1   Collecting Textual, Media and Virtual Data in Qualitative Research

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Why This Book?

Imagine you pay a visit to your university library to read and learn about qualitative research methods. After a few hours of sitting at a table surrounded by piles of books, you will likely draw the conclusion that data collection is fairly straightforward, that all you need to know about collecting qualitative data is how to do a (face-to-face) interview, and maybe how to run a focus group. In a discipline like psychology (our discipline), and in many other social and health science disciplines, methods texts often emphasise (qualitative) data analysis over data collection, with qualitative data collection often limited to face-to-face interviews, and increasingly focus groups. This limited approach creates two impressions: that data *collection* isn't that important, or certainly less important than data *analysis*, and that qualitative researchers use only a limited range of methods to collect data.

Neither of these is true. Data analysis is (arguably) only as good as the data that are collected. What's more, face-to-face interviews and focus groups are not über-methods, suitable for any and all purposes, and without limitations. They can be costly with regard to time and resources, they require certain interactional skills to get the best out of data collection and they aren't always the best way to address the range of research questions that interest qualitative researchers. Despite this, their frequent unquestioned dominance means that they – or face-to-face interviews in particular – occupy a position as the 'gold standard', 'go to' method for collecting qualitative data, often being used to address research questions that would arguably have been better tackled through the use of other data collection methods. This is not to say that face-to-face interviews and focus groups aren't important and useful methods for qualitative research – they very much are! But the range of possibilities for data collection, and thus forms of data, open to the qualitative researcher is much, much wider than just these two methods.

In this book, we aim to explore and expand qualitative research possibilities by providing an accessible and practical introduction to a wide array of data collection methods and sources. Importantly, the methods that we cover do not offer an inferior substitute for the 'gold standard' face-to-face interview and focus group, generating shorter and shallower data; instead, they offer an *alternative*, with different qualities and strengths, and are suited to different purposes. The book offers qualitative researchers an arsenal of (new) tools from which to explore innovative and exciting research questions. We advocate the importance of fit between your theoretical orientation, research question, participant group, analytic approach and the data collection method you use; this view is strongly supported in all the chapters in this book. What matters is selecting the right approach to data collection for your research question and participant group. A good fit will set you on the path towards excellent data.

The book is organised into three parts: Textual, Media and Virtual. *Textual* covers four methods that are typically more widely used in *quantitative* research – surveys, story completion, vignettes and diaries – but that hold great potential for *qualitative* research. Qualitative researchers have long been interested in the media as a source of data, but methodological discussion of this data source is scarce (outside of media studies). *Media* covers both 'traditional' broadcast and print media (radio, magazines and newspapers) and newer forms of social media (blogs, forums, online news, reader comments). *Virtual* covers techniques that harness the potential of the Internet (email, instant messaging (IM) and Skype interviews and online focus groups) to provide alternatives to traditional face-to-face interviews or focus groups. Many contributors in this and other parts of the book identify that the Internet has revolutionised qualitative research, opening up new avenues for recruiting participants and collecting data, as well as giving rise to new *forms* of data (see also Fielding, Lee and Blank, 2008; Mann and Stewart, 2000).

The methods discussed offer ways to collect data that are typically less resource-intensive than face-to-face interviews or focus groups. These methods and data sources enable researchers to conduct high-quality qualitative research, often without leaving the office. They also engage with, and provide possible solutions to, some thorny questions for qualitative researchers (especially in the contemporary academic climate):

(1) How can you access a geographically dispersed sample without it being prohibitively expensive?
(2) What methods can you use to best encourage participation from hidden and/or hard-to-reach populations?

(3) How best can you research sensitive issues, from the point of view of participant anonymity and inclination to participate, *and* from the point of view of researcher well-being?

(4) How can you viably conduct qualitative research with a large participant sample?

(5) How can you viably collect qualitative longitudinal data without an enormous budget?

(6) What are the benefits of non-researcher-generated data?

