KnowHow

Learning Resources for the KnowFife Partnership Hub

Analysing Qualitative Data

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This guide provides an introduction to qualitative data, its advantages and disadvantages and what to consider in qualitative data collection and analysis.

What do we mean by Qualitative Data?

Qualitative data is any information that can be captured that is not numerical in nature. It records people's attitudes, feelings and behaviours, and provides an in-depth but usually indicative picture about why people act in certain ways.

Why do Qualitative Research?

Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, subject matters in terms of the meanings that people bring to them. Qualitative methods can often bring important insights not found in quantitative studies.

Qualitative research is often used:

* To understand
* To describe
* To explore
* To look more in-depth

It looks for:

* Categories/themes such as events, descriptions, comments, behaviours.
* Consistencies, differences, patterns.

Sources of Qualitative Data

Qualitative data can be gathered in a variety of ways, for example:

* Interviews
* Focus Groups
* Observations
* Case Studies
* Social Media
* Open-ended questions in Questionnaires/Surveys
* Analysis of documents and materials

Distinctions between Qualitative and Quantitative Data

Qualitative Data	Quantitative Data
Based on meanings expressed through words	Based on meanings derived from numbers
Results require classification into categories/themes	Results collected from numerical data
Analysis conducted through the use of conceptualisation	Analysis conducted through the use of diagrams and statistics
Data is exploratory and indicative	Data can be generalised and considered to be representative
Interested in quality of response and range of views	Interested in quantifying (counting) responses

Advantages of Qualitative Data

- **Provides depth and detail**:

  Looks deeper than analysing figures by recording attitudes, feelings and behaviours.

- **Creates openness**:

  Encouraging people to expand on their responses can open up new topic areas not initially considered.

- **Simulates people's individual experiences**:

  A detailed picture can be built up about why people act in certain ways.

Disadvantages of Qualitative Data

- **Usually fewer people studied**:

  Collection and analysis of qualitative data is generally more time consuming than quantitative data collection and therefore unless time, staff and budgets allow, sample sizes are generally smaller.

- **Less easy to generalise**:

  Because fewer people are studied, usually exact numbers of participants are reported rather than percentages when discussing the sample. It is also common to focus on the frequency of recurring themes within the data.

- **Dependent on probing skills of the researcher**:

  Particularly when conducting interviews, focus groups and observations.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative analysis involves classifying data into meaningful categories/themes. These are codes or labels used to rearrange the data.

They provide a structure to organise and analyse the data further. Names for these categories/themes may be derived from:

- Terms that emerge from the data

- Based on the actual terms used by participants

- Terms used in existing theory

The categories/themes developed initially are likely to be descriptive. Over time a more hierarchical approach to the categorisation of data will be developed.

Categorisation Process

The categorisation process involves reading the data gathered carefully. Once read, the researcher will look to group the responses into key categories/themes.

When the categorisation occurs it is recommended to note the exact quote/raw data gathered from participants.

Where categories/themes are duplicated by other participants the evidence can be coded in the same way but a tally (frequency score) should be noted.

This begins to build up a picture of the breadth of responses but also the frequency of recurrence, indicating the most popular trends.

It is also best practice when categorising data to note if the statement is positive, neutral or negative. This will allow for a high level summary of how an item has been received/perceived before drilling into the detail of common trends.

Whilst undertaking this process it may be useful to involve a second researcher. This is because qualitative data analysis relies on researcher interpretation of the data. Therefore, by involving a second objective party, this can help improve the reliability of the findings presented.

Using Software for Qualitative Analysis

The use of qualitative data analysis software can help with coding, retrieval and data management.

Key Questions to consider in reporting Qualitative Data

- What is typical? Are the majority of people saying this? What views are in the minority?

- Are there any deviations from the patterns, themes and trends – and if so, can they be explained?

- Do the findings suggest that additional data needs to be collected?

- What interesting stories emerge from the data?

- Can you pull out quote(s) that illustrate the essence of a theme?

Standards for judging the soundness of Qualitative Research

- **Credibility**:

  The extent to which the results are credible or believable from the participants' perspective.

- **Transferability**:

  The degree to which the results can be generalised or transferred to other contexts or settings.

- **Dependability**:

  The extent to which you can rely on the results, i.e. get the same results if you repeated the exercise.

- **Confirmability**:

  The degree to which the results can be confirmed or corroborated by others.

Summary

Qualitative data analysis focuses on the quality rather than the quantity of the information that is being analysed.

In practice, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods are often used which allow statistically reliable information obtained from numerical measurement to be backed up by and enriched by qualitative explanations.

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