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Qualitative Methods

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Chapter 9

Qualitative Methods (HL)

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Introduction

Psychology first emerged as a subject when philosophers began questioning the operating of the mind and asking questions about the human psyche. But one obvious problem with trying to study the mind is we can't see what people are thinking. And if we can't see it, how can we study it?

There was a perception that psychology wasn't a real science because the scientific method couldn't be applied to the human mind: how can you test hypotheses about the way we think if it can't be observed? A desire for psychology to be considered a real science led to the popularity of the experimental method because it helped to give credibility to psychological research. By conducting experiments, researchers could gather empirical evidence to test theories. But then the limitations of applying the experimental method to human research required a variety of other research methods to be applied, including case studies, quasi-experiments and correlational studies.

Such quantitative research involves studying the relationship between variables and these variables are quantified. But can human behaviour always be understood by using numbers? Can we really measure the effects of migration on an individual by giving them questionnaires and reducing their human experience to numbers and statistics? Would this really give us an understanding of an individual's subjective experience of being uprooted from one country and moving to another?

Such questions and inherent limitations in quantitative research have led to the increased use of *qualitative* methods in psychological research. Whereas quantitative data refers to numbers and statistics, qualitative data is descriptive. An underlying assumption behind qualitative research is that human behaviour and mental processes are too complex to be understood by using only numbers and statistics; gathering descriptive data can be of value as well because it can provide more detailed insight into human experiences of particular phenomena.

Qualitative studies explore individual's experiences of phenomena through a range of methods. In this chapter we'll focus on how and why particular observation and interview methods are used in qualitative research, bearing in mind that case studies (a mixed-methods approach) have already been addressed in chapter six.

Gathering qualitative data and analyzing it to understand human behaviour has its own set of issues, especially those related to researcher bias and objectivity. We naturally interpret information based on our existing knowledge, values and beliefs. There are multiple ways in which researcher bias may influence qualitative research - from the design, gathering and analyzing data all the way to writing the report. These issues will also be explored later in the chapter, with the aim of furthering your understanding of research methods in psychology.

Phenomenon: something that can be observed.

This chapter includes examples of studies that investigate experiences of phenomena such as losing a child, gang-related behaviour, and being diagnosed with a psychological disorder.

9.1 Qualitative Methods

How and why do researchers use qualitative methods in psychology?

(a) *Naturalistic Observations*

Empirical evidence refers to any evidence gathered through sensory experience, including observation. We've seen how observational data has been gathered in some experimental studies, such as Bandura's true experiment using the Bobo Doll and Sherif et al.'s field experiment at the Robber's Cave Summer Camp.

Whereas these studies involved quantifying the variables they were measuring during their observations, **naturalistic observations** in qualitative research collate qualitative data. Observations in qualitative research are inherently naturalistic because observations carried out in controlled environments are typically part of experimental studies. During a naturalistic observation the researchers gather their data using **field notes**.

One of the most famous examples of a qualitative study that used a naturalistic observation is Rosenhan's study that was reported in his article, "On being sane in insane places." In this study his pseudopatients were admitted to psychiatric hospitals after reporting symptoms of hearing voices in their heads. After being admitted to the hospitals they began taking their field notes. The pseudopatients (i.e. the researchers) were observing the behaviour of the hospital staff and patients in their natural environment of the hospital, and making general observational notes on the experience of being a patient in a psychiatric hospital.

Rosenhan's study demonstrates another important aspect of naturalistic observations, which is that they may be **overt** or **covert**. An overt observation is when the subjects are aware that they are being observed as part of a study. Rosenhan's study was a covert observation, as the hospital staff and patients were *unaware* that they were being observed as part of a psychological study.

Another characteristic of naturalistic observations is that they may be a **participant** or a **non-participant observation**. A participant observation is when the researcher becomes a member of the group they're observing in order to get an insider's perspective on the phenomenon under investigation. A famous example of a covert, participant, naturalistic observation was carried out by Leon Festinger and his colleagues called "When Prophecy Fails." These researchers joined members of a cult group who believed the earth was going to end. They were interested in observing the reactions of the members of the group when the date passed for the end of the world and their prophecy had failed. The researchers pretended to be believers in order to become a part of this group and make their observations of their reactions. There are obviously some ethical considerations involved in covert observations and these will be explored in the next topic.

