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QUALITATIVE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Narrow the time or resource of the topic.
2. Narrow the audience to be addressed.
3. Narrow the number of participants to save time and analyses.
4. Examine the literature to determine the scale of the topic.
5. Look for potential problems during the early steps of the research.
6. Share the research work with a colleague.
7. Obtain the advice of more experienced qualitative researchers.

A good research plan should answer the following questions, not necessarily in depth, but with some focus, rationale, and thought:

- * What topics are you going to study?
- * In what setting or context will you conduct the study?
- * What kinds of data do you think you will collect?
- * What methods do you plan to use?
- * Why are you doing the study?
- * What contribution might the study provide?

Reviewing the Literature

- * Ethnography- sociological books and articles
- * Historical-books and artifacts
- * Grounded theory- themes in related literature to validate the grounded theory processes used
- * Action research- educational journals.

Common terms:

abstract, observation, participants, methodology, procedures, oral questioning, small number of participants, interviews, questioning- second interview, discussion, implications, describes with words not numbers.

Abstract, emotive terminology, descriptive discussion, literature review, research focuses on advocates not the dispassionate, interviews, observation, survey, natural settings, participant, emerging themes, implications, case study as an example.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: DATA COLLECTION

SUMMARY

Selecting Research Participants

1. Meet potential participants face to face and explain what is expected of them and what protections you will provide them (e.g., anonymity, confidentiality, no reporting to supervisors). Obtain a signed informed consent document from each selected participant.
2. Researchers must work to achieve rapport with gatekeepers and study participants, and to earn their trust. Trust is essential to the tone of the study, and the quality of the data collected.
3. All researchers are bound to search out and avoid unethical treatment of research participants. Two basic and fundamental ethical principles relate to all forms of research activity: (1) both qualitative and quantitative researchers keep participants informed as possible about the research study, and (2) they make every effort to protect participants from harm.
4. Participant selection is usually done using some form of purposive sampling. The key to sampling in qualitative research is to choose good participants who can provide the insights and articulateness needed to attain the desired richness of qualitative data.

Data Collection

5. There are many sources of qualitative data, including observation, interviews, phone calls, personal and official documents, photographs, recordings, drawings, e-mails, and informal conversations. The most commonly used sources are observations and interviews.
6. In most cases, qualitative researchers employ more than one data collection method.

Observation

7. Observation takes many forms of interaction with participants. The researcher make take roles ranging from participant observer to nonparticipant observer to covert observer. Covert observations should be avoided.
8. Although participant observers can gain insights from their close contact, they also may lose objectivity and become emotionally engaged with participants.

9. Most qualitative observational research is naturalistic, encompassing holistic inquiry. The emphasis is on understanding the natural environment as lived by the participants, with no intent on the researcher's part to alter or manipulate that environment.

Field Notes

10. Field notes describe what the observer has heard, seen, experienced, and thought about during an observation. Because field notes are the basis for data collection and analysis, they must be detailed and descriptive, capturing the reality of the setting and participants.
11. The description (emic data) and reflection sections (etic data) should be separated. Both of these are important in data analysis. Field notes should be written up as soon as possible after the observation, and should include the date, time, site, and topics recorded. Number all pages and keep them in order.
12. Novice observers should use a written protocol, or list of issues, to guide and focus their observations.
13. A memo is a form of thinking on paper; researchers write memos to themselves that describe their mental exploration of their ideas, themes, hunches, and reflections about the research topic.

Nonparticipant Data Collection Methods for Observational Studies

14. In nonparticipant observation, the observer is not directly involved in the situation to be observed.
15. In naturalistic observation, the observer purposely does not control or manipulate the setting so that observations will reveal the natural state of activity in the setting.
16. In simulation observation the researcher creates a situation to be observed and tells participants what activities they are to engage in. This technique allows the researcher to observe behavior that occurs infrequently in natural situations or not at all. Two major types of simulation are individual and team role playing.
17. The steps in conducting observational research are essentially the same as for other types of qualitative research. Once the behavior to be observed is determined, the researcher must clearly define what specific actions do and do not match the intended behavior.

Recording Observations

18. Observers should have to observe and record only one behavior at a time. It is also a good idea to alternate observation periods and recording periods, especially if inferences are required on the part of the observers.
19. As a general rule, it is probably better to record observations as the behavior occurs. Both qualitative and quantitative observation studies often facilitate recording by using an agreed code, or set of symbols, and a recording instrument.
20. Probably the most often and efficiently used type of recording form is a checklist that lists all behaviors to be observed so that the observer can simply check each behavior as it occurs. Rating scales are also sometimes used.

