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Child Welfare League of America • National Center for Research and Data • Research to Practice (R2P) Initiative

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Keeping Child Safety, Permanency, and Well-Being at the Forefront

Qualitative Studies

This guide describes qualitative studies: what are they, why they should be used, and how to interpret the results

Qualitative studies are:

- Research that uses interviews and discussions to obtain information.
- An analysis of patterns of behavior detected through key statements and phrases made by subjects.
- A compilation of observations labeled with descriptive terms instead of numbers.
- Micro-level research that examines an individual's day-to-day interactions.
- Any inquiry process of understanding a social problem by building a complex, holistic picture with words and reporting detailed views of informants, using a study conducted in a natural setting (Creswell, 1998).

How and why qualitative studies should be used:

- In exploratory research, to gather information needed to define variables for a subsequent quantitative or mixed-method study.
- To paint a picture of individuals in the larger sample of a quantitative study. Qualitative methods can yield information that is richly detailed and useful in explaining findings of quantitative research.
- As a stand-alone study of certain populations, to grasp their thoughts and feelings about a specific topic, such as caseworkers who work in small rural communities lacking needed services.

Data collection in qualitative research:

- Structured or semistructured interviews of individuals or groups.
- Observation.
- Analysis of written or recorded material.
- Analysis of conversation.
- Analysis of nonverbal interaction.

Take care to avoid:

- Premature closure of observations.
- Exclusion of hard-to-reach subjects.

Ethics of qualitative research:

- Researcher must have critical subjectivity and cultural awareness.
- Researcher must develop a sense of trust in the community being observed.

Qualitative versus quantitative terminology:

Qualitative	↔	Quantitative
credibility	↔	internal validity
transferability	↔	external validity
dependability	↔	reliability
confirmability	↔	objectivity

Credibility (internal validity) is determined by:

- Recording observations in the field with a predetermined length of time.
- Sharing observations with neutral peers.
- Flexibility of hypotheses for unusual observations.
- Maintaining subjectivity.
- Repeating observations back to the subject to ensure correctness.

- Triangulating with multiple sources of data, other investigators, or alternative methods or theories.

Transferability (validity) is determined by:

- Extensive and careful descriptions of events and their overall context for the study.
- Multiple cases to strengthen points.

Dependability (reliability) is determined by:

- Auditing the data collection process to ensure the researchers followed proper methods.

Confirmability (objectivity) is determined by:

- A clear chain of evidence from the conclusion back to original source to deter researcher bias.

Visit these websites on qualitative studies:

<http://trochim.human.cornell.edu/kb/qual.htm>

<http://www.uea.ac.uk/care/elu/Issues/Research/Res1Cont.htm>

Citations:

- Bailey, K. D. (1978). *Methods of social research*. New York: Free Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mertens, D. M. (1997). *Research methods in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative & qualitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

"To accelerate the rate at which communities and agencies prepare for and adopt the most effective known practices in support of a comprehensive system for ensuring healthy child, youth, and family development."



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