(7) How can the time and resources of a researcher best be balanced to maximise the chance of successful research completion?

These questions are particularly pertinent in an 'age of austerity' in the academy (e.g., Davies and O'Callaghan, 2014). Vast numbers of scholars within the health and social sciences use qualitative methods in their research. Many exist within economic and academic climates where research has become more pressured, in terms of time, financial resources and expectations of (quick) outcomes. This book invites those scholars to 'think outside the box' of their regular qualitative methods, offering in a single volume theoretical overviews and practical advice on ways to collect qualitative data differently. In presenting innovative ways data can be collected, new modes of scholarship and new research orientations are opened up to student researchers and established scholars alike.

The methods presented in this book will be particularly suitable for students doing research projects for two main reasons:

(1) They offer typically time-efficient methods, for research needing to be completed within a very clearly delimited time-frame.

(2) They require fairly minimal resources, a potentially important consideration for those conducting research on an extremely tight budget.

A note of caution: we don't cover everything in the wide, *wide* world of qualitative data collection in this book – that would require a whole book series, not just one volume! Nor do we cover many methods of data collection that can be regarded as 'innovative' (e.g., visual approaches; Margolis and Pauwels, 2011; Reavey, 2011; Rose, 2012). In the main, the methods we have selected represent new developments in qualitative data collection in the last decade or so, but retain a focus on the text. They provide interesting 'twists' on existing and established methods and offer alternative – often more practical – ways of addressing familiar research questions about participants' experiences or social processes, whilst at the same time opening up new avenues for qualitative inquiry.

We now provide a brief overview of the book – what it covers (we've already told you a bit about that!) and how it is structured – so that you can use it in a way that best suits your requirements. This is intertwined with a brief discussion of some of the key features of qualitative research as a 'map' for those new to this terrain.

What This Book Offers the Qualitative Researcher

Who Is This Book for?

This book is intended for readers across the social and health sciences – though of course read on, even if that isn't your area of interest! The editors and contributors come from different disciplines and fields of study, including psychology, sociology, public health, communication, psychotherapy, gender studies, social geography and more. As we aim to provide a practical and accessible *introduction* to a range of textual, media and virtual methods, the book is principally written for readers who are new to these methods, and we keep in mind that they may be new to qualitative research more broadly.

The book is also designed to accompany a course or lecture block on qualitative research and to provide a 'how to' guide for students undertaking research using one or more of the methods covered.

How to Read and Use This Book

You can start at the beginning and read this book from cover to cover! But you don't have to – each chapter has been designed to stand-alone. We do, however, recommend that you read the section below before progressing to the rest of the book, as it provides useful framing material, including a brief discussion of some of the key features and assumptions of qualitative research. All of the chapters have (broadly) the same structure – with slight variation when it doesn't fit well with the method or data source under discussion. They are generally organised as follows:

Overview: This section does what it says on the tin – it provides a brief overview of the chapter so you know what you will get out of it.

Introduction to the example study: At the start of each chapter you'll find a *box* that introduces an example study (or sometimes, studies) that provides a real-life illustration of the method/data source *in use*. The example studies aren't intended as perfect exemplars (if there ever were such things!) of how to use a particular method or data source. If you're new to research, know that the

impression of a seamless research process that published journal articles and book chapters create is often far from reality. This book aims to provide a more authentic sense of the messy reality of the research process – and so the contributors share their false-starts, challenges and *complete failures*, as well as their successes! Each chapter as a whole *does* provide clear guidance on how (best) to implement the relevant method and equip you with strategies for dealing with challenges you might encounter.

Introduction to the method/data source: This section clearly defines what the method/data source is, its history and background, and some key characteristics.

What does the method/data source offer the qualitative researcher? This section provides a clear sense of when and why you would chose to use the relevant method, as well as highlighting the practical advantages it offers. Although it is important to have a clear rationale for your design choices that reflect the importance of conceptual 'fit' between your theoretical assumptions, research questions and methods (Willig, 2013), pragmatic considerations – such as 'Do I feel confident using this method?' or 'Will I be able to submit my dissertation by the deadline if I use this method?' – also play a role in research design. Recognising these factors, this section focuses on both theoretical and pragmatic considerations, with the latter particularly important in research that is time- or resource-limited.

