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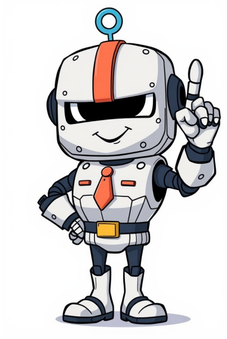

Form of research Part of a series onResearch Research design Ethics Proposal Question Writing Argument Referencing Research strategy Interdisciplinary Multimethodology Qualitative Art-based Quantitative Philosophical schools Antipositivism Constructivism Critical rationalism Empiricism Fallibilism Positivism Postpositivism Pragmatism Realism Critical realism Subtle realism Methodology Action research Art methodology Critical theory Grounded theory Hermeneutics Historiography Human subject research Narrative inquiry Phenomenology Pragmatism Scientific method Methods Analysis Case study Content analysis Descriptive statistics Discourse analysis Ethnography Autoethnography Experiment Field experiment Social experiment Quasi-experiment Field research Historical method Inferential statistics Interviews Mapping Cultural mapping Phenomenography Secondary research Bibliometrics Literature review Meta-analysis Scoping review Systematic review Scientific modelling Simulation Survey Tools and software Argument technology GIS software LIS software Bibliometrics Reference management Science software Qualitative data analysis Simulation Statistics Philosophy portalvte Part of a series onSociology History Outline Index Key themes Society Globalization Human behavior Human environmental impact Identity Industrial revolutions 3 / 4 / 5 Popularity Social complexity Social environment Social equality Social equity Social power Social stratification Social structure Social cycle theory Perspectives Conflict theory Critical theory Structural functionalism Positivism Social constructionism Social darwinism Symbolic interactionism Branches Aging Architecture Art Astrosociology Body Criminology Consciousness Culture Death Demography Deviance Disaster Economic Education Emotion (Jealousy) Environmental Family Feminist Fiscal Food Gender Generations Health Historical Immigration Industrial Internet Jewry Knowledge Language Law Leisure Literature Marxist Mathematic Medical Military Music Peace, war, and social conflict Philosophy Political Public Punishment Race and ethnicity Religion Rural Science (History of science) Social movements Social psychology Sociocybernetics Sociology Space Sport Technology Terrorism Urban Utopian Victimology Visual Methods Quantitative Qualitative Comparative Computational Ethnographic Conversation analysis Historical Interview Mathematical Network analysis Social experiment Survey Major theorists 1700s: Comte · Sieyès 1800s: Martineau · Tocqueville · Marx · Spencer · Le Bon · Ward · Pareto · Tönnies · Veblen · Simmel · Durkheim · Addams · Mead · Weber · Du Bois · Mannheim · Elias 1900s: Fromm · Adorno · Gehlen · Aron · Merton · Nisbet · Mills · Bell · Schoeck · Goffman · Bauman · Foucault · Luhmann · Habermas · Baudrillard · Bourdieu · Giddens Lists Bibliography Terminology Journals Organizations People Timeline By country Society portalvte Qualitative research is a type of research that aims to gather and analyse non-numerical (descriptive) data in order to gain an understanding of individuals' social reality, including understanding their attitudes, beliefs, and motivation. This type of research typically involves in-depth interviews, focus groups, or field observations in order to collect data that is rich in detail and context. Qualitative research is often used to explore complex phenomena or to gain insight into people's experiences and perspectives on a particular topic. It is particularly useful when researchers want to understand the meaning that people attach to their experiences or when they want to uncover the underlying reasons for people's behavior. Qualitative methods include ethnography, grounded theory, discourse analysis, and interpretative phenomenological analysis.[1] Qualitative research methods have been used in sociology, anthropology, political science, psychology, communication studies, social work, folklore, educational research, information science and software engineering research.[2][3][4][5] Qualitative research has been informed by several strands of philosophical thought and examines aspects of human life, including culture, expression, beliefs, morality, life stress, and imagination.[6] Contemporary qualitative research has been influenced by a number of branches of philosophy, for example, positivism, postpositivism, critical theory, and constructivism.[7] The historical transitions or 'moments' in qualitative research, together with the notion of 'paradigms' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), have received widespread popularity over the past decades. However, some scholars have argued that the adoptions of paradigms may be counterproductive and lead to less philosophically engaged communities. The use of nonquantitative material as empirical data has been growing in many areas of the social sciences, including pedagogy, development psychology and cultural psychology.[8] Several philosophical and psychological traditions have influenced investigators' approaches to qualitative research, including phenomenology, social constructionism, symbolic interactionism, and positivism.[9][10] Phenomenology refers to the philosophical study of the structure of an individual's consciousness and general subjective experience. Approaches to qualitative research based on constructionism, such as grounded theory, pay attention to how the subjectivity of both the researcher and the study participants can affect the theory that develops out of the research. The symbolic interactionist approach to qualitative research examines how individuals and groups develop an understanding of the world. Traditional positivist approaches to qualitative research seek a more objective understanding of the social world. Qualitative researchers have also been influenced by the sociology of knowledge and the work of Alfred Schütz, Peter L. Berger, Thomas Luckmann, and Harold Garfinkel. Qualitative researchers use different sources of data to understand the topic they are studying. These data sources include interview transcripts, videos of social interactions, notes, verbal reports[8] and artifacts such as books or works of art. The case study method exemplifies qualitative researchers' preference for depth, detail, and context.[11][12] Data triangulation is also a strategy used in qualitative research.[13] Autoethnography, the study of self, is a qualitative research method in which the researcher uses his or her personal experience to understand an issue. Grounded theory is an inductive type of research, based on ("grounded" in) a very close look at the empirical observations a study yields.[14][15] Thematic analysis involves analyzing patterns of meaning. Conversation analysis is primarily used to analyze spoken conversations. Biographical research is concerned with the reconstruction of life histories, based on biographical narratives and documents. Narrative inquiry studies the narratives that people use to describe their experience. Qualitative researchers may gather information through observations, note-taking, interviews, focus groups (group interviews), documents, images and artifacts.[16][17][18][19][20][21][22] Main article: Interview (research) Research interviews are an important method of data collection in qualitative research. An interviewer is usually a professional or paid researcher, sometimes trained, who poses questions to the interviewee, in an alternating series of usually brief questions and answers, to elicit information. Compared to something like a written survey, qualitative interviews allow for a significantly higher degree of intimacy,[23] with participants often revealing personal information to their interviewers in a real-time, face-to-face setting. As such, this technique can evoke an array of significant feelings and experiences within those being interviewed. Sociologists Bredal, Stefansen and Bjørnholt identified three "participant orientations", that they described as "telling for oneself", "telling for others" and "telling for the researcher". They also proposed that these orientations implied "different ethical contracts between the participant and researcher".[24] In participant observation[25] ethnographers get to understand a culture by directly participating in the activities of the culture they study.[26] Participant observation extends further than ethnography and into other fields, including psychology. For example, by training to be an EMT and becoming a participant observer in the lives of EMTs, Palmer studied how EMTs cope with the stress associated with some of the gruesome emergencies they deal with.[27] In qualitative research, the idea of recursivity refers to the emergent nature of research design. In contrast to standardized research methods, recursivity embodies the idea that the qualitative researcher can change a study's design during the data collection phase.[12] Recursivity in qualitative research procedures contrasts to the methods used by scientists who conduct experiments. From the perspective of the scientist, data collection, data analysis, discussion of the data in the context of the research literature, and drawing conclusions should be each undertaken once (or at most a small number of times). In qualitative research however, data are collected repeatedly until one or more specific stopping conditions are met, reflecting a nonstatic attitude to the planning and design of research activities. An example of this dynamism might be when the qualitative researcher unexpectedly changes their research focus or design midway through a study, based on their first interim data analysis. The researcher can even make further unplanned changes based on another interim data analysis. Such an approach would not be permitted in an experiment. Qualitative researchers would argue that recursivity in developing the relevant evidence enables the researcher to be more open to unexpected results and emerging new constructs.[12] Qualitative researchers have a number of analytic strategies available to them.[28][29][30] Main article: Coding (social sciences) In general, coding refers to the act of associating meaningful ideas with the data of interest. In the context of qualitative research, interpretative aspects of the coding process are often explicitly recognized and articulated; coding helps to produce specific words or short phrases believed to be useful abstractions from the data.[31][32] Data may be sorted into patterns for thematic analyses as the primary basis for organizing and reporting the study findings.[33] Main article: Content analysis According to Krippendorf,[34] "Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inference from data to their context" (p. 21). It is applied to documents and written and oral communication. Content analysis is an important building block in the conceptual analysis of qualitative data. It is frequently used in sociology. For example, content analysis has been applied to research on such diverse aspects of human life as changes in perceptions of race over time,[35] the lifestyles of contractors,[36] and even reviews of automobiles.[37] A growing approach within qualitative research involves combining multiple qualitative methods to produce more robust and multi-faceted findings. In their framework for multi-method qualitative text and discourse analysis, Alejandro and Zhao outline several key benefits for this approach,[38] including complementarity, where the strengths of one method compensate for the weaknesses of another; confirmation, where findings are triangulated for greater validity; and the creation of new research possibilities by examining a phenomenon from wider perspectives. Combining methods, such as discourse analysis and thematic analysis, can also facilitate the contextualisation of findings by connecting textual details to their socio-political environments.[39] This is, for example, illustrated by studies on classroom interactions where thematic analysis identifies learners' behaviors and Critical Classroom Discourse Analysis is then used as a framework to analyze their impact on identity construction;[40] another example is the analysis of online parenting forums, where thematic discourse analysis identifies attitudes towards a practice like placentophagy and then examines how those themes function within broader social discourses on birth and medicalization.[41] However, this approach presents certain challenges, such as the risk of dissolution, where the unique strengths of each method are lost if not implemented with rigour.[38] To navigate this, researchers must have a strong grasp of each individual method before attempting to integrate them. Successful integration requires conscious decisions about the relationship between methods, the data, and the analytical process.[38] It demandes a high degree of researcher reflexivity to ensure the quality of the analysis is enhanced rather than diluted.[42][43] What might be useful is a form of "active reflexivity", which conceptualizes the practice as an ongoing interrogation of the researcher's assumptions and their influence on the methodological choice and production of knowledge.[44] It is possible to coordinate quantitative and qualitative methods in the same study.[45] The idea behind such a research approach would be that the strengths of one type of method would compensate for the weaknesses of the other type of method. For example, in a study of stress in the lives of graduate assistants, stressors, which can be extremely varied, were better ascertained using qualitative methods and the impact of those stressors, measured by a physical symptoms scale, were better assessed with quantitative methods.