Chapter 10
Qualitative and Mixed-Method Approaches

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the juxtaposition and interconnection of deductive and inductive research methods are explored. Qualitative, inductive empirical tools are discussed in depth, specifically in-depth interviews, focus groups, and field observation. Students will learn how these methods are used to generate hypotheses, which can ultimately be tested using deductive research methods. The structure of inductive research questions, and how they differ from deductive research questions, is further addressed, as is how a researcher “makes sense” of qualitative data.

QUALITATIVE, INDUCTIVE METHODS

Qualitative research methods include: in-depth interview questions, focus groups, and field observation. In-depth interview questions are open-ended and they are presented more broadly than survey questions. They provide an abundance of information that is not easily reduced to numbers. Encouraging respondents to speak freely, storytelling, and providing examples is central to the in-depth interview experience. Opportunities for follow-up questions often present themselves, and this allows to the researcher to probe further based on the comments of the interview respondent.

Focus groups consist of small groups, usually consisting of six to ten participants. Much like in-depth interviews, focus groups rely on open-ended questions and broad topics to drive a dialogue. The purpose is to establish a dialogue about a topic. If you were going to assess the quality of a research methods professor using a focus group, you would ask very similar questions as with the interview. A focus group differs from the interview in that it is not a one-on-one question and answer session. The focus group relies on creating a conversation among many participants. The moderator, who is responsible for asking the questions and keeping order within the focus group, tries to draw out opinions and stories from all participants. The moderator also encourages the participants to engage one another, to comment on the other participants’ stories, experiences, and opinions.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8116-3.ch010
It is important to have a capable moderator, one who prevents a few from dominating the group by encouraging all participants to speak freely.

Like interviews, focus groups often rely on the use of follow-up (or probing) questions, the purpose of which is to address inadequate answers, gain additional information, or clarify statements made by the group’s participants. Within focus sessions, it common to hear follow-up questions like:

- Could you tell me more about that?
- Could you give me an example?
- I am not sure I understand. Could you elaborate some more?

Regarding field observation, there are two types: participant observations and non-participant observations. With participant observations, researchers immerse themselves into an environment, documenting what they see or hear. To further illustrate the difference between a participant observer and a non-participant observer, consider this example. A participant observer that wanted to study a research methods professor and his or her teaching quality would act as part of the class. The researcher would actually attend class, ask questions, provide answers to questions when appropriate, take notes, and complete the assignments as if he or she were like every other student. Conversely, nonparticipant observations assume complete detachment. The researcher has no participatory role. The researcher in this context would attend class, but do very little beyond observing and documenting what was seen.

**In-Depth Interviews**

We will now discuss how you execute each of these inductive methods and then transition into a discussion of how inductive methods can be used concurrently with deductive methods. In terms of conducting in-depth interviews, some researchers will have a structured interview protocol, while others choose to be more organic and use a semi-structured protocol. A structured interview protocol would contain the questions that are to be asked and possibly example follow-up questions. A semi-structured interview protocol might contain a list of broader topic areas that need to be addressed, but it is ultimately the interviewer’s discretion as to how those questions are presented and what follow-up question are subsequently asked. A structured interview protocol is preferable when you have (1) a novice researcher that does not have a significant amount of experience conducting in-depth interviews, or (2) you as the primary researcher have delegated authority to members of your research team and you want to make sure that specific questions are asked to ensure quality control. In other words, you want to ensure uniformity throughout the data collection process and to prevent members of your research team from potentially straying from the purpose of the research. The interview protocol, much like with a quantitative survey instrument, should stipulate the purpose of the research, how the research findings will be used, make guarantees of confidentiality, and convey that participation is completely voluntary. Box 1 provides an excerpt of structure interview protocol.

The primary benefit of in-depth interviews is that they produce copious amount of information. It is very typical for an interview transcript to be 20 to 30 single spaced typed pages. Rich, descriptive detail is what the in-depth interview offers the researcher. Being able to explore topics in great detail, and in a face-to-face setting, are benefits of the in-depth interview as well. Flexibility from the standpoint of being able to ask follow-up questions, probe for clarity, or ask questions that might arise given a respondent’s answers are advantages of this qualitative empirical tool. The most obvious burden of the in-depth interview, however, is the need for experienced and well-trained interviewers. The fact that the interview process is dependent on the ability to ask good follow-up questions necessitates the use of seasoned interviewers. A novice interviewer