Qualitative Research Methods

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Housekeeping

• We start in the computer lab next week
  • Regular sections times -- taught by me
  • Section remains optional

• Homework due Thursday. Any Questions about it?
Quantitative Research vs. Qualitative Research

- Five broad (and flawed) generalizations:
  - Theory testing and refinement vs. theory development
    - Exceptions: Data mining, process tracing/idiographic causal inference
  - Parsimony vs. complexity and nuance
  - Generalizability vs. attention to context and “particularity”
  - Rigor and replicability vs. flexibility and efficiency
  - Striving for objectivity vs. acknowledgement of and interest in human subjectivity
Why is qualitative research so good for induction?

- Observation
  - Broad, flexible, nuanced, observation
- Pattern
- Theory
Why is quantitative research good for deduction?

Theory

Hypothesis

Observation

Confirmation or Refutation

Narrow, transparent, replicable, observation
The need for context:
Partial equilibrium vs. General equilibrium

- Our independent variable of interest may have effects that fall outside the scope of our study
  - Long-run effects that occur after the study ends
  - Affects on other outcomes (i.e. other dependent variables)
    - Unintended consequences

- Qualitative research is often field research, but also comparative historical research (including archival research)
Measurement requires simplification

- Content validity is achievable only with narrow, clearly defined concepts

- Sometimes we need to study broad or vaguely defined concepts
Generalizability vs. particularity

- Generalizable findings identify causal processes that work the same way across many units.
  - A focus on average effects

- What about causal processes that are unique to particular units?
  - Outliers and unique cases are really interesting
  - Exceptions to the rule are interesting
Reflexive research designs

• Research designs that evolve as the study progresses
  • The collection of data and the modification of theory are ongoing simultaneously

• Benefits: Flexibility and the ability to seize opportunities to advance understanding
  • Get answers to questions you didn’t even know to ask at the beginning

• Drawbacks: Not replicable
Subjectivity is interesting in its own right

- Human subjectivity: the meanings that participants attach to events and their lives.
  - How different people perceive events can be as interesting a subject of study as what objectively occurs.
  - After all, social science studies PEOPLE

- Researcher subjectivity
  - Quantitative research (and much qualitative research) tends to try to minimize researcher subjectivity
  - Some qualitative research embraces, and studies, researchers own subjective experience
Types of Qualitative Research: Participant Observation

- **Overt observation**
  - Reactive effects (e.g. Hawthorne effects)
    - Worse for illegal or stigmatized behavior

- **Covert observation**
  - Ethical drawbacks
  - Hard to observe well without blowing your cover

- **Overt Participation (participant-observer) -- Ethnography**
  - The trick is fitting in (well enough)
Participant Observation (2)

• So, you want to be a participant observer:
• Gatekeepers and key informants
• What is required to belong?
• How will your participation affect and change you?
• Awareness of your own subjectivity
  • The risk of “going native”
Ethnography

- Long-running participant observation (often a year or more in length)
  - Particularly common in anthropology, but also sociology
  - Less common in political science, econ, or business, but still used

- Good ethnography is hard, but the data it produces is extremely rich and nuanced.
Napoleon Chagnon

- Controversial anthropologist
- Yamamoto: The Fierce People
  - 40% of living adult males 25-40 have killed at least one other person
  - 30% of adult male deaths are violent

- Maia Cross (USC)
  - Ethnographic study of European diplomats
Review: Units of Analysis

- Individual vs. organization vs. country
- The relationship
- The encounter
- The event
- The crisis
- The social movement
- The (sub)culture
Participant Observation: Sampling

- Sampling still matters in qualitative research
  - What observations allow you to make the comparisons you want to make?
  - **Saturation**: the point at which additional data ceases to reveal new information.

- Theoretical sampling:
  - Any theory-driven, non-random sampling of units to observe
  - Can evolve as research progresses
Participant Observation: Experience Sampling

- Beepers that go off randomly
  - Random selection of time periods
  - Still have to think about the sampling of individuals

- This is often used in studies of happiness, etc.
Participant Observation: Recording observations

- How do you record qualitative data?
  - Jottings -- while observation is ongoing
  - Field notes (often takes 3x as long as the observation)
    - The observation is only as good as your recording of it
    - Your memory is shorter and worse than you think

- Audio recordings:
  - Allows for thorough analysis later
  - May alter the nature of the conversation
    - Public figures are especially sensitive
Intensive Interviewing

• “You have to be free to follow your data where they lead”

• All open-ended questions
  • More like natural conversation -- flexibility for detailed follow-up questions
  • Tailored to the individual respondent

• Building a relationship with the respondent is key
Intensive Interviewing (2)

• The grand tour question: Asking the respondent for a narrative of an event, process, or decision, and then asking for details along the way.
  • e.g. Walk me through the events that lead to your decision to leave the country.
  • e.g. Tell me about what things were like when you first arrived at the U.N.
Focus Groups

• Really big in marketing
  • Get 5-10 people in a room and ask questions of the group as a whole

• Focus groups are all about interactions between participants
  • The good: In the real world, we don’t form our opinions in isolation
  • The bad: One strong personality in the room can drive the whole discussion.
Mixed Method Research

• The question should drive the selection of methods

• Most research projects require different methods at different stages
  • Often proceeding from qualitative methods to quantitative
  • This evolution of a research agenda may occur over decades and many different researchers

• We want to put our theories at risk of falsification in a variety of ways

• Divergent findings across methodologies demonstrates weak validity
Quick Terminology

• Rival goods: If I am consuming it, someone else cannot consume it (as much)
  • Example: Material goods (e.g. oil), land (if I’m farming it, you can’t)
• Non-rival goods: My consumption doesn’t limit your consumption
  • Example: Security. Also, secure shipping lanes.
Picking the Appropriate Method

• Some Theory:
  • Democracies must divide the spoils of war widely, and the costs of war are born by voters, so democracies are unlikely to wage costly wars for private goods.
  • Autocracies can divide the spoils of war narrowly, and can push most of the costs of war onto non-voters, so autocracies are more likely to wage costly wars for private goods.

• In Groups:
  • What is one qualitative way we could test this theory?
  • What is one quantitative way?