What research questions suit the method/data source? The research process begins with a research question: this section provides a consideration of the types of research questions that can be addressed using the method or data source discussed. Whereas quantitative research tends to be guided by concrete and precise predictions and hypotheses, qualitative research questions tend to be fairly open. This is *not* the same as not having a research question! Even though qualitative research designs are characteristically organic, flexible and exploratory, developing an appropriate research question is a vital starting point (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This is not to say your research question can't evolve as the research progresses – in qualitative research, it often does; but qualitative research, like all research, has a clear sense of its purpose. One common focus for qualitative research is exploring the 'lived experience' of particular groups or individuals. However, research questions are not limited to people's thoughts, feelings and behaviours, or to how they experience and/or make sense of particular phenomena. Research questions can also focus on the interrogation of language and meaning, as well as examining the assumptions underpinning, and the implications and effects of, particular patterns and formations (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Thinking about research questions early on is important as some of the methods discussed particularly – or even only – suit specific kinds of research questions; others are more flexible with a wider range of applications.

Design, sampling and ethical issues: This section provides practical guidance on considerations involved in designing a piece of research using a particular method/data source, with a focus on sampling and ethical concerns. At first sight, qualitative research may seem like it doesn't need much in the way of 'designing'. After all, you're not administering lots of different measures, and you don't have to worry about things like standardising participant instructions and internal validity – or do you? Design and careful planning are just as important in qualitative research as they are in quantitative research, and some approaches do require extensive preparation (e.g., qualitative surveys, see Chapter 2). The key to effective qualitative design is conceptual 'fit' between the different elements of the project; 'a good qualitative research design is one in which the method of data analysis is appropriate to the research question, and where the method of data collection generates data that are appropriate to the method of analysis' (Willig, 2001: 21). Along with the section on suitable research questions, this section will help you to design a coherent project – one that exhibits good fit!

Steps to using the method/data source: Again, this section does what it says on the tin! It outlines the key steps involved in implementing a particular method/data source. This provides a useful checklist for when you come to use the method.

What can go wrong with the method/data source? It is exceedingly rare for a research project to run smoothly with no challenges or obstacles to overcome, or even what at the time can feel like complete disasters to manage. This section gives you a heads up on some of the common pitfalls associated with a particular method/data source and advice on potential ways to avoid or manage them. The key message across the book is *don't panic*! Things go wrong from time to time, but careful planning and design can help smooth your path and ensure that you are well equipped to deal with any challenges you may encounter. We are very grateful to the contributors for being willing to share their trials and tribulations; as we noted above, this is the kind of detail typically left out of seamless research reports (for other discussions, see Boynton, 2016; Hallowell, Lawton and Gregory, 2005), but doing so can create a false impression that published researchers are perfect at research and never get anything wrong (far from it!).

What methods of analysis suit the method/data source? The aim in this section is to provide you with an *overview* of analytic approaches appropriate for the data source/method, rather than in-depth guidance – plenty of other texts offer that. There is a broad range of analytic approaches available to the qualitative researcher: some are used widely, and across the social and health sciences (e.g., grounded theory, thematic analysis); others are associated with

particular disciplines (e.g., interpretative phenomenological analysis has origins in psychology) but are increasingly taken up more broadly; others still are more 'idiosyncratic', associated primarily with a particular researcher or group of researchers. To add more complexity, some approaches come in lots of *different varieties*, both across and within disciplines. Discourse analysis, for instance, can refer to very *different*, and sometimes actually contradictory, approaches. This section of each chapter identifies a range of analytic approaches appropriate to the method/data source, focused mainly on approaches widely used across the social and health sciences: qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005), thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2013), interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009), grounded theory (Birks and Mills, 2011), discourse analysis (Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001a, 2001b), narrative analysis (Riessman, 2007) and conversation analysis (Ten Have, 2007). Some authors may also describe *particular* analytic traditions/approaches that have developed with regard to the method in slightly more depth.

