

Chapter 35

Ethical Issues in Qualitative Data Collection and Management

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative data collection is largely defined by the personal experience and opinions of the examinee. The examinee is central in the approach, and not so much the researcher. The essence is a communication between the researcher and the examinee, where interpretation of both the questions asked and the answers provided serves the purpose of understanding. This type of research is interpretative and almost exclusively subjective, because the personal or subjective way of understanding and interpretation is central. However, there is certainly a serious possibility for external influence on the answers to be provided or even the way answers are interpreted. Additionally, there is a fair chance that the questions are phrased towards expected answers. There are various moments where ethics are paramount to the quality and acceptability of the research. To protect objectivity, ethical professionalism and professional morale are important. This chapter aims to describe and discuss ethical issues related to collection and management of data from qualitative research.

INTRODUCTION

Since ever man has collected information from his existential environment (flora, fauna and cosmos) and fellow-men. This has been dominated by observation using the five senses – sight, smell, sound, taste and touch. The observations have always been digested and stored in the mind, the grey matter between the ears. These data collected provide over a life time a huge and growing base of information, triggering action. The experiences serve as shared data base between men and lead to development and progress of culture in the broadest sense – morale and standards of life, comfort, safety and protection, behavior and attitude, communication, technology, science and art, but also philosophy and religion. From the very beginning, the data collected have been both qualitative and quantitative. For each category ordering

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and interpretation have been prime and logical approaches to judge the value of the data collected and a first approach to utilization or application. The result is an acceptance or rejection, a contribution to progress and development or a warning, an identification of a potential risk, or simply the discrimination of the *good* and the *bad*. In the processes of qualitative and quantitative research the steps do not differ:

1. Defining the objective and describing the hypothesis;
2. Designing the process with its procedures, methodology and tools;
3. Collecting and documenting the data;
4. Interpretation of and reflection on the data (discussion) against the set hypothesis;
5. Drawing conclusions;
6. Reporting of the result (documentation) and archiving (sustainability, traceability and retrievability).

Actually, the principles as described by Deming (1993) have always and uniformly applied:

Plan → Do → Check → Act

This principle is known as the Deming cycle of improvement, where the *Plan* describes the intended activity or work to be done including the expected outcome, the indicators or parameters to be used, the benchmark methodology to judge against set standards and the time lines. The *Do* then represents the implementation of the activity or work, followed by, or even simultaneously, applied monitoring (*Check*) of the data produced and collected, both quantitative and qualitative according to the set indicators or parameters. When these data are evaluated through analysis, the outcome leads to conclusions, whether interim or final and ultimate action (*Act*). Ideally the collected sets of data – quantitative and qualitative, are complementary and enforce the ultimate quality and efficacy of the conclusions and justification of the continued action (improvement). After all ‘*Quality is a Journey, not a Destination*’.

This contribution aims to describe and discuss ethical issues related to collection and management of data from qualitative research.

QUALITATIVE VS. QUANTITATIVE DATA COLLECTION

Depending on the research question and conditions one may decide to approach the research in a quantitative or a qualitative way, or even both. For instance, in the pre-phase of a research project one may want to know the feasibility of the research or project, for which purpose third party opinions may be of importance. That is usually done in a qualitative way rather than a quantitative way.

Quantitative research focuses on the collection of numerical data and is widely applied in laboratory science and epidemiology, experimental research and related fundamental and applied research. Surveys are often used to collect structured data sets in social sciences and epidemiology, e.g., looking for prevalence of disease or disease markers among a given study population. However, they may contain so-called open questions, allowing for the provision of personal opinions or experiences. These data are qualitative and need a different approach in the evaluation as compared to data sets that are expressed in a numerical way. Data need to be documented in order to be examined and interpreted. Statistical methods play an important role, such as simple statistics of means and standard deviations, or more complex statistics to compare data sets and find out values of difference. There are special software

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