[46] The Journal of Mixed Methods Research is devoted to studies that coordinate different research methodologies. A screenshot of a user coding text on NVivo Contemporary qualitative data analyses can be supported by computer programs (termed computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software).[47] These programs have been employed with or without detailed hand coding or labeling. Such programs do not supplant the interpretive nature of coding. The programs are aimed at enhancing analysts' efficiency at applying, retrieving, and storing the codes generated from reading the data. Many programs enhance efficiency in editing and revising codes, which allow for more effective work sharing, peer review, data examination, and analysis of large datasets.[47] Common qualitative data analysis software includes: ATLAS.ti Dedoose (mixed methods) MAXQDA (mixed methods) NVivo QDA MINER A criticism of quantitative coding approaches is that such coding sorts qualitative data into predefined (nomothetic) categories that are reflective of the categories found in objective science. The variety, richness, and individual characteristics of the qualitative data are reduced or, even, lost.[citation needed] To defend against the criticism that qualitative approaches to data are too subjective, qualitative researchers assert that by clearly articulating their definitions of the codes they use and linking those codes to the underlying data, they preserve some of the richness that might be lost if the results of their research boiled down to a list of predefined categories. Qualitative researchers also assert that their procedures are repeatable, which is an idea that is valued by quantitatively oriented researchers.[48] Sometimes researchers rely on computers and their software to scan and reduce large amounts of qualitative data. At their most basic level, numerical coding schemes rely on counting words and phrases within a dataset; other techniques involve the analysis of phrases and exchanges in analyses of conversations. A computerized approach to data analysis can be used to aid content analysis, especially when there is a large corpus to unpack. A central issue in qualitative research is trustworthiness (also known as credibility or, in quantitative studies, validity).[49] There are many ways of establishing trustworthiness, including member check, interviewer corroboration, peer debriefing, prolonged engagement, negative case analysis, auditability, confirmability, bracketing, and balance.[49] Data triangulation and eliciting examples of interviewee accounts are two of the most commonly used methods of establishing the trustworthiness of qualitative studies.[50] Transferability of results has also been considered as an indicator of validity.[51] Qualitative research is not without limitations. These limitations include participant reactivity, the potential for a qualitative investigator to over-identify with one or more study participants, "the impracticality of the Glaser-Strauss idea that hypotheses arise from data unsullied by prior expectations," the inadequacy of qualitative research for testing cause-effect hypotheses, and the Baconian character of qualitative research.[45] Participant reactivity refers to the fact that people often behave differently when they know they are being observed. Over-identifying with participants refers to a sympathetic investigator studying a group of people and ascribing, more than is warranted, a virtue or some other characteristic to one or more participants. Compared to qualitative research, experimental research and certain types of nonexperimental research (e.g., prospective studies), although not perfect, are better means for drawing cause-effect conclusions. Glaser and Strauss,[14] influential members of the qualitative research community, pioneered the idea that theoretically important categories and hypotheses can emerge "naturally" from the observations a qualitative researcher collects, provided that the researcher is not guided by preconceptions. The ethologist David Katz wrote "a hungry animal divides the environment into edible and inedible things....Generally speaking, objects change...according to the needs of the animal."[52] Karl Popper carrying forward Katz's point wrote that "objects can be classified and can become similar or dissimilar, only in this way--by being related to needs and interests. This rule applied not only to animals but also to scientists."[53] Popper made clear that observation is always selective, based on past research and the investigators' goals and motives and that preconceptionless research is impossible. The Baconian character of qualitative research refers to the idea that a qualitative researcher can collect enough observations such that categories and hypotheses will emerge from the data. Glaser and Strauss developed the idea of theoretical sampling by way of collecting observations until theoretical saturation is obtained and no additional observations are required to understand the character of the individuals under study.[14] Bertrand Russell suggested that there can be no orderly arrangement of observations such that a hypothesis will jump out of those ordered observations; some provisional hypothesis usually guides the collection of observations.[54] Autobiographical narrative research has been conducted in the field of community psychology.[6] A selection of autobiographical narratives of community psychologists can be found in the book Six Community Psychologists Tell Their Stories: History, Contexts, and Narrative.[55] Edwin Farrell used qualitative methods to understand the social reality of at-risk high school students.[56] Later he used similar methods to understand the reality of successful high school students who came from the same neighborhoods as the at-risk students he wrote about in his previously mentioned book.[57] In the field of health psychology, qualitative methods have become increasingly employed in research on understanding health and illness and how health and illness are socially constructed in everyday life.[58][59] Since then, a broad range of qualitative methods have been adopted by health psychologists, including discourse analysis, thematic analysis, narrative analysis, and interpretative phenomenological analysis. In 2015, the journal Health Psychology published a special issue on qualitative research.[60] According to Doldor and colleagues[61] organizational psychologists extensively use qualitative research "during the design and implementation of activities like organizational change, training needs analyses, strategic reviews, and employee development plans." Although research in the field of occupational health psychology (OHP) has predominantly been quantitatively oriented, some OHP researchers[62][63] have employed qualitative methods. Qualitative research efforts, if directed properly, can provide advantages for quantitatively oriented OHP researchers. These advantages include help with (1) theory and hypothesis development, (2) item creation for surveys and interviews, (3) the discovery of stressors and coping strategies not previously identified, (4) interpreting difficult-to-interpret quantitative findings, (5) understanding why some stress-reduction interventions fail and others succeed, and (6) providing rich descriptions of the lived lives of people at work.[45][64] Some OHP investigators have united qualitative and quantitative methods within a single study (e.g., Elfering et al., [2005][65]); these investigators have used qualitative methods to assess job stressors that are difficult to ascertain using standard measures and well validated standardized instruments to assess coping behaviors and dependent variables such as mood.[45] Since the advent of social media in the early 2000s, formerly private accounts of personal experiences have become widely shared with the public by millions of people around the world. Disclosures are often made openly, which has contributed to social media's key role in movements like the #metoo movement.[66] The abundance of self-disclosure on social media has presented an unprecedented opportunity for qualitative and mixed methods researchers; mental health problems can now be investigated qualitatively more widely, at a lower cost, and with no intervention by the researchers.[67] To take advantage of these data, researchers need to have mastered the tools for conducting qualitative research.[68] Consumption Markets & Culture Journal of Consumer Research Qualitative Inquiry Qualitative Market Research Qualitative Research The Qualitative Report Society portalPsychology portal Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) Hermeneutics – Theory and methodology of text interpretation Methodological dualism – Epistemological position in praxeology Participatory action research – Approach to research in social sciences Process tracing – Method to develop and test theories Qualitative geography – Subfield of geographic methods Qualitative psychological research – Psychological research with qualitative methods Quantitative research – All procedures for the numerical representation of empirical facts Real world data – Medical data derived from many sources

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Qualitative research is a method of inquiry that seeks to understand human experiences, behaviors, and interactions by exploring them in-depth. Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on numerical data, qualitative research delves into meanings, perceptions, and subjective experiences. It is widely used in fields such as sociology, psychology, education, healthcare, and business to uncover insights that are difficult to capture through numerical data. This article explores the methods of qualitative research, types of qualitative analysis, and a comprehensive guide to conducting a qualitative study. Qualitative research is a non-numerical method of data collection and analysis that focuses on understanding phenomena from the perspective of participants. It prioritizes depth over breadth and aims to explore the “why” and “how” behind human behaviors and social phenomena. For example, qualitative research might examine how individuals cope with chronic illness by conducting interviews to explore their experiences and emotions in detail. Exploratory Nature: Focuses on exploring new areas of study or understanding complex phenomena. Contextual Understanding: Emphasizes the importance of context in interpreting findings. Subjectivity: Values participants’ perspectives and experiences as central to the research. Flexibility: Allows for adjustments to research design based on emerging insights. Rich Data: Produces detailed and nuanced descriptions rather than numerical summaries. Interviews involve one-on-one conversations between the researcher and participants to gather in-depth insights. Types: Structured, semi-structured, or unstructured interviews. Example: Interviewing teachers to understand their experiences with online education. Focus groups consist of facilitated discussions with small groups of participants to explore shared experiences or perspectives. Example: Conducting a focus group with patients to understand their satisfaction with healthcare services. Observation involves studying participants in their natural environment to capture behaviors, interactions, and contexts. Types: Participant observation (researcher participates) and non-participant observation (researcher observes without involvement). Example: Observing interactions in a classroom to understand teaching dynamics. Case studies provide an in-depth examination of a single individual, group, event, or organization. Example: Analyzing the impact of a leadership change within a specific company. Ethnography focuses on studying cultural practices and social norms by immersing the researcher in the community. Example: Exploring the cultural traditions of an indigenous group through prolonged fieldwork. Document analysis involves