An example of an overt naturalistic observation was carried out by Sudhir Venkatesh, a social scientist who was originally studying gangs in Chicago as a researcher's assistant. He was collecting data by going around South Chicago and asking gang members questions. After being held hostage because one group thought

Field notes: descriptive observational notes that a researcher takes while in the field.

Examples of qualitative studies are cited throughout this chapter. However, these are for illustrative purposes only: you do not need to remember these for Paper Three. What is needed is an understanding of key terms and an ability to apply them to an example study.

he was a spy for a rival gang, they convinced Venkatesh that he could not understand their experiences by asking them silly questions from surveys; he had to live their life and see the world through their eyes (Venkatesh, 2008).

This final example demonstrates what we've seen in quantitative studies: sometimes the distinctions between methods are not black-and-white. One could argue that Venkatesh's was a participant observation, because Venkatesh tried to immerse himself in the gang culture in order to gain a better perspective of what their life was like. However, the extent to which he became a member of the gang could be disputed. Nevertheless, it provides a good example of one benefit of the participant observation in qualitative research – it enables researchers to be able to experience particular phenomena (in this case life as a gang member and the perspectives of community members towards the gangs) from the perspective of the subjects of the observation.

The experiences of individuals you've seen in these three examples, including life as a gang member, belonging to a cult and living in psychiatric hospital, might be difficult to quantify and measure using experimental or correlational methods. These examples demonstrate one benefit of qualitative research – descriptive data can be gathered to provide an insight into the subjective experiences of subjects in naturalistic environments.

In summary, naturalistic observations involve researchers taking field notes and gathering data on subjects' real life behaviour in naturalistic settings. The key characteristics of a naturalistic observation are:

- Subjects' naturally occurring behaviour is observed in their natural environment.
- Field notes and other data gathering techniques (e.g. videos) may be used.
- The observation may be covert or overt, participant or non-participant.
- Observations are sometimes followed by interviews with subjects.

Venkatesh published a book about his experiences called, "Gang Leader for a Day."



These are the "projects" in Southside Chicago where Venkatesh conducted his research.

Guiding Question:

Why might a naturalistic observation be used in a qualitative study?

Abstraction Extension:

Later in this chapter we will explore issues related to researcher bias in qualitative research. Can you think of how researcher bias could potentially influence naturalistic observational studies?

If you're interested...

You can watch an interview on YouTube with Venkatesh in which he describes his research on gang culture. He has also written a book about the experience called "Gang Leader for a Day." You can read more about Festinger's study online as well and Wikipedia has a summary of the events of the night when the world was supposed to end.

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(b) Unstructured Interviews

In the previous section you were introduced to a common method in qualitative studies, naturalistic observations. **Interviews** are another common method used to gather data in qualitative studies. In psychological research they involve a researcher asking questions of participants while recording and then analyzing the responses. In the following sections we'll explore three different types of interviews: **unstructured**, **semi-structured** and **focus group interviews**.

Unstructured Interview: a style of interview that has topics to cover, but allows flexibility in the order and content of the questions.

The first type of interview method we'll look at is the **unstructured interview**, which arose from studies in sociology and anthropology. It resembles a conversation more than a formal Q&A style interview. Do not be fooled by the name – all interviews have at least some type of structure. Even in an unstructured interview “the researcher has a number of topics to cover” (Breakwell et al., 2001, p.240). The difference is that the “...precise questions and their order are not fixed” (ibid). In this method the interview evolves as a result of the interactions and discussions between the interviewer and the interviewee. Whereas structured interviews have prescribed and closed questions, unstructured interviews use open-ended questions that allow the interviewee to say as much or as little as they choose.

They may also form an extension of a naturalistic observation as the researchers triangulate their observational data with interview data (Patton, 2002). Unstructured interviews may be focused, which means the interviewer would be aware of any time the interviewee is deviating from the subject matter of interest. If this happened they might try to use their interviewing skills to guide the interviewee back towards the topic of interest.