Assessing Observer Reliability

21. Determining observer reliability generally requires two observers independently making observations. Their recorded judgments about what occurred are compared to see how well they agree.
22. One approach to increasing reliability is to use shorter observation periods and to base reliability calculations on both observer agreements and disagreements. This approach makes it easier to determine whether observers are recording the same events at the same time.
23. In qualitative research, the emphasis is on the observer's ability to accurately record the details of the observed behavior.
24. Mechanical recording allows observers to play back tapes as often as needed. They can improve both validity and reliability.
25. Observers need to be trained to assure that all observers are observing and recording the same behaviors in the same way. Observers must be instructed as to what behaviors to observe, how behaviors are to be coded, how behaviors are to be recorded, and how often.
26. Practice sessions using recordings of behaviors are most effective since segments with which observers have difficulty can be replayed for discussion and feedback purposes. Training may be terminated when a satisfactory level of reliability is achieved (say, 80%).
27. The main way to ensure continued high levels of reliability is to periodically monitor the activities of observers. As a general rule, the more monitoring that can reasonable managed, the better.

Interviews

28. An interview is a purposive interaction between two or more persons, with one trying to obtain information from the other. Interviews permit researchers to obtain information that cannot be obtained from observation, such as subjective reports of past events or participants emotions.
29. Interviews vary in a number of ways: they may be focused on one or on many interviewees; they researcher may hold one or a number of interviews; interviews may vary in length from a few minutes to a few hours; they may be conducted using structured or unstructured questions.
30. Generally, qualitative interviews are free flowing and open ended, with the interviewer probing to clarify and extend the participant's comments. This interview format requires insight, tact, and timing to accomplish successfully. An important aspect of good interviewing is the interviewer's ability to "read" the interviewee. Inexperienced interviewers should have a general protocol of questions as a safety net.
31. Multiple-participant interviews, commonly called focus groups, are mainly useful for exploring ideas, topics, and perspectives of participants.
32. It is difficult to simultaneously interview participants and record the data they provide, so use of recording devices during interviews is recommended. Audio or videotapes provide the researcher with a verbatim account of the interview.
33. Beginning researchers should keep their interviews relatively short.
34. It is expensive and time consuming to transcribe interview recordings, especially long ones. Nonetheless, transcribing is strongly encouraged; transcripts are the interview field notes, and become the data the researcher will analyze.

Threats to the Quality of Observations and Interviews

35. There are two main threats to the validity of qualitative data: observer bias and the observer effect.
36. Observer bias refers to invalid information that results from the perspective the researcher brings to the study. It occurs when the researcher consciously or unconsciously interprets data on the basis of attitudes or beliefs held prior to the research. While no researcher can be totally unbiased, all researchers must try as much as possible to avoid bias or prejudgment.

37. The observer effect occurs when the researchers presence leads participants to behave atypically. The best way to handle the problem is to make observers aware of it so they can attempt to be as inconspicuous as possible.

Enhancing Validity and Reducing bias

38. A number of strategies can be used to improve validity and reduce bias. The researcher can strive to obtain participants' trust, recognize his or her own biases, use verbatim observation and interview data, work with another researcher when collecting and reviewing data, examine unusual or contradictory results for explanations, and triangulate varied data sources.

Leaving the Field

39. Disengagement from the field and participants is not an easy task, either to decide when to leave or to actually leave. There are no simple rules to determine when to disengage, except when data collection becomes redundant. However, whenever one leaves the setting and participants, it may be helpful to "ease out" gradually.

Historical Research: Data Collection

40. Historical research data collection differs from that of other types of research in that the sources are primarily artifacts and documents. In historical research, the review of related literature and the study procedures are part of the same process.
41. The term literature takes on a broad meaning in a historical study and refers to all sorts of communications, including tape recordings, movies, photographs, documents, oral history, books, pamphlets, journal articles, and other types of artifacts.
42. A historical research study might also involve interviews with persons who observed an event or knew a person being written about. However, the use of interviews has limitations in historical research, especially when the researcher is studying events that occurred more than a lifetime previously.
43. Sources of data in an historical research study are classified as either primary or secondary. Primary sources are definitely preferred; in general, the further removed from the primary source the evidence is, the less comprehensive and accurate the resulting data.
44. Because primary sources are often more difficult to acquire, a common criticism of historical research is excessive reliance on secondary sources.