2004:54). Strauss and Corbin (1998), for example, as well as Nelson et al. (1992:2 cited in Denzin and Lincoln 2003:11), and Flick (2007:ix–x), have recognized that the term is problematic: “Actually, the term ‘qualitative research’ is confusing because it can mean different things to different people” (Strauss and Corbin 1998:10–11). Hammersley has discussed the possibility of addressing the problem, but states that “the task of providing an account of the distinctive features of qualitative research is far from straightforward” (2013:2). This confusion, as he has recently further argued (Hammersley 2018), is also salient in relation to ethnography where different philosophical and methodological approaches lead to a lack of agreement about what it means. Others (e.g. Hammersley 2018; Fine and Hancock 2017) have also identified the treat to qualitative research that comes from external forces, seen from the point of view of “qualitative research.” This threat can be further divided into that which comes from inside academia, such as the critique voiced by “quantitative research” and outside of academia, including, for example, New Public Management. Hammersley (2018), zooming in on one type of qualitative research, ethnography, has argued that it is under treat. Similarly to Fine (2003), and before him Gans (1999), he writes that ethnography’ has acquired a range of meanings, and comes in many different versions, these often reflecting sharply divergent epistemological orientations. And already more than twenty years ago while reviewing Denzin and Lincoln’ s Handbook of Qualitative Methods Fine argued: While this increasing centrality [of qualitative research] might lead one to believe that consensual standards have developed, this belief would be misleading. As the methodology becomes more widely accepted, querulous challengers have raised fundamental questions that collectively have undercut the traditional models of how qualitative research is to be fashioned and presented (1995:417). According to Hammersley, there are today “serious treats to the practice of ethnographic work, on almost any definition” (2018:1). He lists five external treats: (1) that social research must be accountable and able to show its impact on society; (2) the current emphasis on “big data” and the emphasis on quantitative data and evidence; (3) the labor market pressure in academia that leaves less time for fieldwork (see also Fine and Hancock 2017); (4) problems of access to fields; and (5) the increased ethical scrutiny of projects, to which ethnography is particularly exposed. Hammersley discusses some more or less insufficient existing definitions of ethnography. The current situation, as Hammersley and others note—and in relation not only to ethnography but also qualitative research in general, and as our empirical study shows—is not just unsatisfactory, it may even be harmful for the entire field of qualitative research, and does not help social science at large. We suggest that the lack of clarity of qualitative research is a real problem that must be addressed. Seen in an historical light, what is today called qualitative, or sometimes ethnographic, interpretative research – or a number of other terms – has more or less always existed. At the time the founders of sociology – Simmel, Weber, Durkheim and, before them, Marx – were writing, and during the era of the Methodenstreit (“dispute about methods”) in which the German historical school emphasized scientific methods (cf. Swedberg 1990), we can at least speak of qualitative forerunners. Perhaps the most extended discussion of what later became known as qualitative methods in a classic work is Bronisław Malinowski’s (1922) Argonauts in the Western Pacific, although even this study does not explicitly address the meaning of “qualitative.” In Weber’s ([1921--22] 1978) work we find a tension between scientific explanations that are based on observation and quantification and interpretative research (see also Lazarsfeld and Barton 1982). If we look through major sociology journals like the American Sociological Review, American Journal of Sociology, or Social Forces we will not find the term qualitative sociology before the 1970s. And certainly before then much of what we consider qualitative classics in sociology, like Becker’ study (1963), had already been produced. Indeed, the Chicago School often combined qualitative and quantitative data within the same study (Fine 1995). Our point being that before a disciplinary self-awareness the term quantitative preceded qualitative, and the articulation of the former was a political move to claim scientific status (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). In the US the World War II seem to have sparked a critique of sociological work, including “qualitative work,” that did not follow the scientific canon (Rawls 2018), which was underpinned by a scientifically oriented and value free philosophy of science. As a result the attempts and practice of integrating qualitative and quantitative sociology at Chicago lost ground to sociology that was more oriented to surveys and quantitative work at Columbia under Merton-Lazarsfeld. The quantitative tradition was also able to present textbooks (Lundberg 1951) that facilitated the use this approach and its “methods.” The practices of the qualitative tradition, by and large, remained tacit or was part of the mentoring transferred from the renowned masters to their students. This glimpse into history leads us back to the lack of a coherent account condensed in a definition of qualitative research. Many of the attempts to define the term do not meet the requirements of a proper definition: A definition should be clear, avoid tautology, demarcate its domain in relation to the environment, and ideally only use words in its definiens that themselves are not in need of definition (Hempel 1966). A definition can enhance precision and thus clarity by identifying the core of the phenomenon. Preferably, a definition should be short. The typical definition we have found, however, is an ostensive definition, which indicates what qualitative research is about without informing us about what it actually is: Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretative, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives. (Denzin and Lincoln 2005:2) Flick claims that the label “qualitative research” is indeed used as an umbrella for a number of approaches (2007:2–4; 2002:6), and it is not difficult to identify research fitting this designation. Moreover, whatever it is, it has grown dramatically over the past five decades. In addition, courses have been developed, methods have flourished, arguments about its future have been advanced (for example, Denzin and Lincoln 1994) and criticized (for example, Snow and Morrill 1995), and dedicated journals and books have mushroomed. Most social scientists have a clear idea of research and how it differs from journalism, politics and other activities. But the question of what is qualitative in qualitative research is either eluded or eschewed. We maintain that this lacuna hinders systematic knowledge production based on qualitative research. Paul Lazarsfeld noted the lack of “codification” as early as 1955 when he reviewed 100 qualitative studies in order to offer a codification of the practices (Lazarsfeld and Barton 1982:239). Since then many texts on “qualitative research” and its methods have been published, including recent attempts (Goertz and Mahoney 2012) similar to Lazarsfeld’s. These studies have tried to extract what is qualitative by looking at the large number of empirical “qualitative” studies. Our novel strategy complements these endeavors by taking another approach and looking at the attempts to codify these practices in the form of a definition, as well as to a minor extent take Becker’s study as an exemplar of what qualitative researchers actually do, and what the characteristic of being ‘qualitative’ denotes and implies. We claim that qualitative researchers, if there is such a thing as “qualitative research,” should be able to codify their practices in a condensed, yet general way expressed in language. Lingering problems of “generalizability” and “how many cases do I need” (Small 2009) are blocking advancement – in this line of work qualitative approaches are said to differ considerably from quantitative ones, while some of the former unsuccessfully mimic principles related to the latter (Small 2009). Additionally, quantitative researchers sometimes unfairly criticize the first based on their own quality criteria. Scholars like Goertz and Mahoney (2012) have successfully focused on the different norms and practices beyond what they argue are essentially two different cultures: those working with either qualitative or quantitative methods. Instead, similarly to Becker (2017) who has recently questioned the usefulness of the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research, we focus on similarities. The current situation also impedes both students and researchers in focusing their studies and understanding each other’s work (Lazarsfeld and Barton 1982:239). A third consequence is providing an opening for critiques by scholars operating within different traditions (Valsiner 2000:101). A fourth issue is that the “implicit use of methods in qualitative research makes the field far less standardized than the quantitative paradigm” (Goertz and Mahoney 2012:9). Relatedly, the National Science Foundation in the US organized two workshops in 2004 and 2005 to address the scientific foundations of qualitative research involving strategies to improve it and to develop standards of evaluation in qualitative research. However, a specific focus on its distinguishing feature of being “qualitative” while being implicitly acknowledged, was discussed only briefly (for example, Best 2004). In 2014 a theme issue was published in this journal on “Methods, Materials, and Meanings: Designing Cultural Analysis,” discussing central issues in (cultural) qualitative research (Berezin 2014; Biernacki 2014; Glaeser 2014; Lamont and Swidler 2014; Spillman 2014). We agree with many of the arguments put forward, such as the risk of methodological tribalism, and that we should not waste energy on debating methods separated from research questions. Nonetheless, a clarification of the relation to what is called “qualitative research” is of outmost importance to avoid misunderstandings and misguided debates between “qualitative” and “quantitative” researchers. Our strategy means that researchers, “qualitative” or “quantitative” they may be, in their actual practice may combine qualitative work and quantitative work. In this article we accomplish three tasks. First, we systematically survey the literature for meanings of qualitative research by looking at how researchers have defined it. Drawing upon existing knowledge we find that the different meanings and ideas of qualitative research are not yet coherently integrated into one satisfactory definition. Next, we advance our contribution by offering a definition of qualitative research and illustrate its meaning and use partially by expanding on the brief example introduced earlier related to Becker’s work (1963). We offer a systematic analysis of central themes of what researchers consider to be the core of “qualitative,” regardless of style of work. These themes – which we summarize in terms of four keywords: distinction, process, closeness, improved understanding – constitute part of our literature review, in which each one appears, sometimes with others, but never all in the same definition. They serve as the foundation of our contribution. Our categories are overlapping. Their use is primarily to organize the large amount of definitions we have identified and analyzed, and not necessarily to draw a clear distinction between them. Finally, we continue the elaboration discussed above on the advantages of a clear definition of qualitative research. In a hermeneutic fashion we propose that there is something meaningful that deserves to be labelled “qualitative research” (Gadamer 1990). To approach the question “What is qualitative in qualitative research?” we have surveyed the literature. In conducting our survey we first traced the word’s etymology in dictionaries, encyclopedias, handbooks of the social sciences and of methods and textbooks, mainly in English, which is common to methodology courses. It should be noted that we have zoomed in on sociology and its literature. This discipline has been the site of the largest debate and development of methods that can be called “qualitative,” which suggests that this field should be examined in great detail. In an ideal situation we should expect that one good definition, or at least some common ideas, would have emerged over the years. This common core of qualitative research should be so accepted that it would appear in at least some textbooks. Since this is not what we found, we decided to pursue an inductive approach to capture maximal variation in the field of qualitative research; we searched in a selection of handbooks, textbooks, book chapters, and books, to which we added the analysis of journal articles. Our sample comprises a total of 89 references. In practice we focused on the discipline that has had a clear discussion of methods, namely sociology. We also conducted a broad search in the JSTOR database to identify scholarly sociology articles published between 1998 and 2017 in English with a focus on defining or explaining qualitative research. We specifically zoom in on this time frame because we would have expect that this more mature period would have produced clear discussions on the meaning of qualitative research. To find these articles we combined a number of keywords to search the content and/or the title: qualitative (which was always included), definition, empirical, research, methodology, studies, fieldwork, interview and observation. As a second phase of our research we searched within nine major sociological journals (American Journal of Sociology, Sociological Theory, American Sociological Review, Contemporary Sociology, Sociological Forum, Sociological Theory, Qualitative Research, Qualitative Sociology and Qualitative Sociology Review) for articles also published during the past 19 years (1998–2017) that had the term “qualitative” in the title and attempted to define qualitative research. Lastly we picked two additional journals, Qualitative Research and Qualitative Sociology, in which we could expect to find texts addressing the notion of “qualitative.” From Qualitative Research we chose Volume 14, Issue 6, December 2014, and from Qualitative Sociology we chose Volume 36, Issue 2, June 2017. Within each of these we selected the first article; then we picked the second article of three prior issues. Again we went back another three issues and investigated article number three. Finally we went back another three issues and perused article number four. This selection criteria was used to get a manageable sample for the analysis. The coding process of the 89 