On the other hand, an unstructured interview might not require focus on a particular topic. It may instead have the general aim of gathering in-depth information. In this instance, a researcher may not have any pre-planned set of questions and would be happy to let the conversation evolve naturally. This latter technique may be valuable when gathering information in an area that the researcher knows little about. (Jamshed, 2014). As with other research methods, the nature and style of the interview would depend on the aims and context of the study



Unstructured interviews allow a lot of flexibility for the researcher when asking questions, and even greater flexibility for the participant when providing answers.

An example of a social scientist using unstructured interviews can be seen in Prowse's (2012) use of unstructured interviews when studying street gangs. In order to understand the world of street gangs, a range of people were interviewed. These interviewees had different connections to the gangs, such as being members, informants, victims, associates or investigators. The general topics for the interview were chosen based on the characteristics of the participants being interviewed. This study also highlights another benefit of using interviews as well as other methods, such as observations; Prowse reports that the interviews enabled areas of uncertainty or perceived contradictions that had been observed in field studies to be followed-up with and clarified in interviews. The interviews themselves also became “thematic” as particular topics arose as the focus during the evolution of the discussion.

In qualitative research the goal isn't necessarily to investigate relationships between variables and behaviour. Often the goal is to uncover and understand participants' experiences of particular phenomena, such as belonging to a street gang. Being able to ask open-ended questions and have natural discussions with participants allows researchers to gain an insight into the perspectives and experiences of the participants that would be impossible with other methods like a quantitative questionnaire.

To summarize, the key characteristics of an unstructured interview are:

- The interviewer has topics to cover, but the precise questions and order is flexible and not fixed.
- The interview evolves as a result of the social interaction of the researcher and the participant.
- It involves asking open-ended questions.
- It is likely to resemble a conversation more than a formal interview.

Characteristics are summarized because the first question in Paper Three will require you to identify the method used in the stimulus study and outline two characteristics of the method. The study could be quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods, so it is important that you can remember at least two of the key characteristics of each of the methods and you can identify them from the summary provided. It is a good idea to remember three characteristics, so you're safe if you forget one on exam day.

The terms interviewee, participant and subject can be used interchangeably in the context of discussing qualitative interviews.

Guiding Question:

Why might an unstructured interview be used in qualitative research?

Abstraction Extension:

Triangulation: An important concept in qualitative research is triangulation. One type of triangulation is methodological triangulation: using more than one method to gather data. Why might it be beneficial to conduct an unstructured interview alongside naturalistic observations? You may want to think about Venkatesh's, Festinger's or Rosenhan's research to help you with this question.

If you're interested...

Yale University's YouTube channel has a series of videos explaining qualitative research methods, including the use of interviews. These are informative, more than they are interesting.

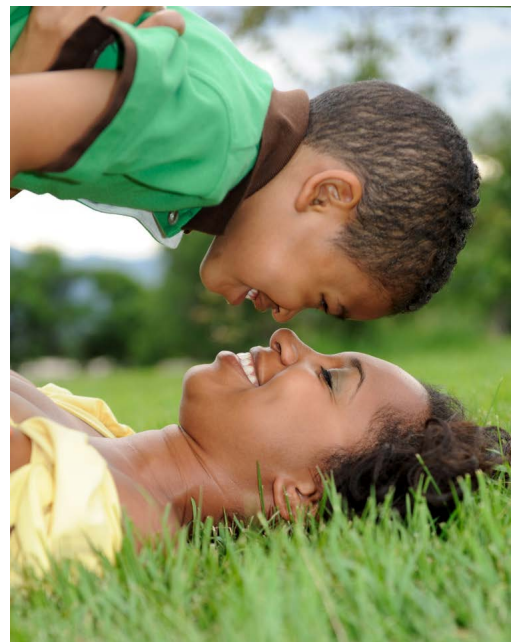
(c) *Semi-Structured Interviews*

We saw in the previous lesson how interviews can be used to provide additional information to clarify questions that arise from naturalistic observations. An unstructured interview resembles a discussion and is often referred to as a guided discussion. As the name suggests, there is less structure in an unstructured interview than a structured one. This might be useful for a number of reasons, including allowing subjects to freely communicate their experiences and ideas.

