

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is any which does not involve numbers or numerical data. It often involves words or language, but may also use pictures or photographs and observations. Almost any phenomenon can be examined in a qualitative way, and it is often the preferred method of investigation in the UK and the rest of Europe; US studies tend to use quantitative methods, although this distinction is by no means absolute.

Qualitative analysis results in rich data that gives an in-depth picture and it is particularly useful for exploring how and why things have happened.

Sources of Qualitative Data

Although qualitative data is much more general than quantitative, there are still a number of common techniques for gathering it. These include:

Interviews, which may be structured, semi-structured or unstructured;

Focus groups, which involve multiple participants discussing an issue;

‘Postcards’, or small-scale written questionnaires that ask, for example, three or four focused questions of participants but allow them space to write in their own words;

Secondary data, including diaries, written accounts of past events, and company reports; and

Observations, which may be on site, or under ‘laboratory conditions’, for example, where participants are asked to role-play a situation to show what they might do.