references we gathered in our selected review began soon after the first round of material was gathered, and we reduced the complexity created by our maximum variation sampling (Snow and Anderson 1993:22) to four different categories within which questions on the nature and properties of qualitative research were discussed. We call them: Qualitative and Quantitative Research, Qualitative Research, Fieldwork, and Grounded Theory. This – which may appear as an illogical grouping – merely reflects the “context” in which the matter of “qualitative” is discussed. If the selection process of the material – books and articles – was informed by pre-knowledge, we used an inductive strategy to code the material. When studying our material, we identified four central notions related to “qualitative” that appear in various combinations in the literature which indicate what is the core of qualitative research. We have labeled them: “distinctions”, “process,” “closeness,” and “improved understanding.” During the research process the categories and notions were improved, refined, changed, and reordered. The coding ended when a sense of saturation in the material arose. In the presentation below all quotations and references come from our empirical material of texts on qualitative research. In this section we describe the four categories we identified in the coding, how they differently discuss qualitative research, as well as their overall content. Some salient quotations are selected to represent the type of text sorted under each of the four categories. What we present are examples from the literature. This analytic category comprises quotations comparing qualitative and quantitative research, a distinction that is frequently used (Brown 2010:231); in effect this is a conceptual pair that structures the discussion and that may be associated with opposing interests. While the general goal of quantitative and qualitative research is the same – to understand the world better – their methodologies and focus in certain respects differ substantially (Becker 1966:55). Quantity refers to that property of something that can be determined by measurement. In a dictionary of Statistics and Methodology we find that “(a) When referring to *variables, ‘qualitative’ is another term for *categorical or *nominal. (b) When speaking of kinds of research, ‘qualitative’ refers to studies of subjects that are hard to quantify, such as art history. Qualitative research tends to be a residual category for almost any kind of non-quantitative research” (Stiles 1998:183). But it should be obvious that one could employ a quantitative approach when studying, for example, art history. The same dictionary states that quantitative is “said of variables or research that can be handled numerically, usually (too sharply) contrasted with *qualitative variables and research” (Stiles 1998:184). From a qualitative perspective “quantitative research” is about numbers and counting, and from a quantitative perspective qualitative research is everything that is not about numbers. But this does not say much about what is “qualitative.” If we turn to encyclopedias we find that in the 1932 edition of the Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences there is no mention of “qualitative.” In the Encyclopedia from 1968 we can read: Qualitative Analysis. For methods of obtaining, analyzing, and describing data, see [the various entries:] CONTENT ANALYSIS; COUNTED DATA; EVALUATION RESEARCH, FIELD WORK; GRAPHIC PRESENTATION; HISTORIOGRAPHY, especially the article on THE RHETORIC OF HISTORY; INTERVIEWING; OBSERVATION; PERSONALITY MEASUREMENT; PROJECTIVE METHODS; PSYCHOANALYSIS, article on EXPERIMENTAL METHODS; SURVEY ANALYSIS, TABULAR PRESENTATION; TYPOLOGIES. (Vol. 13:225) Some, like Alford, divide researchers into methodologists or, in his words, “quantitative and qualitative specialists” (Alford 1998:12). Qualitative research uses a variety of methods, such as intensive interviews or in-depth analysis of historical materials, and it is concerned with a comprehensive account of some event or unit (King et al. 1994:4). Like quantitative research it can be utilized to study a variety of issues, but it tends to focus on meanings and motivations that underlie cultural symbols, personal experiences, phenomena and detailed understanding of processes in the social world. In short, qualitative research centers on understanding processes, experiences, and the meanings people assign to things (Kalof et al. 2008:79). Others simply say that qualitative methods are inherently unscientific (Jovanović 2011:19). Hood, for instance, argues that words are intrinsically less precise than numbers, and that they are therefore more prone to subjective analysis, leading to biased results (Hood 2006:219). Qualitative methodologies have raised concerns over the limitations of quantitative templates (Brady et al. 2004:4). Scholars such as King et al. (1994), for instance, argue that non-statistical research can produce more reliable results if researchers pay attention to the rules of scientific inference commonly stated in quantitative research. Also, researchers such as Becker (1966:59; 1970:42–43) have asserted that, if conducted properly, qualitative research and in particular ethnographic field methods, can lead to more accurate results than quantitative studies, in particular, survey research and laboratory experiments. Some researchers, such as Kalof, Dan, and Dietz (2008:79) claim that the boundaries between the two approaches are becoming blurred, and Small (2009) argues that currently much qualitative research (especially in North America) tries unsuccessfully and unnecessarily to emulate quantitative standards. For others, qualitative research tends to be more humanistic and discursive (King et al. 1994:4). Ragin (1994), and similarly also Becker, (1996:53), Marchel and Owens (2007:303) think that the main distinction between the two styles is overstated and does not rest on the simple dichotomy of “numbers versus words” (Ragin 1994:xii). Some claim that quantitative data can be utilized to discover associations, but in order to unveil cause and effect a complex research design involving the use of qualitative approaches needs to be devised (Gilbert 2009:35). Consequently, qualitative data are useful for understanding the nuances lying beyond those processes as they unfold (Gilbert 2009:35). Others contend that qualitative research is particularly well suited both to identify causality and to uncover fine descriptive distinctions (Fine and Hallett 2014; Lichterman and Isaac Reed 2014; Katz 2015). There are other ways to separate these two traditions, including normative statements about what qualitative research should be (that is, better or worse than quantitative approaches, concerned with scientific approaches to societal change or vice versa; Snow and Morrill 1995; Denzin and Lincoln 2005), or whether it should develop falsifiable statements; Best 2004). We propose that quantitative research is largely concerned with pre-determined variables (Small 2008); the analysis concerns the relations between variables. These categories are primarily not questioned in the study, only their frequency or degree, or the correlations between them (cf. Franzosi 2016). If a researcher studies wage differences between women and men, he or she works with given categories: x number of men are compared with y number of women, with a certain wage attributed to each person. The idea is not to move beyond the given categories of wage, men and women; they are the starting point as well as the end point, and undergo no “qualitative change.” Qualitative research, in contrast, investigates relations between categories that are themselves subject to change in the research process. Returning to Becker’s study (1963), we see that he questioned pre-dispositional theories of deviant behavior working with pre-determined variables such as an individual’s combination of personal qualities or emotional problems. His take, in contrast, was to understand marijuana consumption by developing “variables” as part of the investigation. Thereby he presented new variables, or as we would say today, theoretical concepts, but which are grounded in the empirical material. This category contains quotations that refer to descriptions of qualitative research without making comparisons with quantitative research. Researchers such as Denzin and Lincoln, who have written a series of influential handbooks on qualitative methods (1994; Denzin and Lincoln 2003; 2005), citing Nelson et al. (1992:4), argue that because qualitative research is “interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counterdisciplinary” it is difficult to derive one single definition of it (Jovanović 2011:3). According to them, in fact, “the field” is “many things at the same time,” involving contradictions, tensions over its focus, methods, and how to derive interpretations and findings (2003: 11). Similarly, others, such as Flick (2007:ix–x) contend that agreeing on an accepted definition has increasingly become problematic, and that qualitative research has possibly matured different identities. However, Best holds that “the proliferation of many sorts of activities under the label of qualitative sociology threatens to confuse our discussions” (2004:54). Atkinson’s position is more definite: “the current state of qualitative research and research methods is confused” (2005:3–4). Qualitative research is about interpretation (Blumer 1969; Strauss and Corbin 1998; Denzin and Lincoln 2003), or Verstehen [understanding] (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 1996). It is “multi-method,” involving the collection and use of a variety of empirical materials (Denzin and Lincoln 1998; Silverman 2013) and approaches (Silverman 2005; Flick 2007). It focuses not only on the objective nature of behavior but also on its subjective meanings: individuals’ own accounts of their attitudes, motivations, behavior (McIntyre 2005:127; Creswell 2009), events and situations (Bryman 1989) – what people say and do in specific places and institutions (Goodwin and Horowitz 2002:35–36) in social and temporal contexts (Morrill and Fine 1997). For this reason, following Weber ([1921-22] 1978), it can be described as an interpretative science (McIntyre 2005:127). But could quantitative research also be concerned with these questions? Also, as pointed out below, does all qualitative research focus on subjective meaning, as some scholars suggest? Others also distinguish qualitative research by claiming that it collects data using a naturalistic approach (Denzin and Lincoln 2005:2; Creswell 2009), focusing on the meaning actors ascribe to their actions. But again, does all qualitative research need to be collected in situ? And does qualitative research have to be inherently concerned with meaning? Flick (2007), referring to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), mentions conversation analysis as an example of qualitative research that is not concerned with the meanings people bring to a situation, but rather with the formal organization of talk. Still others, such as Ragin (1994:85), note that qualitative research is often (especially early on in the project, we would add) less structured than other kinds of social research – a characteristic connected to its flexibility and that can lead both to potentially better, but also worse results. But is this not a feature of this type of research, rather than a defining description of its essence? Wouldn’t this comment also apply, albeit to varying degrees, to quantitative research? In addition, Strauss (2003), along with others, such as Alvesson and Kärreman (2011:10–76), argue that qualitative researchers struggle to capture and represent complex phenomena partially because they tend to collect a large amount of data. While his analysis is correct at some points – “It is necessary to do detailed, intensive, microscopic examination of the data in order to bring out the amazing complexity of what lies in, behind, and beyond those data” (Strauss 2003:10) – much of his analysis concerns the supposed focus of qualitative research and its challenges, rather than exactly what it is about. But even in this instance we would make a weak case arguing that these are strictly the defining features of qualitative research. Some researchers seem to focus on the approach or the methods used, or even on the way material is analyzed. Several researchers stress the naturalistic assumption of investigating the world, suggesting that meaning and interpretation appear to be a core matter of qualitative research. We can also see that in this category there is no consensus about specific qualitative methods nor about qualitative data. Many emphasize interpretation, but quantitative research, too, involves interpretation; the results of a regression analysis, for example, certainly have to be interpreted, and the form of meta-analysis that factor analysis provides indeed requires interpretation However, there is no interpretation of quantitative raw data, i.e., numbers in tables. One common thread is that qualitative researchers have to get to grips with their data in order to understand what is being studied in great detail, irrespective of the type of empirical material that is being analyzed. This observation is connected to the fact that qualitative researchers routinely make several adjustments of focus and research design as their studies progress, in many cases until the very end of the project (Kalof et al. 2008). If you, like Becker, do not start out with a detailed theory, adjustments