But if a researcher had a very specific set of issues or topics that they would like to discuss, an unstructured interview may not be suitable. Similarly, if they wanted to compare responses to particular questions across a range of participants, the unstructured interview method may not be the best method. They may instead use a **semi-structured interview**. The structure in this interview method comes in the form of the **interview schedule** that is planned beforehand. This guide includes the general themes or topics that the researcher wants to cover in the actual interview, and perhaps loosely formed questions or general areas of discussion. The interview will consist of a range of questions, including open-ended questions that allow for the interviewees to provide detailed responses, as well as more directed and closed questions for gathering specific information.

In a semi-structured interview, the researcher asks a combination of open and closed questions, and they are free to prompt the interviewee and go in to more depth depending on the responses provided by the participants. This flexibility is what allows for a lot of valuable data to be collected. As with an unstructured interview, it also results in the interview resembling more of an informal conversation and a discussion, rather than a formal interview.

An example of the use of a semi-structured interview used in a qualitative study was Kistin et al.'s (2014) study on parenting. Individual, semi-structured interviews were carried out on 30 traumatized, low-income mothers to gather data on their experiences of parenting. One aim of the study was to gain an understanding of how stressors in the mothers' lives may influence their approach to disciplining their children, as harsh disciplining is a risk factor for maltreatment of kids. The interview schedule consisted of general and open-ended questions that were followed by probing questions. An example of an open-ended question the interviewers asked was "Can you describe a typical day for me?" This was then followed by probing questions that were designed to elicit data about the parent's relationship with their child, their interactions, and how they coped as parents. For example, one probing question was "Can you think of a time with your child when you felt like you were going to lose it?" Further probes were written in the interview schedule, and these included questions based on getting more information about



Experiences of parenting and motherhood is a common subject of qualitative studies.

Semi-structured interview: this has more structure than an unstructured interview as there is a series of topics and questions to be addressed in the interview. There still exists flexibility to explore areas of interest as they arise in the course of the interview.

Interview schedule: the series of questions to be asked and topics to be covered that is prepared before the interview takes place.

settings, feelings and thoughts (about the incident revealed from the initial question). The use of the interview schedule means that similar topics were discussed with all participants, which enables comparisons of responses and general themes regarding these topics to be deduced.

The researchers were also interested in understanding the experiences of these mothers as they had experienced trauma in their past. Perhaps for ethical considerations, the interview guide did not prompt the interviewers to ask questions related to trauma. However, if this was brought up organically in the course of the interview they asked the participant to elaborate. This is a good example of the benefit of having an interview schedule: ensuring particular questions are asked will enable comparisons to be made across participants, but having the freedom to ask follow-up questions based on responses can help to elicit information that wasn't expected and may not have been revealed in a structured interview.

This study provides a good example of the value of qualitative research and semi-structured interviews as parenting is a highly subjective and personal experience. The researchers in this case had particular areas of interest that they wanted to explore and they had the aim of making comparisons and general conclusions across participants. This may have been why they chose a semi-structured interview, as opposed to an unstructured one.

To recap, the key characteristics of the semi-structured interview are:

- It follows a general interview schedule that has been pre-prepared.
 - This ensures similar topics are addressed in each interview, allowing for comparisons to be made across participants.
- It asks a combination of open and closed questions.
- The interviewer has freedom to ask additional questions and/or provide prompts.
- It resembles a conversation.

Guiding Question:

Why might a semi-structured interview be used in a qualitative study?

Abstraction Extension:

There are a number of factors that could influence an interviewee's responses during an interview. Data in qualitative interviews is reliant on interviewees giving open and honest responses that can provide detailed information for the researchers. Can you think of any factors that may influence the responses of participants during an interview? Imagine you were one of the mothers in the study above: what might influence how detailed, open and/or honest you were in your responses?

If you're interested...

