

# Qualitative Research

During the course of your studies you may be required to conduct a study or to run your own research project. As with any piece of academic research, you will have to **systematically investigate a particular social phenomena**, answer a **specific research question** and do so by considering the use of a **predefined research design**. An important first step will therefore be to choose between quantitative or qualitative methods, or to adopt a mixture of both.

A research design is a systematic plan to answer your research question(s).

## Qualitative versus Quantitative Research

Qualitative research is a method of inquiry employed across a variety of academic disciplines. It is, however, most traditionally situated in the **social sciences**. Qualitative research tends to favour a more exploratory, interactive exchange between the researcher and the subject with the purpose of gaining a **deeper understanding of the social world**.

LDS can offer non subject-specific qualitative and quantitative methods support upon request.

Quantitative research tends to favour the use of statistics in order to **make generalisable statements about the social world**. A quantitative approach uses measurable data to convey facts and discover patterns. Whereas an in-depth ontological and epistemological critique is beyond the scope of this resource, in order to help you decide upon an appropriate methodological framework, the core principles of a qualitative and quantitative research project are outlined below:

	Qualitative	Quantitative
<b>Aim</b>	To achieve an in-depth, interpretive analysis of the issue investigated.	To create generalisable and reliable statistical explanations of the issue examined.
<b>Research Design</b>	Research design and research question are roughly developed in advance but may change and emerge further in the course of the research process.	Research design is precisely developed in advance and geared to answer the research questions and all hypotheses which should not change in the course of the research process.
<b>Data</b>	Qualitative data encompasses words, pictures and objects. This makes qualitative data richer, but at the same time less prone to be generalised.	Quantitative data has the form of numbers. This makes quantitative data more efficient, although it may miss out contextual detail.

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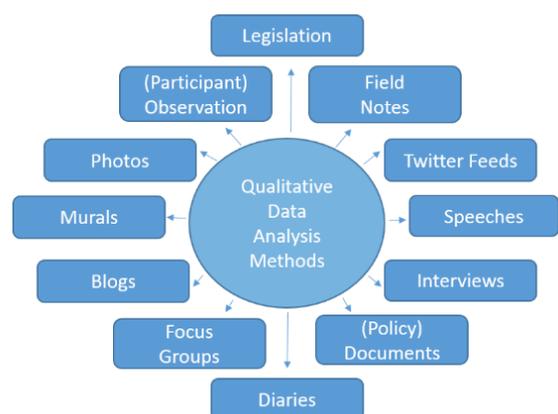
	Qualitative	Quantitative
<b>Data Collection</b>	The researcher collects data and is basically the data gathering instrument.	The researcher uses tools to collect numerical data e.g., questionnaires, experiments.
<b>Data Analysis</b>	Qualitative data analysis methods involve organising, accounting for and explaining data and are based on an individual interpretation.	Quantitative data analysis methods seek statistical precision and measurement.
<b>Researcher's Position</b>	The researcher is often subjectively immersed in the research project.	The researcher tends to remain objective and separate to the research project.

A **mixed methods** research design combines both qualitative and quantitative research and gains inference from their conflation.

## Qualitative Data Collection Methods

Qualitative data can derive from many sources such as interviews, documents as well as reports but even pictures and photographs could be analysed qualitatively. Dependent on the data you are going to use, you should think carefully about:

- The **process** of collecting your data in a systematic and rigorous manner: Think about a step-by-step process of where you look for, how you gather and store data but ultimately also how you could justify a data reduction or selection.
- The way the data **will help you answer** the research question: Is the public opinion of certain groups, really examined through the study of newspaper articles or do you actually end up investigating the media discourse? Think about potential other data sources which could be used.
- The **advantages and disadvantages** which are inherent to each data collection method: For example interviews can be very time consuming and expensive, in Focus Groups power dynamics between participants could come into play, while in dairies you might lose control of the content participants generate.
- The **ethical implications** of your research: You need ethical approval when engaging with humans or animals and additional rules for working with vulnerable groups such as minors or prisoners apply.



You may want to have a look at the **here outlined potential data sources**. These are, however, only recommendations. There are certainly more and **subject-specific** options available to you.

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## Qualitative Data Analysis Methods

Qualitative data analysis encompasses organising and explaining of data in terms of certain **patterns, themes or categories**. There is **no one single or correct way** to analyse qualitative data, but there is a wide range of acknowledged methods, including:

- **Thematic Analysis**
- **Content Analysis**
- **Grounded Theory**
- **Narrative Analysis**
- **Discourse Analysis**
- **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

Decide on the appropriate data collection and analysis method in agreement with your supervisor.

While an in-depth examination of each method goes beyond the scope of this resource, it can be emphasised that there are certain **factors which determine the kind of analysis** you may want to apply:

- **Epistemology**: Your assumptions about reality which are underlying your analysis. Epistemology is the basis of your methods.
- **Data source and quantity**: Some analysis methods work better with certain kinds of data sets than others. Be clear if they match.
- **What you want the data analysis to do**: Do you want to discover patterns, understand your participant's lived experience or linguistic features of their talk?

## Suggested Readings

- Denzin, N.,K., & Lincoln, Y.,S. (2011). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed.). Los Angeles; London: Sage.
- Given, L. M. (2008). *The Sage encyclopaedia of qualitative research methods*. Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications.
- Halperin, S., & Heath, O. (2012). *Political research: Methods and practical skills*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- King, G., Keohane, R. O., & Verba, S. (1994). *Designing social inquiry: Scientific inference in qualitative research*. Princeton, N.J.; Chichester: Princeton University Press.
- Louis, C., Lawrence, M., & Keith, M. (2011). *Research methods in education*. New York: Routledge.
- Silverman, D. (2011). *Interpreting qualitative data*. Sage: London.
- Willig, C. (2008). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology: Adventures in theory and method*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Open University Press.

You might also want to have a look at specific journals focussing on qualitative research, among others the **International Journal of Qualitative Methods**, the **Forum: Qualitative Social Research** or the **Journal of Mixed Methods Research**.

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## Questions You Should Address

Here are a few questions that you might want to address when both **designing your research project** but also when **writing up** your method section.

### What is/are your central research question(s)?

- A research question should be narrow and specific so it can be conceived and answered.
- It should encompass all the keywords that your research will touch upon and can be concerned with, among others predictions, understanding, descriptions, relations, comparisons.

### What kind of data is used?

- Outline the kind of data you are using. This can stretch from human participants or animals to policy documents or newspaper articles.
- Address the inclusion and exclusion criteria and describe any demographic characteristics and other specifications of participants or data sources.

Have a look at published papers and examine closely what and how they address these issues.

### What is your sampling procedure?

- Describe the procedures for selecting participants or other forms of data.

### What is your research design?

- Provide a description of the study procedures such as interviews or participant observation to allow the reader to fully comprehend what you did and how the research was conducted.

### What is the epistemological underpinning of your research?

- Report the assumptions about reality underlying your analysis and whether you consider data as a factual account of events or, for example, a piece of situated language.

### What is your data collection procedure?

- Outline when and in what timeframe the data was collected or how you proceeded to find the documents.

### What kind of data analysis method are you using?

- Refer to the method you are using and if you follow certain guidelines set out by specific scholars or publications.



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