Conclusion: Each chapter ends with a brief conclusion summing up the benefits of the particular method, and incorporates a boxed personal reflection of using the method.

A Guide to the Pedagogical Features in This Book

A key aim of this book is to provide a *practical* and *accessible* guide to collecting qualitative data. Various pedagogical features, designed to highlight key information and assist you in implementing the methods in your own research, are included:

(1) Each chapter finishes with a *have a go . . .* feature. This offers suggestions for *hands-on* activities for *trying out*, and developing a deeper and practical understanding of, the particular method or data source. This *have a go . . .* feature will also be useful for lecturers in planning seminar and workshop activities.

(2) Each chapter provides *further resources* to take you deeper into the method. Some of these are useful *online* resources; some are suggestions for *further reading*, including any published versions of the example studies discussed in the chapter. These provide what the authors see as key and accessible starting points for going deeper.

(3) In each chapter you'll also find a variety of *boxes*, *tables* and *figures* to highlight key information.

Qualitative research writing can appear rather jargon-loaded to the unin-itiated, and even at times to the experienced qualitative researcher, so it's likely you'll come across a term or terms you've never heard of before. We therefore include a detailed *glossary* to provide pithy, confusion-busting definitions of some of the key terms and concepts used in the book.

Overview of Chapters

Chapters are presented within three thematic parts, each focused on a particular broad type of method/data source. There's naturally some overlap between the three: many of the *textual* methods are also used online; likewise, media data are increasingly accessed online – *textual, media* and *virtual*. . . . This means the distinction between textual, media and virtual methods is not absolute, but the methods/data sources described in each part share some core characteristics.

In Chapter 2, Gareth Terry and Virginia Braun kick off Part I focused on *textual* data with an introduction to *qualitative survey methods*. Surveys have traditionally been used by quantitative researchers to examine attitudes and opinions; Terry and Braun argue that surveys can be used by qualitative researchers to ask similar types of questions, as well as address distinctively *qualitative* research questions about the lived experiences and practices of particular groups. Unique among qualitative methods, surveys provide a 'wide angle' lens on the topic of interest, which is particularly useful in research focused on documenting and exploring social norms, such as Terry and Braun's research on body hair management and removal.

In Chapter 3, Victoria Clarke, Nikki Hayfield, Naomi Moller, Irmgard Tischner and other members of the Story Completion Research Group discuss their 'experiments' with *story completion* as a qualitative method. Story completion was first developed as a 'projective' technique, designed to uncover the 'hidden depths' of psychoanalytic psychotherapy clients, and later developed as a quantitative research tool, with complex coding systems used to translate stories into numerical data for statistical analysis. Clarke et al. argue that story completion provides a compelling and creative way of exploring topics of interest to qualitative researchers. Drawing on their research relating to gender, sexuality, appearance and embodiment, they show how asking participants to write stories, rather than asking them directly about their views and opinions, opens up exciting new possibilities for qualitative research.

Another method that involves hypothetical scenarios and stories is the vignette method. In Chapter 4, Debra Gray, Bronwen Royall and Helen Malson provide an introduction to *vignettes as a qualitative, stand-alone*

method. Vignettes have long been used in quantitative survey research to measure participants' attitudes and beliefs about a particular topic. In qualitative research, vignettes have typically been used in combination with other methods, as a secondary elicitation tool. However, Gray et al. demonstrate that vignettes in and of themselves provide a productive way of exploring participants' sense-making around particular phenomena.

