

Do this exercise with all two or three annual reports.

Then compare the visual materials used in annual reports and write down in what ways the materials are similar to and/or deviate from one company to another.

EXERCISE 7.2

Research questions that use various types of data

Develop a research topic for the exercise purpose. You can, for example, pick up a contemporary economic news article from a daily newspaper. Gather three types of data in relation to your research topic: short interview of colleague; social media online observation on the topic; newspaper article. Now come up with three different types of research questions that can in principle be answered by using any available data you have. Do you find restrictions that come up with the data?