such as the emergence and refinement of research questions will occur during the research process. We have thus found a number of useful reflections about qualitative research scattered across different sources, but none of them effectively describe the defining characteristics of this approach. Although qualitative research does not appear to be defined in terms of a specific method, it is certainly common that fieldwork, i.e., research that entails that the researcher spends considerable time in the field that is studied and use the knowledge gained as data, is seen as emblematic of or even identical to qualitative research. But because we understand that fieldwork tends to focus primarily on the collection and analysis of qualitative data, we expected to find within it discussions on the meaning of “qualitative.” But, again, this was not the case. Instead, we found material on the history of this approach (for example, Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 1996; Atkinson et al. 2001), including how it has changed; for example, by adopting a more self-reflexive practice (Heyl 2001), as well as the different nomenclature that has been adopted, such as fieldwork, ethnography, qualitative research, naturalistic research, participant observation and so on (for example, Lofland et al. 2006; Gans 1999). We retrieved definitions of ethnography, such as “the study of people acting in the natural courses of their daily lives,” involving a “resocialization of the researcher” (Emerson 1988:1) through intense immersion in others’ social worlds (see also examples in Hammersley 2018). This may be accomplished by direct observation and also participation (Neuman 2007:276), although others, such as Denzin (1970:185), have long recognized other types of observation, including non-participant (“fly on the wall”). In this category we have also isolated claims and opposing views, arguing that this type of research is distinguished primarily by where it is conducted (natural settings) (Hughes 1971:496), and how it is carried out (a variety of methods are applied) or, for some most importantly, by involving an active, empathetic immersion in those being studied (Emerson 1988:2). We also retrieved descriptions of the goals it attends in relation to how it is taught (understanding subjective meanings of the people studied, primarily develop theory, or contribute to social change) (see for example, Corte and Irwin 2017; Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 1996:281; Trier-Bieniek 2012:639) by collecting the richest possible data (Lofland et al. 2006) to derive “thick descriptions” (Geertz 1973), and/or to aim at theoretical statements of general scope and applicability (for example, Emerson 1988; Fine 2003). We have identified guidelines on how to evaluate it (for example Becker 1996; Lamont 2004) and have retrieved instructions on how it should be conducted (for example, Lofland et al. 2006). For instance, analysis should take place while the data gathering unfolds (Emerson 1988; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Lofland et al. 2006), observations should be of long duration (Becker 1970:54; Goffman 1989), and data should be of high quantity (Becker 1970:52–53), as well as other questionable distinctions between fieldwork and other methods: Field studies differ from other methods of research in that the researcher performs the task of selecting topics, decides what questions to ask, and forges interest in the course of the research itself. This is in sharp contrast to many ‘theory-driven’ and ‘hypothesis-testing’ methods. (Lofland and Lofland 1995:5) But could not, for example, a strictly interview-based study be carried out with the same amount of flexibility, such as sequential interviewing (for example, Small 2009)? Once again, are quantitative approaches really as inflexible as some qualitative researchers think? Moreover, this category stresses the role of the actors’ meaning, which requires knowledge and close interaction with people, their practices and their lifeworld. It is clear that field studies – which are seen by some as the “gold standard” of qualitative research – are nonetheless only one way of doing qualitative research. There are other methods, but it is not clear why some are more qualitative than others, or why they are better or worse. Fieldwork is characterized by interaction with the field (the material) and understanding of the phenomenon that is being studied. In Becker’s case, he had general experience from fields in which marihuana was used, based on which he did interviews with actual users in several fields. Another major category we identified in our sample is Grounded Theory. We found descriptions of it most clearly in Glaser and Strauss’ ([1967] 2010) original articulation, Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Charmaz (2006), as well as many other accounts of what it is for: generating and testing theory (Strauss 2003:xi). We identified explanations of how this task can be accomplished – such as through two main procedures: constant comparison and theoretical sampling (Emerson 1998:96), and how using it has helped researchers to “think differently” (for example, Strauss and Corbin 1998:1). We also read descriptions of its main traits, what it entails and fosters – for instance, an exceptional flexibility, an inductive approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998:31–33; 1990; Esterberg 2002:7), an ability to step back and critically analyze situations, recognize tendencies towards bias, think abstractly and be open to criticism, enhance sensitivity towards the words and actions of respondents, and develop a sense of absorption and devotion to the research process (Strauss and Corbin 1998:5–6). Accordingly, we identified discussions of the value of triangulating different methods (both using and not using grounded theory), including quantitative ones, and theories to achieve theoretical development (most comprehensively in Denzin 1970; Strauss and Corbin 1998; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). We have also located arguments about how its practice helps to systematize data collection, analysis and presentation of results (Glaser and Strauss [1967] 2010:16). Grounded theory offers a systematic approach which requires researchers to get close to the field; closeness is a requirement of identifying questions and developing new concepts or making further distinctions with regard to old concepts. In contrast to other qualitative approaches, grounded theory emphasizes the detailed coding process, and the numerous fine-tuned distinctions that the researcher makes during the process. Within this category, too, we could not find a satisfying discussion of the meaning of qualitative research. In sum, our analysis shows that some notions reappear in the discussion of qualitative research, such as understanding, interpretation, “getting close” and making distinctions. These notions capture aspects of what we think is “qualitative.” However, a comprehensive definition that is useful and that can further develop the field is lacking, and not even a clear picture of its essential elements appears. In other words no definition emerges from our data, and in our research process we have moved back and forth between our empirical data and the attempt to present a definition. Our concrete strategy, as stated above, is to relate qualitative and quantitative research, or more specifically, qualitative and quantitative work. We use an ideal-typical notion of quantitative research which relies on taken for granted and numbered variables. This means that the data consists of variables on different scales, such as ordinal, but frequently ratio and absolute scales, and the representation of the numbers to the variables, i.e. the justification of the assignment of numbers to object or phenomenon, are not questioned, though the validity may be questioned. In this section we return to the notion of quality and try to clarify it while presenting our contribution. Broadly, research refers to the activity performed by people trained to obtain knowledge through systematic procedures. Notions such as “objectivity” and “reflexivity,” “systematic,” “theory,” “evidence” and “openness” are here taken for granted in any type of research. Next, building on our empirical analysis we explain the four notions that we have identified as central to qualitative work: distinctions, process, closeness, and improved understanding. In discussing them, ultimately in relation to one another, we make their meaning even more precise. Our idea, in short, is that only when these ideas that we present separately for analytic purposes are brought together can we speak of qualitative research. We believe that the possibility of making new distinctions is one the defining characteristics of qualitative research. It clearly sets it apart from quantitative analysis which works with taken-for-granted variables, albeit as mentioned, meta-analyses, for example, factor analysis may result in new variables. “Quality” refers essentially to distinctions, as already pointed out by Aristotle. He discusses the term “qualitative” commenting: “By a quality I mean that in virtue of which things are said to be qualified somehow” (Aristotle 1984:14). Quality is about what something is or has, which means that the distinction from its environment is crucial. We see qualitative research as a process in which significant new distinctions are made to the scholarly community; to make distinctions is a key aspect of obtaining new knowledge; a point, as we will see, that also has implications for “quantitative research.” The notion of being “significant” is paramount. New distinctions by themselves are not enough; just adding concepts only increases complexity without furthering our knowledge. The significance of new distinctions is judged against the communal knowledge of the research community. To enable this discussion and judgements central elements of rational discussion are required (cf. Habermas [1981] 1987; Davidsson [1988] 2001) to identify what is new and relevant scientific knowledge. Relatedly, Ragin alludes to the idea of new and useful knowledge at a more concrete level: “Qualitative methods are appropriate for in-depth examination of cases because they aid the identification of key features of cases. Most qualitative methods enhance data” (1994:79). When Becker (1963) studied deviant behavior and investigated how people became marihuana smokers, he made distinctions between the ways in which people learned how to smoke. This is a classic example of how the strategy of “getting close” to the material, for example the text, people or pictures that are subject to analysis, may enable researchers to obtain deeper insight and new knowledge by making distinctions – in this instance on the initial notion of learning how to smoke. Others have stressed the making of distinctions in relation to coding or theorizing. Emerson et al. (1995), for example, hold that “qualitative coding is a way of opening up avenues of inquiry,” meaning that the researcher identifies and develops concepts and analytic insights through close examination of and reflection on data (Emerson et al. 1995:151). Goodwin and Horowitz highlight making distinctions in relation to theory-building writing: “Close engagement with their cases typically requires qualitative researchers to adapt existing theories or to make new conceptual distinctions or theoretical arguments to accommodate new data” (2002: 37). In the ideal-typical quantitative research only existing and so to speak, given, variables would be used. If this is the case no new distinction are made. But, would not also many “quantitative” researchers make new distinctions? Process does not merely suggest that research takes time. It mainly implies that qualitative new knowledge results from a process that involves several phases, and above all iteration. Qualitative research is about oscillation between theory and evidence, analysis and generating material, between first- and second-order constructs (Schütz 1962:59), between getting in contact with something, finding sources, becoming deeply familiar with a topic, and then distilling and communicating some of its essential features. The main point is that the categories that the researcher uses, and perhaps takes for granted at the beginning of the research process, usually undergo qualitative changes resulting from what is found. Becker describes how he tested hypotheses and let the jargon of the users develop into theoretical concepts. This happens over time while the study is being conducted, exemplifying what we mean by process. In the research process, a pilot-study may be used to get a first glance of, for example, the field, how to approach it, and what methods can be used, after which the method and theory are chosen or refined before the main study begins. Thus, the empirical material is often central from the start of the project and frequently leads to adjustments by the researcher. Likewise, during the main study categories are not fixed; the empirical material is seen in light of the theory used, but it is also given the opportunity to kick back, thereby resisting attempts to apply theoretical straightjackets (Becker 1970:43). In this process, coding and analysis are interwoven, and thus are often important steps for getting closer to the phenomenon and deciding what to focus on next. Becker began his research by interviewing musicians close to him, then asking them to refer him to other musicians, and later on doubling his original sample