

Section 14

Constructing a Social Science Argument: Recognising and Using Qualitative Data

Introduction

The previous two sections have looked at how we can recognise theory and quantitative data in our reading. Now we are going to look in a similar way at what is known as ‘qualitative’ data. In the previous section we looked at the ways that different types of data can be produced:

Qualitative data	generated by	Interviews, diaries, focus groups
Quantitative data	generated by	Closed answer questionnaires, surveys of records, postal and telephone surveys

This section will look at what qualitative data is, then go on to consider why it is important. It will then look at where it is used, examples of its use and how it might be useful in your work.

By the end of this session you should be able to understand what qualitative data is, recognise it and its use in other people’s work, and use it to construct arguments in your own work.

What is qualitative data?

We discussed earlier how quantitative data is statistical and might involve telling us, for example, the number of people employed in a particular profession. Qualitative data is more difficult to define precisely. It is generated by such methods as interviews, analysing diaries, and observing people (ethnography), and is used predominantly in subjects such as anthropology. It is often argued that these results are useful for revealing the ‘bigger picture’ behind statistics.

“Quantitative data are data in a numerical form.....By comparison ‘qualitative data are usually presented in words...Compared to quantitative data, qualitative data are usually seen as richer, more vital, as having greater depth and as more likely to present a true picture of a way of life, of peoples experiences , attitudes and beliefs”
(Haralambos and Holborn 1991: 707)

This quote gives an idea of how qualitative data is perceived, however, the last comment is controversial and touches on debates about how much we can know about the ‘truth’ of someone’s life, and to what extent that can be revealed by research.

For example, we may know that 90, 000 teenagers become pregnant every year in the UK. However, this does not tell us why this happens, how those teenagers are feeling about being pregnant, whether their families are supportive, what decisions they may make and what those decisions will be based upon. To find out more researchers could conduct interviews with teenage parents, youth workers, and medical personnel. It could be examined by observing young parents within their peer groups, or analysing diaries kept by young women during their pregnancies. This could therefore provide more useful information for social scientists and policy makers than simply recording the number of young women actually becoming pregnant in any one year.

It is important to stress once again that these two ‘categories’ of data, and the methods and theories which are associated with their production, are not concrete and discrete, but are fluid, and researchers who work with one method for one project, may use another method for another. Those advocating mostly qualitative methods may

disagree amongst themselves on other issues, and the same may be true for those working mostly with quantitative methods.

What follows is an example of qualitative research as it may be summarised in a social science textbook:

“..Husbands and wives did not form an economic unit. Although husbands might give wives token gifts, they were not expected to maintain them – indeed it was frowned upon if they attempted to. Instead the economic unit was made up of brothers and sisters’ children and their daughters’ children.Nayar society then was a ‘matrilineal’ society” (Gough discussed in Haralambos and Holborn 1991: 455)

This data would have been generated from ethnography – a detailed observation of a community of people or society. This gives us an insight into Nayar society that statistics on marriage rates would not have. We should also remember that statistics viewed from our Eurocentric standpoint can be highly misleading.

So, when you are reading books and articles, broadly speaking, qualitative data is that which is expressed in words rather than numbers. It is generated by methods such as unstructured interviews and observations, and gives us a deeper picture of *why* something is happening.

Why is qualitative data important?

As discussed above, qualitative data is important for giving us the picture behind statistics – what can we find out that the numbers don’t tell us? For example, numbers can’t tell us much about how people feel about being out of work. A research survey may attempt to do this by posing the question *‘how do you feel?’* However, in order to obtain statistics the research participant may then have to choose from answers predetermined by the author of the questionnaire, or are coded as such after the responses have been gathered. Qualitative research, however would not seek to guide a respondent’s answers in this way, allowing participants to express how they feel about something in their own words

Qualitative methods are often favoured for researching on sensitive subjects. For example, qualitative research methods may be more suitable for researching subjects such as the experience of domestic violence, where an interviewer can be compassionate, and not as impersonal as a closed answer questionnaire.

Assessing qualitative data

In order to assess theories and theoretical approaches, we need to assess the pros and cons of the types of data used as evidence to support them. So it is helpful to bear in mind that there is disagreement over these methods, and the data they produce.

Advantages:

1. Interviewees can talk about issues that are important to them, rather than having these imposed by the interviewer in the form of pre-set answers
2. Can be more useful if wanting to talk to people that wouldn't have time/resources to return questionnaires
3. Allows an interviewer to interview on sensitive subjects with sensitivity, rather than being constrained by the pre-set answers
4. Allows any confusion over concepts to be made clear in the interview, rather than being left to chance

Disadvantages:

1. May only get hazy memories, re-interpreted events (this can be true however of many methods)
2. The interviewer being may be heavily involved in the research, which has the potential to be problematic: respondents may not feel comfortable with the interviewer, may feel pressured to give certain answers
3. As with 2, the gender or ethnicity of interviewers can affect answers, and how comfortable participants in research feel.

To see how using these advantages and disadvantages in assessing a qualitative study might work, we can look at an example:

“Once you get a reputation, your life’s like... ‘wrecked’” Stuart, F (1999) ‘The implications of reputation for young women’s sexual health and well-being’. *Womens Studies International Forum* Vol 22 No 3 pp373-383

- This is a qualitative study of young women and their safe sex practices
- Examining young women’s “concern with reputation”
- Trying to give some background to decisions taken about safe sex (p 373)
- Research method employed - conducting group interviews with young women, who were interviewed in their group of friends

❖ *What might this study be able to tell us that a survey could not?*

Amongst other things the article includes quotes of conversations amongst the girls, explaining how young women in their group, and in their school, regulate each other through phrases such as “*they’re the girls that make names for themselves*” (p 376)

A survey, such as a postal or closed answer questionnaire, that included personal and sensitive questions could not provide this level of insight and the quotations and context.

In a study such as this, the facilitator asks broad questions and ‘prompts’ rather than asking preset questions. S/he can accept the answers as they are given, s/he does not need to make them fit a preset answer.

There is a chance that the young women would not have responded to a questionnaire. In any case this would have gathered individual responses and not been able to account for the group responses and relationships.

This is a sensitive subject: it can be approached appropriately.

The Facilitator can clarify meanings. For example, when the girls refer to 'class', they mean popularity, not socio-economic status.

- ❖ What might a quantitative approach to this research have told us? What might it add to the study?

Suggested exercises

1. Can you think of any pros and cons of qualitative data? Its uses and also how we might need to be aware of its weaknesses ?
2. Find examples of qualitative data. What, if anything, does it tell you that statistics could not? What kinds of explanations [theories] are offered to explain the data?
3. Consider your position on the issues raised in this section.