Qualitative Research

The field of social science is very complex with main field branches that cover anthropology, economics, history, political science, psychology, social psychology, and sociology. These main branches in turn contain subfields of study and there are still other disciplines in which social research is done including criminology, demography, education, and nursing (Bernard 6). Social science research is split between the positivistic (quantitative) approach and the interpretive-phenomenological approach (qualitative). Social science research often contains a combination of both approaches. But, qualitative research investigates the why and how about human behavior, the reasons that govern behavior. These reasons are complex and cannot be fully understood through only quantitative methods.

In qualitative research, data is collected through direct observation, in depth interviews, participation in the setting and/or an analysis of different forms of printed materials. Qualitative data collection is typically purposively done; selection is based on whether an event fits a specific characteristic. The data is categorized into patterns for organization and reporting results (usually visual in the form of flow charts, maps, or presented in matrix or table form). Data collection is typically approached by traditional methods of phenomenology, some form of field study, grounded theory, and ethnography. A brief description of these methods follows.

Phenomenology: describes in words a person’s reality; a reflection of one’s consciousness and perceptions (Bernard 20).

Field Study: involves some form of field work either through participant observation or by indirectly through collection of data (Bernard 318).
Grounded Theory: provides a set of techniques that identifies potential analytical categories for comparison and development of relationships to build theoretical models (Bernard 443).

Ethnography: studies both the process of collecting descriptive data about a culture and is the product (presented possibly as a book, film or article) of the study itself (Bernard 318).

These methods depend highly on the researcher who plays a key role in the analysis of the data. Qualitative data analysis is commonly done through observer impression. An impression is formed by an expert or layman and reported in a structured manner (even quantitatively). Qualitative research is concerned with content validity, that is, what you believe is being measured is really being measured. Constant validity checks are necessary to ensure that this concern is being met. Additional concerns occur when projects consist of more than one coder. Qualitative data analysis can require a tremendous amount of time and effort. The qualitative researcher is assisted in this process through the use of relational database management software to store and manage the data. QSR International (www.qsrinternational.com) is such a company that offers a solution for this process.

QSR International is the world largest qualitative software research developer based out of Melbourne, Austria. QSR’s products helps the researchers organize and analyze non-numerical or unstructured data (video, audio, photos and text such as blogs, PDF’s, the body of an email, web page, etc). This is an important tool for qualitative research which can consist of various combinations of data. Using this company’s offerings could drastically reduce the time required to organize your data and greatly increase your ability to explore and gain greater
insight through the ability to easily analyze several combinations of data. QSR offers two main products to assist with qualitative research; Xsight 2 and NVivo 8.

Xsight 2 is used for organizing your information and thoughts for your research, though imports are limited to Microsoft Word documents with embedded tables and images and rich text formats, this product can handle both small and large volumes of data. In comparison, NVivo 8 contains all of the highlights of Xsights with the additional ability to import, analyze and sort digital photos, audio files, videos, and PDF files. Some of NVivo 8’s highlights include the ability to create and analyzed transcripts directly from audio and video files sections at a time. Documents can be created or imported that contain tables and images. Project information can be graphically displayed by charts and models and all components of the project’s results shared as HTML web pages (helpful for non-users of software and key to easy distribution). Project notes and analysis performed by individual researchers are available for viewing. Although these highlights are significant for qualitative research, the use nodes remain one of NVivo 8’s most useful features.

Nodes are what NVivo calls the ability to organize all the components of your project by topic. All components would be contained in one location. These are five classifications of nodes; Free Nodes, Tree Nodes, Cases, Relations, and Matrices. A brief description of this classification follows as described on page 11 of the Getting Started with NVivo 8 PDF guide.

- Free Nodes are stand alone nodes that do not fit into hierarchical structure.
- Tree Nodes are nodes that are catalogued into a hierarchical structure.
- Cases are nodes that contain attributes of people or sites and can be organized hierarchically.
- Relationships are nodes that describe a connection between to project items.
Matrices are a collection of nodes resulting from a matrix coding query (Although coding is not possible, opening and exploring a node in a matrix is permissible).

This feature would be essential in exploring and developing models. Researchers can organize materials by topic and deeply explore each relationship within that topic, compare connections to other topics, and consider other outside factors all within one location. The use of nodes could assist in viewing data as variables and its role in analyzing and understanding human behavior.

The basic elements of Grounded Theory practice involves three main steps; producing the text of the experience being researched, create initial categories through analyzing and coding the data to determine relationships (such as recurring themes) and through continual review of categories, developing theories based on the relationships of the data. The researcher becomes grounded in the data and continues to examine alternative theories and directions for the research (Bernard 443-444). A review of Marlene Pomrenke’s research, Using Grounded Theory to Understand Resiliency in Pre-Teen Children of High-Conflict Families, shows the three step process of Grounded Theory; understanding the experience by producing text from pertinent court documents, in-depth interviews from individuals and focus group participants, analyzing the data created by the text (open coding), and developing a theory based on relationship of the data. Use of Grounded Theory methods in this study gives an incredibly rich and thorough examination of a process for qualitative research. A quick browse of other research articles from The Qualitative Report shows the vast differences of research possible using qualitative methods of research.
The process of transcript coding (inductive or deductive) is critically important to qualitative analysis. The use of grounded theory (mostly inductive coding) is an interactive process that depends heavily on the ability to identify themes and to code text according to those themes. The goal is for understanding to emerge through constant review of the next as it takes new directions (Bernard 444). The overall lesson becomes clear; transcript coding requires a detailed examination and re-examination of the text in order to discover patterns (or not) that may lead to understanding human behavior.

A researcher would use qualitative strategies to conduct studies of human behavior that is by definition complex and cannot necessarily be examined by one method alone. Human thoughts and behavior are produced by various forms of communication (talking, writing, and even non-verbal communication). Some research studies then can not be categorized and measured using one method. They require a close examination of text and analysis through observation to develop a complete view of human thoughts and behavior.

Qualitative research would greatly serve my research on implementing a Course Management System (CMS) in an urban education environment. Methods of data collection for my proposal include interviews (students and instructors), performance assessments tests and field work involving the use of the CMS by participants. The initial data collected from the interviews and performance assessments will used to direct the course of this study.
Works Cited

Bernard, H. Russel. *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*


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