of about 25 to include individuals in other professions (Becker 1973:46). Additionally, he made use of some participant observation, documents, and interviews with opiate users made available to him by colleagues. As his inductive theory of deviance evolved, Becker expanded his sample in order to fine tune it, and test the accuracy and generality of his hypotheses. In addition, he introduced a negative case and discussed the null hypothesis (1963:44). His phasic career model is thus based on a research design that embraces processual work. Typically, process means to move between “theory” and “material” but also to deal with negative cases, and Becker (1998) describes how discovering these negative cases impacted his research design and ultimately its findings. Obviously, all research is process-oriented to some degree. The point is that the ideal-typical quantitative process does not imply change of the data, and iteration between data, evidence, hypotheses, empirical work, and theory. The data, quantified variables, are, in most cases fixed. Merging of data, which of course can be done in a quantitative research process, does not mean new data. New hypotheses are frequently tested, but the “raw data is often the “the same.” Obviously, over time new datasets are made available and put into use. Another characteristic that is emphasized in our sample is that qualitative researchers – and in particular ethnographers – can, or as Goffman put it, ought to (1989), get closer to the phenomenon being studied and their data than quantitative researchers (for example, Silverman 2009:85). Put differently, essentially because of their methods qualitative researchers get into direct close contact with those being investigated and/or the material, such as texts, being analyzed. Becker started out his interview study, as we noted, by talking to those he knew in the field of music to get closer to the phenomenon he was studying. By conducting interviews he got even closer. Had he done more observations, he would undoubtedly have got even closer to the field. Additionally, ethnographers’ design enables researchers to follow the field over time, and the research they do is almost by definition longitudinal, though the time in the field is studied obviously differs between studies. The general characteristic of closeness over time maximizes the chances of unexpected events, new data (related, for example, to archival research as additional sources, and for ethnography for situations not necessarily previously thought of as instrumental – what Mannay and Morgan (2015) term the “waiting field”), serendipity (Merton and Barber 2004; Åkerström 2013), and possibly reactivity, as well as the opportunity to observe disrupted patterns that translate into exemplars of negative cases. Two classic examples of this are Becker’s finding of what medical students call “crocks” (Becker et al. 1961:317), and Geertz’s (1973) study of “deep play” in Balinese society. By getting and staying so close to their data – be it pictures, text or humans interacting (Becker was himself a musician) – for a long time, as the research progressively focuses, qualitative researchers are prompted to continually test their hunches, presuppositions and hypotheses. They test them against a reality that often (but certainly not always), and practically, as well as metaphorically, talks back, whether by validating them, or disqualifying their premises – correctly, as well as incorrectly (Fine 2003; Becker 1970). This testing nonetheless often leads to new directions for the research. Becker, for example, says that he was initially reading psychological theories, but when facing the data he develops a theory that looks at, you may say, everything but psychological dispositions to explain the use of marihuana. Especially researchers involved with ethnographic methods have a fairly unique opportunity to dig up and then test (in a circular, continuous and temporal way) new research questions and findings as the research progresses, and thereby to derive previously unimagined and uncharted distinctions by getting closer to the phenomenon under study. Let us stress that getting close is by no means restricted to ethnography. The notion of hermeneutic circle and hermeneutics as a general way of understanding implies that we must get close to the details in order to get the big picture. This also means that qualitative researchers can literally also make use of details of pictures as evidence (cf. Harper 2002). Thus, researchers may get closer both when generating the material or when analyzing it. Quantitative research, we maintain, in the ideal-typical representation cannot get closer to the data. The data is essentially numbers in tables making up the variables (Franzosi 2016:138). The data may originally have been “qualitative,” but once reduced to numbers there can only be a type of “hermeneutics” about what the number may stand for. The numbers themselves, however, are non-ambiguous. Thus, in quantitative research, interpretation, if done, is not about the data itself—the numbers—but what the numbers stand for. It follows that the interpretation is essentially done in a more “speculative” mode without direct empirical evidence (cf. Becker 2017). While distinction, process and getting closer refer to the qualitative work of the researcher, improved understanding refers to its conditions and outcome of this work. Understanding cuts deeper than explanation, which to some may mean a causally verified correlation between variables. The notion of explanation presupposes the notion of understanding since explanation does not include an idea of how knowledge is gained (Manicas 2006: 15). Understanding, we argue, is the core concept of what we call the outcome of the process when research has made use of all the other elements that were integrated in the research. Understanding, then, has a special status in qualitative research since it refers both to the conditions of knowledge and the outcome of the process. Understanding can to some extent be seen as the condition of explanation and occurs in a process of interpretation, which naturally refers to meaning (Gadamer 1990). It is fundamentally connected to knowing, and to the knowing of how to do things (Heidegger [1927] 2001). Conceptually the term hermeneutics is used to account for this process. Heidegger ties hermeneutics to human being and not possible to separate from the understanding of being (1988). Here we use it in a broader sense, and more connected to method in general (cf. Seiffert 1992). The abovementioned aspects – for example, “objectivity” and “reflexivity” – of the approach are conditions of scientific understanding. Understanding is the result of a circular process and means that the parts are understood in light of the whole, and vice versa. Understanding presupposes pre-understanding, or in other words, some knowledge of the phenomenon studied. The pre-understanding, even in the form of prejudices, are in qualitative research process, which we see as iterative, questioned, which gradually or suddenly change due to the iteration of data, evidence and concepts. However, qualitative research generates understanding in the iterative process when the researcher gets closer to the data, e.g., by going back and forth between field and analysis in a process that generates new data that changes the evidence, and, ultimately, the findings. Questioning, to ask questions, and put what one assumes—prejudices and presumption—in question, is central to understand something (Heidegger [1927] 2001; Gadamer 1990:368–384). We propose that this iterative process in which the process of understanding occurs is characteristic of qualitative research. Improved understanding means that we obtain scientific knowledge of something that we as a scholarly community did not know before, or that we get to know something better. It means that we understand more about how parts are related to one another, and to other things we already understand (see also Fine and Hallett 2014). Understanding is an important condition for qualitative research. It is not enough to identify correlations, make distinctions, and work in a process in which one gets close to the field or phenomena. Understanding is accomplished when the elements are integrated in an iterative process. It is, moreover, possible to understand many things, and researchers, just like children, may come to understand new things every day as they engage with the world. This subjective condition of understanding – namely, that a person gains a better understanding of something –is easily met. To be qualified as “scientific,” the understanding must be general and useful to many; it must be public. But even this generally accessible understanding is not enough in order to speak of “scientific understanding.” Though we as a collective can increase understanding of everything in virtually all potential directions as a result also of qualitative work, we refrain from this “objective” way of understanding, which has no means of discriminating between what we gain in understanding. Scientific understanding means that it is deemed relevant from the scientific horizon (compare Schütz 1962: 35–38, 46, 63), and that it rests on the pre-understanding that the scientists have and must have in order to understand. In other words, the understanding gained must be deemed useful by other researchers, so that they can build on it. We thus see understanding from a pragmatic, rather than a subjective or objective perspective. Improved understanding is related to the question(s) at hand. Understanding, in order to represent an improvement, must be an improvement in relation to the existing body of knowledge of the scientific community (James [1907] 1955). Scientific understanding is, by definition, collective, as expressed in Weber’s famous note on objectivity, namely that scientific work aims at truths “which ... can claim, even for a Chinese, the validity appropriate to an empirical analysis” ([1904] 1949:59). By qualifying “improved understanding” we argue that it is a general defining characteristic of qualitative research. Becker‘s (1966) study and other research of deviant behavior increased our understanding of the social learning processes of how individuals start a behavior. And it also added new knowledge about the labeling of deviant behavior as a social process. Few studies, of course, make the same large contribution as Becker’s, but are nonetheless qualitative research. Understanding in the phenomenological sense, which is a hallmark of qualitative research, we argue, requires meaning and this meaning is derived from the context, and above all the data being analyzed. The ideal-typical quantitative research operates with given variables with different numbers. This type of material is not enough to establish meaning at the level that truly justifies understanding. In other words, many social science explanations offer ideas about correlations or even causal relations, but this does not mean that the meaning at the level of the data analyzed, is understood. This leads us to say that there are indeed many explanations that meet the criteria of understanding, for example the explanation of how one becomes a marihuana smoker presented by Becker. However, we may also understand a phenomenon without explaining it, and we may have potential explanations, or better correlations, that are not really understood. We may speak more generally of quantitative research and its data to clarify what we see as an important distinction. The “raw data” that quantitative research—as an idealtypical activity, refers to is not available for further analysis; the numbers, once created, are not to be questioned (Franzosi 2016: 138). If the researcher is to do “more” or “change” something, this will be done by conjectures based on theoretical knowledge or based on the researcher’s lifeworld. Both qualitative and quantitative research is based on the lifeworld, and all researchers use prejudices and pre-understanding in the research process. This idea is present in the works of Heidegger (2001) and Heisenberg (cited in Franzosi 2010:619). Qualitative research, as we argued, involves the interaction and questioning of concepts (theory), data, and evidence. Ragin (2004:22) points out that “a good definition of qualitative research should be inclusive and should emphasize its key strengths and features, not what it lacks (for example, the use of sophisticated quantitative techniques).” We define qualitative research as an iterative process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied. Qualitative research, as defined here, is consequently a combination of two criteria: (i) how to do things –namely, generating and analyzing empirical material, in an iterative process in which one gets closer by making distinctions, and (ii) the outcome –improved understanding novel to the scholarly community. Is our definition applicable to our own study? In this study we have closely read the empirical material that we generated, and the novel distinction of the notion “qualitative research” is the outcome of an iterative process in which both deduction and induction were involved, in which we identified the categories that we analyzed. We thus claim to meet the first criteria, “how to do things.” The second criteria cannot be judged but in a partial way by us, namely that the “outcome” —in concrete form the definition-improves our understanding to others in the scientific community. We have defined qualitative research, or qualitative scientific work, in relation to quantitative