

Qualitative Research and Its Use in Sport and Physical Activity

All research is concerned with seeking the answers to specific questions, and qualitative inquiry is no exception to other social science approaches. Qualitative social research – an umbrella term for a group of approaches which take a similar worldview – focuses specifically on the understanding of social phenomena and the ways in which people make sense and extract meaning from their experiences, while quantitative research refers to a systematic examination of phenomena through testing a hypothesis – a statement of a relationship between variables – and focuses on measurement; however they are not incompatible, and neither is one form superior to the other. Qualitative and quantitative researchers answer different questions, use different procedures and need different skills.

The main characteristics of qualitative research

The essential traits of qualitative research explain its character. They are:

- Flexibility, coherence and consistency
- Priority of data
- Context sensitivity
- Thick description
- Immersion in the setting (natural setting)
- Insider/outsider perspectives
- Reflexivity and 'critical subjectivity'

Flexibility, coherence and consistency

Qualitative researchers need flexibility – the design of the study to be carried out is emerging and evolving rather than wholly predetermined. The research can change in the early stages and be adapted according to developing ideas. As Patton (2002) notes, qualitative research is neither unilinear nor straight-forward, but is iterative. It uses the skill of 'tacking', going back and forth between the data collection, analysis and findings. This means that qualitative researchers make sure that their work is always 'grounded in the data'. The strategies used are more open-ended and flexible, and give the participants the freedom to respond in their own way, enabling researchers to follow up on anticipated and unanticipated areas in both interviews and observations. The research relationship too has inherent flexibility and might change over time. More so than in other types of inquiry, researchers can evaluate ideas, take them back to the data, and explore them and modify or reject them. Nevertheless, qualitative research should still stay true to the principles and procedures of each specific approach, which should be followed so that inner consistency and coherence can be established (Holloway and Todres, 2003).

Priority of data

Qualitative research is initially inductive, which means that the researcher moves from specific instances to discover patterns or regularities or even tentative hypotheses (or working propositions). Thus the data in qualitative research have primacy, and inductive reasoning does *not* start with a hypothesis (or theory). The patterns in the data allow theories to develop. Inductive reasoning allows more flexibility and exploration, especially in its early stages. However, there can also be a deductive element in that the working propositions are followed up and explored (and in some forms of grounded theory even tested) until researchers come to a broader conclusion or theory, for example the study by Roberts et al. (2001) on athlete perceptions of sports equipment under playing conditions, where the initial inductive analysis generated a number of themes that were subsequently tested deductively.

Context sensitivity

Qualitative research is context-bound; it is not located in a vacuum but always tied to its context, which refers to the locality, time and culture in which it takes place, and the values and beliefs the participants – and researchers – hold. As Patton (2002) observes, qualitative research takes a holistic perspective – it portrays the whole of the phenomenon under study. To be aware

of the context, researchers need context sensitivity or context intelligence. They can only make sense and grasp meaning through contextualisation. Context is important throughout the process of the research; it influences the way in which participants and researchers think and behave. Of course, the unique context of the research makes generalisations difficult though not impossible (this will be discussed in Chapter 15). Sport and physical activity take place in particular contexts or settings which will impact on both the nature of the activity and the experiences of the participants. Thus context sensitivity is crucial for a full understanding of the data generated.

Thick description

Closely linked to context and contextualisation is 'thick description', a concept developed by the anthropologist Geertz and discussed by Denzin (2001). Thick description refers to detailed, contextual description that includes feelings, meanings and intentions of people. The use of quotes from participants enhances the description and makes it more vivid. Thick description portrays the context of the participants' lives, their culture and the meaning they attach to their actions and words, showing both general traits and specific patterns in the group under study. It is not merely factual description but needs to be grounded in a theoretical base.

Immersion in the setting

For thick description to be possible, researchers immerse themselves in the setting and situation which they study and engage fully with the participants, specifically in participant observation and interviews. This means spending time in the setting with participants to learn about their thoughts, feelings and actions. Researchers build a relationship of trust with the people whose world they study. Through this, critical events are observed, feelings uncovered and routine behaviours understood. It would be difficult to analyse and interpret data from sport fans, for example, without ever having been to a game. Similarly gaining an understanding of the experiences of elite athletes may prove to be difficult if the researchers have had no exposure to sport at a high level themselves.

Insider/outsider perspectives

In qualitative research, writers differentiate between insider and outsider perspectives, the 'emic' and the 'etic' view (terms developed by Harris in 1979, though not first used by him). The emic perspective refers to the participants'

understanding and voice, from those who are insiders in the group and setting that researchers study. Patton insists that it is important to be empathetic and non-judgemental, however. The outsider, 'etic' view – that of the social scientist, the researcher, who takes the research to a different level – is less empirical or concrete than that of the participants. This level is more abstract and theory-based as well as having more general applications (see Chapter 15 on transferability). The theoretical framework will not be predetermined but links directly to the data analysis and findings. A qualitative account which lacks proper analysis, interpretation and theory does not suffice.

