

Introduction to Qualitative Research

1. Introduction

Qualitative research on psychotherapy and therapeutic practice has a long, intertwined history. Most famously, Freud used highly detailed qualitative case studies to describe and demonstrate psychoanalytic theories and techniques, as well as the efficacy of his therapeutic approach.

Contemporary qualitative research extends beyond case studies: it can involve analysis of texts and documents (for example, diaries or legislation) and observing or interviewing individuals or groups.

Common types of qualitative research include:

- **phenomenological research** which focuses on the lived experiences of individuals and what a particular experience feels like or means to them
- **ethnography** which concerns cultures, groups or society at large and can be conducted from the 'outside' or by immersing oneself in the group being studied
- **case studies** which are accounts of one individual or group (such as a family).
- **field research** which involves observing the norms and practices of a group, community or institution and often involves travelling outside the researcher's usual setting.

Interviews are one of the more popular tools of qualitative research and are often conducted as part of the approaches listed above. For instance, field research or ethnography might involve interviewing members of the group being studied.

Interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured, referring to the extent to which the questions are planned in advance and how much flexibility there is in how the interview unfolds. A structured interview involves a list of pre-designed questions which are asked in the same order of each participant, with no opportunity to follow-up on or expand on the responses. Whereas semi-structured and unstructured interviews are more flexible, allowing opportunities for the interviewer to ask the participant for more information or clarification.

Both structured and less structured methods of interviewing have their merits, for example, asking identical questions from each participants makes it easier to compare responses from across the group. On the other hand, less structured interviews can elicit more detailed information.

2. Analysing qualitative data

A typical way of analysing qualitative research involves coding the data. Once interviews have been transcribed, codes can be assigned to particular statements to group them together, so that patterns or themes in the responses can be made apparent. Typically, researchers use software such as NVivo or ATLAS, to assign codes to qualitative data.

Certain quantitative approaches, for instance **content analysis**, can be used for analysing qualitative data. For example, it is possible to count how many times a certain word, phrase or code comes up in a particular response or group and compare these counts across different groups or interviews.

Some analysis of qualitative research is highly interpretive and explores how participants in the research understand and make sense of the question being researched rather than trying to collect data that can be easily measured or directly analysed. Qualitative analysis of this kind tends to draw more heavily on direct quotations from participants and focuses on the meanings and implications of what is said.

Some of these more [interpretive types of analysis](#) include:

- **thematic analysis** which focuses on identifying specific themes and patterns in the data that cannot be analysed quantitatively
- **narrative analysis** which is applied to data that comes in the form of stories, for instance interviews where participants are recounting their lives or some important event; researchers are more interested in the overall narrative than individual themes or patterns
- **grounded theory** which is a 'bottom up' method of analysis where theorising is simultaneous with data collection; researchers note themes and patterns and adjust their hypothesis while they are collecting and recording the data.

3. When to use qualitative research

Both quantitative and qualitative research have their strengths. Quantitative research is more generalisable, meaning that it is easier to make comparisons or inferences. For example, if you used the same numeric [outcome measures](#) to track how your clients were progressing, it is possible to compare across clients, or across different years.

Qualitative research can sometimes provide more detailed or richer understanding than quantitative research. For example, [previous qualitative research into psychotherapy](#) has found that clients tend to understand recovery or progress in therapy in richer terms than what is typically explored in psychotherapy research. Clients emphasise improvements to their overall quality of life, such as being able to deal with problems as they arise or being able to attend education or work, rather than measuring progress simply in terms of changes to the symptoms (sleep, mood, etc.) tracked in routine outcome measures.

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods can be used together. For instance, outcome measures can be paired with interviewing to give a fuller picture of client experiences.

Additional resources

- [Introductory lectures on qualitative research](#)

- [Differences between qualitative and quantitative research](#)
- [Detailed overview of qualitative and quantitative research methods](#)
- [Guide to choosing qualitative research methods](#)
- [Analysing and displaying qualitative data](#)
- [Detailed book chapter on qualitative outcome research on psychotherapy](#)
- [Book on qualitative research in counselling and psychotherapy \(snippet view only\)](#)

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