The final chapter in this part also discusses a method that requires participants to write or type their responses to a particular question or task but shifts from hypothetical scenarios and stories back to gathering first-person accounts of personal experience (like qualitative surveys do). In Chapter 5, Paula Meth explores the *solicited diary method*, where the researcher asks the participant to engage in diary writing for a specific purpose. She shows that diaries provide an invaluable way of gaining access to participants' hidden worlds and the unfolding of personal experience over time. Solicited diaries can therefore provide a relatively accessible tool for conducting longitudinal research, something not usually possible in time- and resource-limited research.

Part II focuses on *media* as a data source, exploring both traditional broadcast and print media and newer forms of social and online media. Laura Favaro, Rosalind Gill and Laura Harvey open this part with a broad focus on *media data* in Chapter 6, discussing newspapers, magazines and the increasingly pervasive 'reader comments' feature on online news sites. They outline the many advantages of media data for qualitative researchers, not least their ubiquity and (often free) accessibility, and the importance of engaging with such sources *as* data in an increasingly 'mediated' world. Their chapter not only offers specific guidance for visiting these media types, but also provides a good foundation for the other chapters in this part.

In Chapter 7, Scott Hanson-Easey and Martha Augoustinos discuss another kind of traditional media data – *talkback* or *talk radio*, where a listening audience is invited to 'call-in' to discuss a variety of 'everyday' concerns, opinions and views. Drawing on their own discourse analytic research, on constructions and representations of Sudanese refugees in Australia, they highlight how talkback radio can provide unique insight into how people 'make sense of' their social worlds. Moreover, they argue that talkback radio offers particular advantages for researchers who are interested in *language* and *talk-in-interaction.*

Nicholas Hookway shifts the focus onto newer forms of online social media data – in particular *blogs* – in Chapter 8. Drawing on his own experiences of using blogs in his research on everyday morality, he highlights the ways in which blogs provide qualitative researchers with uniquely multi-modal and multi-media data that are textual, audio, visual and interactive. He

argues that blogs provide qualitative researchers with unique access to first-person textual accounts of everyday life, and therefore offer much potential for researchers interested in how people understand and experience the world, and the creative ways in which people express these understandings and experiences.

David Giles continues the discussion of online interactive media, with his overview of using *online discussion forums* as data in Chapter 9. He highlights the potential of these data for providing access to 'naturalistic' accounts of people's views and experiences (a common theme across the media chapters), and for providing key insights into social interaction and social identities, as well as the functioning of online communities. Drawing on his own discursive research in pro-ana and Asperger's online communities, he highlights the enormous potential of social media data for qualitative researchers, as well as key challenges around ethics and the status of online data.

Part III focuses on *virtual* interactive data collection, particularly the ways in which more traditional forms of qualitative data collection (e.g., interviews, focus groups) have evolved or been transformed by the move to virtual environments. In Chapter 10, Lucy Gibson provides an introduction to *email interviews*. Drawing on her own research with music fans, she demonstrates that email interviews offer an efficient, cost-effective and convenient means of gathering rich and detailed *written* data. They also offer specific benefits to the research participant, in that they are convenient and can be more acceptable to people who are unable, or do not want, to attend a face-to-face interview. Thus, email interviews can be very useful for reaching a geographically dispersed group, or for hard-to-find and/or hard-to-reach populations.

In Chapter 11, Pamela Lannutti takes us into the world of *Instant Messaging (IM) interviewing*, where people are asked to take part in a real-time, interactive, text-based chat (interview). She argues that, as IM interviews take place while the researcher and participant are simultaneously online, they confer many of the benefits of more traditional interview formats, whilst also offering many of the advantages of virtual methods: overcoming distance, convenience for the researchers and participants, increased possibility for data confidentiality and anonymity, and ease of data capture. Drawing on her research into same-sex marriage in the US, she highlights the potential of this method, but also some of its pitfalls – particularly in terms of some of the security concerns around collecting data in virtual spaces.

Chapter 12 explores one of the latest developments in interviewing – the use of video-calling technologies (in this instance Skype) to conduct virtual-but-visual interviews. Paul Hanna was the first researcher to write about the use of