scientific work. Given this definition, qualitative research is about questioning the pre-given (taken for granted) variables, but it is thus also about making new distinctions of any type of phenomenon, for example, by coining new concepts, including the identification of new variables. This process, as we have discussed, is carried out in relation to empirical material, previous research, and thus in relation to theory. Theory and previous research cannot be escaped or bracketed. According to hermeneutic principles all scientific work is grounded in the lifeworld, and as social scientists we can thus never fully bracket our pre-understanding. We have proposed that quantitative research, as an idealtype, is concerned with pre-determined variables (Small 2008). Variables are epistemically fixed, but can vary in terms of dimensions, such as frequency or number. Age is an example; as a variable it can take on different numbers. In relation to quantitative research, qualitative research does not reduce its material to number and variables. If this is done the process of comes to a halt, the researcher gets more distanced from her data, and it makes it no longer possible to make new distinctions that increase our understanding. We have above discussed the components of our definition in relation to quantitative research. Our conclusion is that in the research that is called quantitative there are frequent and necessary qualitative elements. Further, comparative empirical research on researchers primarily working with ”quantitative” approaches and those working with ”qualitative” approaches, we propose, would perhaps show that there are many similarities in practices of these two approaches. This is not to deny dissimilarities, or the different epistemic and ontic presuppositions that may be more or less strongly associated with the two different strands (see Goertz and Mahoney 2012). Our point is nonetheless that prejudices and preconceptions about researchers are unproductive, and that as other researchers have argued, differences may be exaggerated (e.g., Becker 1996: 53, 2017; Marchel and Owens 2007:303; Ragin 1994), and that a qualitative dimension is present in both kinds of work. Several things follow from our findings. The most important result is the relation to quantitative research. In our analysis we have separated qualitative research from quantitative research. The point is not to label individual researchers, methods, projects, or works as either “quantitative” or “qualitative.” By analyzing, i.e., taking apart, the notions of quantitative and qualitative, we hope to have shown the elements of qualitative research. Our definition captures the elements, and how they, when combined in practice, generate understanding. As many of the quotations we have used suggest, one conclusion of our study holds that qualitative approaches are not inherently connected with a specific method. Put differently, none of the methods that are frequently labelled “qualitative,” such as interviews or participant observation, are inherently “qualitative.” What matters, given our definition, is whether one works qualitatively or quantitatively in the research process, until the results are produced. Consequently, our analysis also suggests that those researchers working with what in the literature and in jargon is often called “quantitative research” are almost bound to make use of what we have identified as qualitative elements in any research project. Our findings also suggest that many” quantitative” researchers, at least to some extent, are engaged with qualitative work, such as when research questions are developed, variables are constructed and combined, and hypotheses are formulated. Furthermore, a research project may hover between “qualitative” and “quantitative” or start out as “qualitative” and later move into a “quantitative” (a distinct strategy that is not similar to “mixed methods” or just simply combining induction and deduction). More generally speaking, the categories of “qualitative” and “quantitative,” unfortunately, often cover up practices, and it may lead to “camps” of researchers opposing one another. For example, regardless of the researcher is primarily oriented to “quantitative” or “qualitative” research, the role of theory is neglected (cf. Swedberg 2017). Our results open up for an interaction not characterized by differences, but by different emphasis, and similarities. Let us take two examples to briefly indicate how qualitative elements can fruitfully be combined with quantitative. Franzosi (2010) has discussed the relations between quantitative and qualitative approaches, and more specifically the relation between words and numbers. He analyzes texts and argues that scientific meaning cannot be reduced to numbers. Put differently, the meaning of the numbers is to be understood by what is taken for granted, and what is part of the lifeworld (Schütz 1962). Franzosi shows how one can go about using qualitative and quantitative methods and data to address scientific questions analyzing violence in Italy at the time when fascism was rising (1919–1922). Aspers (2006) studied the meaning of fashion photographers. He uses an empirical phenomenological approach, and establishes meaning at the level of actors. In a second step this meaning, and the different ideal-typical photographers constructed as a result of participant observation and interviews, are tested using quantitative data from a database; in the first phase to verify the different ideal-types, in the second phase to use these types to establish new knowledge about the types. In both of these cases—and more examples can be found—authors move from qualitative data and try to keep the meaning established when using the quantitative data. A second main result of our study is that a definition, and we provided one, offers a way for research to clarify, and even evaluate, what is done. Hence, our definition can guide researchers and students, informing them on how to think about concrete research problems they face, and to show what it means to get closer in a process in which new distinctions are made. The definition can also be used to evaluate the results, given that it is a standard of evaluation (cf. Hammersley 2007), to see whether new distinctions are made and whether this improves our understanding of what is researched, in addition to the evaluation of how the research was conducted. By making what is qualitative research explicit it becomes easier to communicate findings, and it is thereby much harder to fly under the radar with substandard research since there are standards of evaluation which make it easier to separate “good” from “not so good” qualitative research. To conclude, our analysis, which ends with a definition of qualitative research can thus both address the “internal” issues of what is qualitative research, and the “external” critiques that make it harder to do qualitative research, to which both pressure from quantitative methods and general changes in society contribute. Financial Support for this research is given by the European Research Council, CEV (263699). The authors are grateful to Susann Krieglsteiner for assistance in collecting the data. The paper has benefitted from the many useful comments by the three reviewers and the editor, comments by members of the Uppsala Laboratory of Economic Sociology, as well as Jukka Gronow, Sebastian Kohl, Marcin Serafin, Richard Swedberg, Anders Vassenden and Turid Rødne. is professor of sociology at the Department of Sociology, Uppsala University and Universität St. Gallen. His main focus is economic sociology, and in particular, markets. He has published numerous articles and books, including Orderly Fashion (Princeton University Press 2010), Markets (Polity Press 2011) and Re-Imagining Economic Sociology (edited with N. Dodd, Oxford University Press 2015). His book Ethnographic Methods (in Swedish) has already gone through several editions. is associate professor of sociology at the Department of Media and Social Sciences, University of Stavanger. 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Objectivity' in social Science and social policy. Ed. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch, 49–112. New York: The Free Press. Articles from Qualitative Sociology are provided here courtesy of Springer Qualitative research deals with words, meanings, and experiences, while quantitative research deals with numbers and statistics. Quantitative data involves measurable numerical information used to test hypotheses and identify patterns, while qualitative data is descriptive, capturing phenomena like language, feelings, and experiences that can't be quantified. Quantitative research collects numerical data and analyzes it using statistical methods. The aim is to produce objective, empirical data that can be measured and expressed numerically. Quantitative research is often used to test hypotheses, identify patterns, and make predictions. Qualitative research gathers non-numerical data (words, images, sounds) to explore subjective experiences and attitudes, often via observation and interviews. It aims to produce detailed descriptions and uncover new insights about the studied phenomenon. QualitativeQuantitativeData in words/images (descriptive)Data in numbers (measurable)Answers "Why? How?" (explores ideas)Answers "How many? How much?" (tests predictions)Methods: Interviews, focus groups, observationsMethods: Surveys (closed questions), experimentsSmall, in-depth samples (not generalizable)Large samples (aims to generalize)Open-ended, flexible processStructured, controlled processInsights and themes (subjective analysis)Statistics and figures (objective analysis) In many cases, researchers benefit from employing a mixed-method approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods to gain comprehensive insights into their research questions. This approach is particularly effective when one method alone is insufficient to address all aspects of the research question, providing both depth and breadth to the analysis. Choose qualitative methods if your aim is to explore perceptions, motivations, or underlying reasons behind human behavior. Opt for quantitative methods if your objective is to measure variables, test hypotheses, or make generalizations about populations. Qualitative methods are well-suited for research questions starting with "how" or "why," focusing on depth and detailed understanding. Quantitative methods align better with research questions like "how many," "how often," or "what is the relationship between variables," where precise measurement and statistical analysis are required. If detailed, rich, and descriptive data (e.g., personal experiences, emotions, behaviors) is needed, qualitative research is preferable. If numerical data that can be quantified, statistically analyzed, and generalized to larger populations is necessary, quantitative research is ideal. Use qualitative methods for naturalistic, real-world settings where context and interaction are essential. Employ quantitative methods in controlled or laboratory settings, where variables can be isolated, manipulated, and precisely measured. Qualitative research typically requires more time-intensive methods, such as interviews and thematic analysis. Quantitative research often allows quicker data collection and analysis, especially with standardized tools and statistical software. What Is Qualitative Research? Qualitative research involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data, such as text, audio, or visual materials, to understand people's experiences, perceptions, and meanings. It focuses on subjective experiences, capturing how individuals interpret their social world and give meaning to events and situations. Common methods include interviews, focus groups, observations, and diary accounts. The collected data is usually analyzed through approaches such as thematic analysis or grounded theory, identifying patterns and themes in people's responses. Qualitative researchers study people in their natural environments, aiming to understand experiences exactly as people live and perceive them. It is exploratory, helping researchers discover how and why things occur rather than simply measuring occurrences. Typical qualitative research questions might ask how individuals experience a particular event, why they hold certain beliefs, or how they describe and interpret their own behaviors and interactions. Qualitative research is valuable for generating new insights, theories, and hypotheses, especially when little is known about a topic or when researchers seek deep, detailed understanding. Key Features of Qualitative Research Natural Context: Qualitative research takes place in real-life settings rather than artificial environments. Studying people within their natural surroundings provides genuine insights into their behaviors and experiences. Participant Perspectives: Participants actively share their viewpoints and experiences in their own words. This interactive process allows researchers to deeply understand participants' realities and meanings. Researcher as Participant: Researchers engage directly with participants. Their involvement shapes the research data. Their presence and interactions are essential, as qualitative data is created through this active participation. Flexible Design: Qualitative studies adapt and evolve during the research process. Researchers adjust their methods or focus areas as new findings emerge, making the study responsive to discoveries. Data-Driven Theories: Theories and conclusions are developed