Kistin et al.'s full study can be found online. It's called "A Qualitative Study of Parenting Stress, Coping, and Discipline Approaches Among Low-Income Traumatized Mothers." Reading examples of qualitative studies can help make abstract ideas a little more concrete. You can also see some of their materials they used, including a sample of their interview schedule.



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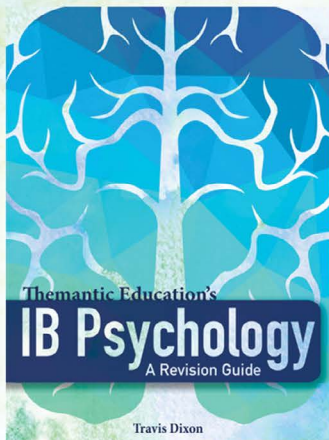
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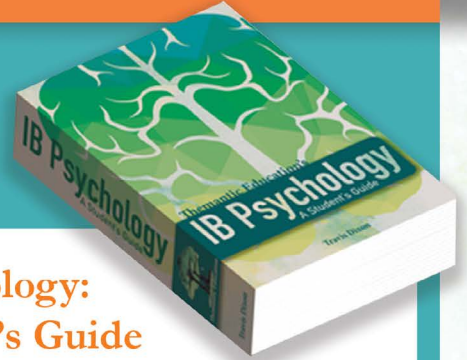
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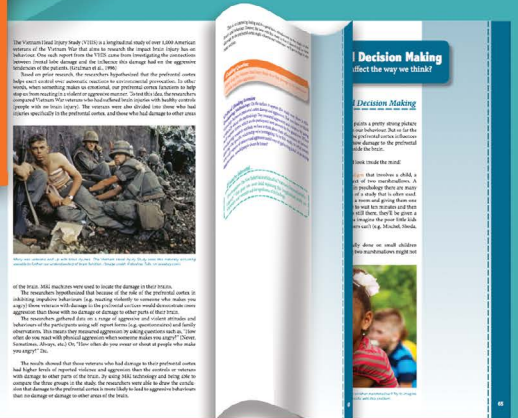
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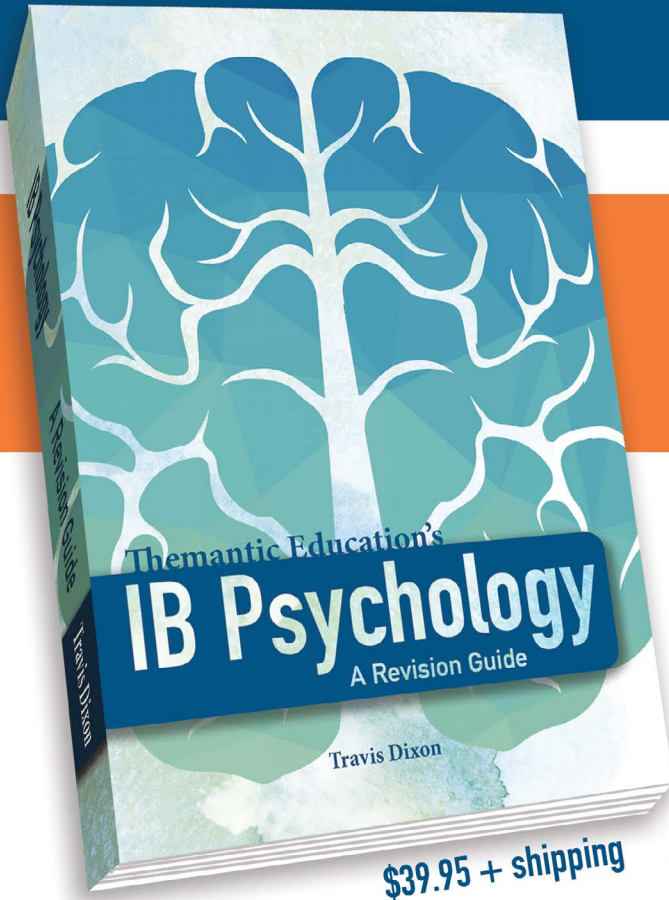
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