Reflexivity and 'critical subjectivity'

Reflexivity refers to the location of the researchers in the study, 'the situated self'. Their values and beliefs – as well as their status and place in a hierarchy – affect the research they carry out. They need to reflect on their position in the study and how their own assumptions influence it. In qualitative research this is called 'reflexivity'. Researchers are participants in the research and cannot distance themselves from it; indeed they acknowledge their assumptions and their involvement in the research. Self-referencing is not easy; qualitative researchers are often criticised for self-indulgence. They need to be part of the study without smothering the ideas and voice of the participants. Reflexivity goes on throughout the research; the research diary will chart the process of reflexivity. Throughout the inquiry researchers reflect on their own assumptions (or bias, a term from quantitative research and rarely used in qualitative inquiry). Reflexivity also takes into account the philosophy, ideology and worldview in which the research is based.

Research can never be neutral and wholly objective. Qualitative researchers take their own subjectivity as a resource, drawing on their own experience to assist in understanding participants: 'researcher subjectivity impacts upon how the research unfolds and is interpreted' (Bott, 2010: 161). Prior knowledge becomes part of the research though it cannot direct it. Researchers need a critical stance to their own assumptions and predispositions while focusing on their participants' ideas.

Qualitative research in sport and physical activity

The very nature of sport and physical activity makes it a rich area of investigation for the qualitative researcher. Its social, cultural, political and economic importance, its pervasiveness at all levels of society, the key issues raised by

participation (and non-participation), the embodied nature of the phenomenon, the uncertainty of outcome, and the varied experiences of both fan and player are just some of the characteristics that make it interesting in qualitative research terms. Brustad (2009) summarises the role of qualitative research in sport and physical activity succinctly, suggesting that:

Sport is an entirely human endeavour. Our involvement in sport and physical activity is full of personally and socially generated meanings as our participation occurs in interaction with other individuals in various social and cultural contexts. Qualitative researchers in sport and physical activity have an essential role in uncovering the meaningful nature of this involvement. Without this contribution, we will never have a good understanding for why completing a marathon could transform a person's life, or how burnout is experienced by adolescent or elite athletes ... we need to better understand the lived meaning of the experience and qualitative/interpretive forms of research provide us with important tools for achieving this goal. (p. 112)

Despite this, as Hunger et al. (2003) note, early approaches to sport science research were dominated by quantitative research, adopting methodologies largely inspired by the natural sciences. Despite Whitson arguing in 1976 for the use of phenomenological methods within sport, it was only in the late 1980s, as the field of sport science matured, that the use of qualitative methods began to be debated, let alone implemented to any significant extent among scholars in the field, for example through the call of Martens (1987) for greater consideration of the use of qualitative research in sport psychology. Since then, as Kerry and Armour (2000) suggest, qualitative research methods have become increasingly popular, particularly in the fields of sport pedagogy, sociology, philosophy and psychology. However, it must be noted that in some domains, such as sport management and sport science, quantitative approaches are still dominant.

Arguments about the relative merits of qualitative and quantitative research in sport and physical activity have existed for many years. However, Li et al. (2008) suggest: 'these two research approaches answer different types of questions and both can facilitate an understanding of the field' (p. 41). Thus, as Smith and Gilbourne (2009: 1) observe, 'for some time qualitative inquiry has been recognised as a legitimate area of scholarship within the sport and exercise sciences', and even in disciplines where quantitative research prevails, there is still a clear increase in the use and perceived legitimacy of qualitative studies. Li et al. (2008), for example, demonstrate a significant growth in the number of academic articles published in key sport management journals since 2001.

Despite the growing acceptance of qualitative research in sport and physical activity, its use is, on the whole, relatively restricted methodologically. As Krane and Baird (2005) point out, although the acceptance of qualitative research in sport psychology has grown steadily, 'more attention to methodological

diversity is needed' (p. 87). The authors suggest an over-reliance on 'one-shot interviews that are often highly structured' (ibid), a point reinforced by Brustad (2008) who argues that reliance on such approaches will limit the potential knowledge generation that is a key strength of qualitative research. Indeed, a survey of the literature suggests that the most commonly adopted qualitative method is the semi-structured interview. It is gratifying, however, to record a gradually increasing diversity in both methods and approaches adopted by qualitative researchers in sport and physical activity, as a number of the case studies presented in subsequent chapters demonstrate.

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Ethical Considerations in Research

The need and moral duty of researchers to protect participants in the research process is well documented. According to Mason (2002), qualitative research raises a number of ethical issues which should be anticipated in advance, so that researchers can take into account how their actions may affect participants. It is paramount that ethical issues are considered before, during and after the research process. This is particularly true of qualitative research because of its processual and flexible nature. Ethical considerations need to be made in the following situations:

- When choosing the topic and aim
- When gaining access to participants
- When conducting the research
- When writing the report and disseminating the data.

When writing a research proposal, a key issue to be addressed is the extent to which ethical issues have been covered. Research proposals will be considered by an ethics committee; in some cases, students will be advised to reconsider certain issues, and to resubmit their proposal, and it has often happened that proposals have been rejected on the grounds that the research might harm either participants or the researcher, not only in terms of physical harm, but also social and psychological harm.

It is important that the researcher continues to consider ethical issues throughout the research process; that they are not forgotten once approval to conduct the research has been given. Simply gaining ethical approval at the start of any study is not enough. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) distinguish between procedural ethics, denoting the steps that need to be followed to gain approval from ethics committees and gatekeepers, and ethics in practice, relating to the issues that arise on a daily basis during research. Ethics in practice should be continually addressed throughout the research process. All ethical issues that have been considered should be discussed by the researcher in a distinct section of the methodology.