directly from patterns found in the collected data, rather than testing existing theories. Insights naturally arise from participants' responses, shaping the study's outcomes. Qualitative Methods Qualitative research methods collect descriptive, narrative data to deeply understand people's experiences and social realities. They allow researchers to identify common themes and patterns, and draw conclusions based on the data. Common qualitative methods include: In-depth Interviews: Open-ended conversations allowing participants to freely share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in their own words. Focus Groups: Group discussions that explore shared views and interactions on specific topics or experiences. Observations: Researchers carefully observe and record behaviors, interactions, and social practices within natural environments. Diaries or Journals: Participants keep written reflections on personal experiences, emotions, or events over time. Case Studies: In-depth exploration of an individual, group, or situation to understand complex phenomena within their real-life context. Ethnography: Detailed observation and analysis of cultures, communities, or groups over extended periods, capturing their daily life and customs. Qualitative Data Qualitative data describes experiences, feelings, or behaviors using words, stories, or visuals instead of numbers. Interview transcripts: Exact records of what participants say, useful for identifying themes, patterns, and illustrative quotes. Open-ended customer feedback: Responses customers write describing their feelings, suggestions, or experiences about products or services. Observational notes: Detailed notes of behaviors, social interactions, nonverbal cues, and context recorded by researchers during observation. Personal diaries: Written reflections capturing someone's thoughts, emotions, and personal experiences over time. Visual and audio data: Photographs, videos, and audio recordings used to understand behaviors, social interactions, and environments from multiple perspectives. Qualitative Data Analysis Analyzing qualitative data involves creativity and interpretation. Researchers use various techniques to make sense of the rich, detailed information they've collected, such as: Thematic Analysis: Researchers closely examine qualitative data to find repeating ideas, concepts, or patterns called themes. These themes help summarize and interpret participants' experiences or views. Content Analysis: This method involves systematically organizing and categorizing text or speech data into meaningful groups. It allows researchers to quantify and interpret the presence of specific words, ideas, or concepts. Grounded Theory: Researchers use data to build new theories or explanations directly from observed patterns. Theories emerge gradually through an iterative process of data collection, analysis, and refinement. Discourse Analysis: Researchers analyze spoken or written language within its social context to understand underlying meanings or social interactions. This approach reveals how communication shapes and reflects relationships, identities, or power dynamics. For example, thematic analysis is a qualitative approach that involves identifying implicit or explicit ideas within the data. Themes will often emerge once the data has been coded. Limitations of Qualitative Research Small Sample Sizes: Qualitative research usually involves smaller groups due to high time and resource requirements. This limits the ability to generalize findings to larger populations. Subjectivity and Bias: The personal involvement of the researcher can introduce bias, making it difficult to achieve consistent results. The subjective interpretation also means traditional measures of reliability and validity are hard to apply. Limited Replicability: Qualitative studies are context-specific, and exact conditions, interactions, or events can't be reproduced. This means findings may not easily transfer to different contexts or groups. Time-Intensive Analysis: Collecting, analyzing, and interpreting qualitative data is time-consuming. It requires considerable expertise to identify accurate patterns, themes, and insights, especially in complex or sensitive topics. Advantages of Qualitative Research In-depth Understanding: Close researcher involvement allows for deep insights and understanding from an insider's perspective. Researchers can uncover subtleties and complexities often overlooked by quantitative methods. Identifies New Relationships: Qualitative descriptions help reveal new ideas, connections, causes, and effects. This exploratory approach often leads to discovering previously unknown dynamics and processes. Captures Complexity: Qualitative analysis embraces ambiguity and contradictions within data, accurately reflecting the complexity of social realities. This flexibility allows researchers to capture genuine human experiences. Practical Insights for Practitioners: Using rich narrative descriptions, qualitative research provides practical insights valuable to professionals. Practitioners can access unique, detailed knowledge through qualitative studies that might otherwise remain hidden. What Is Quantitative Research? Quantitative research involves the process of objectively collecting and analyzing numerical data to describe, predict, or control variables of interest. The goals of quantitative research are to test causal relationships between variables, make predictions, and generalize results to wider populations. Quantitative researchers aim to establish general laws of behavior and phenomenon across different settings/contexts. Research is used to test a theory and ultimately support or reject it. Key Features of Quantitative Research Controlled Environment: Quantitative researchers often conduct studies in laboratory or controlled settings to minimize outside influences. This approach ensures more precise measurement and reduces interference from external variables. Objective and Detached: Researchers aim for objectivity by maintaining distance from their data. By avoiding personal involvement, they strive to minimize bias and achieve consistent results. Predefined Research Design: The structure and methods of a quantitative study are clearly defined and established beforehand. Researchers follow this fixed approach, making results replicable and comparable. Independent Reality: Quantitative research assumes reality exists independently and objectively, separate from the researcher's perspective. Anyone observing the same phenomena should theoretically reach similar conclusions. Hypothesis Testing: Quantitative methods focus on testing specific theories or hypotheses. The results either support or reject these hypotheses, providing clear, measurable conclusions. Quantitative Methods Quantitative research typically involves collecting measurable data through experiments, surveys, or rating scales. Experiments are commonly quantitative, as they focus on precise measurements and statistical analysis. Other methods, such as structured observations and questionnaires, may also yield quantitative data, particularly when using rating scales or closed-ended questions (e.g., "yes/no" responses). These methods are widely used in fields like clinical psychology to measure treatment outcomes and generalize findings across populations. Examples There are numerous examples of quantitative data in psychological research, including mental health. Here are a few examples: Standardized Psychological Assessments: IQ Tests: The Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS) measures intelligence numerically. Attachment Styles: The Experience in Close Relationships Scale (ECR) uses numerical ratings to assess attachment styles and predict relationship patterns. Neuroimaging Data: Techniques like MRI and fMRI produce numerical data on brain activity and structure. Researchers analyze this data to identify regions involved in mental processes or disorders. Clinical Outcome Measures: Clinical questionnaires provide standardized, numerical data on patient symptoms, informing treatment decisions. For instance, the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) rates depressive symptoms numerically, with higher scores indicating greater severity. Survey rating scales: Numerical ratings (e.g., 1–5 stars) used to quantify customer satisfaction or opinions in surveys or product reviews. Quantitative Data Analysis Quantitative research involves collecting numerical data such as test scores, frequency counts, survey ratings, or other measurable information. Researchers use statistics to convert numerical data into meaningful information, aiding decision-making by revealing patterns, relationships, or trends. There are two main types of statistical analysis: Descriptive Statistics: Summarize and simplify data, providing an overview of the main characteristics (e.g., averages, percentages, or frequency distributions). Inferential Statistics: Analyze data to determine if findings are statistically significant, allowing researchers to draw conclusions or generalize results from a sample to a larger population (e.g., comparing treatment and control groups in experiments). Limitations of Quantitative Research Context: Quantitative experiments do not take place in natural settings. In addition, they do not allow participants to explain their choices or the meaning of the questions they may have for those participants (Carr, 1994). Researcher expertise: Poor knowledge of the application of statistical analysis may negatively affect analysis and subsequent interpretation (Black, 1999). Variability of data quantity: Large sample sizes are needed for more accurate analysis. Small-scale quantitative studies may be less reliable because of the low quantity of data (Denscombe, 2010). This also affects the ability to generalize study findings to wider populations. Confirmation bias: The researcher might miss observing phenomena because of focus on theory or hypothesis testing rather than on the theory of hypothesis generation. Advantages of Quantitative Research Scientific Objectivity: Quantitative research uses statistical methods, providing objective and mathematically grounded interpretations. This scientific approach reduces researcher bias, making findings more credible. Theory Testing and Validation: Ideal for testing existing theories, quantitative research clearly supports or rejects hypotheses through measurable evidence. This clarity helps build reliable knowledge by confirming or challenging established theories. Efficient Analysis: Advanced statistical software enables fast and efficient analysis of large datasets. Researchers can quickly interpret results, saving time and resources. Easy Replication: Quantitative studies rely on numerical measurements, allowing others to easily replicate the research. This enhances reliability, as findings can be consistently verified or challenged. Precise Hypothesis Testing: Statistical analysis provides a clear framework for testing hypotheses, offering precise and definitive conclusions. This strength makes quantitative research particularly effective for exploring cause-and-effect relationships. Mixed Methods Research Mixed-methods research combines qualitative and quantitative methods within one study. By integrating detailed, narrative insights from qualitative data with measurable, statistical results from quantitative data, mixed-methods research provides a richer and more complete understanding of complex research questions. When to Use Mixed Methods: Exploration followed by Validation: Start qualitatively to discover new insights or ideas, then validate these insights using quantitative methods to see if findings apply more broadly. Quantitative Results Needing Explanation: Begin quantitatively by identifying significant patterns or relationships in large datasets, then use qualitative methods to explore why these patterns occur. Detailed Example of Mixed Methods: Imagine researching student stress at a university: Quantitative Phase: First, conduct a large-scale survey using rating scales to measure stress levels numerically. This survey identifies which student groups experience higher stress and how widespread the issue is. Qualitative Phase: Next, interview smaller groups of students to explore personal experiences, opinions, and feelings about the stress. Interviews reveal reasons behind survey results, such as workload pressures, social challenges, or financial concerns. By combining both sets of data, the researcher achieves both breadth (how widespread stress is) and depth (why stress occurs). Mixed-methods research is particularly effective for understanding complex topics. 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Minichiello, V. (1990). In-Depth Interviewing: Researching People. Longman Cheshire. Punch, K. (1998). Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches. London: Sage Olivia Guy-Evans, MSc BSc (Hons) Psychology, MSc Psychology of Education Associate Editor for Simply Psychology Olivia Guy-Evans is a writer and associate editor for Simply Psychology, where she contributes accessible content on psychological topics. She is also an autistic PhD student at the University of Birmingham, researching autistic camouflaging in higher education. Saul McLeod, PhD Editor-in-Chief for Simply Psychology BSc (Hons) Psychology, MRes, PhD, University of Manchester Saul McLeod, PhD., is a qualified psychology teacher with over 18 years of experience in further and higher education. He has been published in peer-reviewed journals, including the Journal of Clinical Psychology.