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## Qualitative Research: Central Tendencies and Ranges

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## Qualitative Research: Central Tendencies and Ranges

### Abstract

It is always interesting to listen closely when someone says, "Qualitative research is..." or curious to read intently an article or book which prominently features "qualitative research" in the title, and then experience a strange, defamiliarization process as the words of the conversation, lecture, article, or book don't seem to fit your notion of what "qualitative research" is and isn't. Well, you are not alone in your confusion. As far as I know, no one has copy rights on the term so it ends up meaning a variety of things for a variety of people. As a matter of fact, that is the most important point: Qualitative research can be a diverse, rich, and sometimes self-contradictory world of inquiry. Meta-analyses of qualitative research methods and philosophies are quite common in the field and serve as good introductions to this diversification of approach. In this short essay I offer one such examination of the field by presenting a series of couplets which help to exemplify central tendencies (CT) and ranges (R) of qualitative research.

### Keywords

qualitative research

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# Qualitative Research: Central Tendencies and Ranges

by Ronald J. Chenail

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It is always interesting to listen closely when someone says, "Qualitative research is..." or curious to read intently an article or book which prominently features "qualitative research" in the title, and then experience a strange, defamiliarization process as the words of the conversation, lecture, article, or book don't seem to fit your notion of what "qualitative research" is and isn't. Well, you are not alone in your confusion. As far as I know, no one has copy rights on the term so it ends up meaning a variety of things for a variety of people. As a matter of fact, that is the most important point: Qualitative research can be a diverse, rich, and sometimes self-contradictory world of inquiry. Meta-analyses of qualitative research methods and philosophies are quite common in the field and serve as good introductions to this diversification of approach. In this short essay I offer one such examination of the field by presenting a series of couplets which help to exemplify central tendencies (CT) and ranges (R) of qualitative research.

## Couplet One

**CT: Qualitative research is synonymous with ethnographic and participant observation methods.**

**R: Qualitative research is polysemous when it comes to method.**

Much of qualitative research is dominated by research traditions from education, sociology, and anthropology. The researchers from these fields favor such methods as ethnography, participant observation, and naturalistic inquiry. In addition to these popular methods, qualitative research can also include methods from fields like communication (e.g., discourse analysis or conversation analysis), literature (e.g., narratology or figurative language analysis), or Biblical studies (e.g., exegesis or hermeneutics).

## Couplet Two

**CT: Qualitative research is conducted from a scientific perspective.**

**R: Qualitative research can be conducted from a number of contexts.**

Much of qualitative research is practiced from a scientific viewpoint. It is legitimized by its juxtaposition with quantitative approaches (i.e., qualitative research as pre-quantitative, qualitative research as post-quantitative, or qualitative and quantitative research in triangulation configurations) and it is undertaken with similar goals in mind as quantitative approaches (e.g., to predict, to confirm, etc.). There are many varieties of qualitative research which do not embrace a scientific way of knowing and doing. There is artistic or literary qualitative research which is based upon an artist's way of practice and knowledge production. Another type is clinical qualitative research which constructs its investigations by examining clinicians' methods

and applying those ways of knowing in research inquiries (e.g., the use of circular questioning in data collection and analysis).

### **Couplet Three**

**CT: Qualitative researchers assume a monological position of privilege with their practice knowledge.**

**R: Qualitative researchers assume a dialogical position of difference with their practice knowledge.**

In our culture, knowledge produced from a practice of research, qualitative or quantitative, is usually placed above awareness derived from a practice of practitioners as in the case of educators reflecting on their teaching or therapists re-searching their work in the clinic. Some researchers, qualitative and quantitative, realize that researchers can take their place along side other practitioners and engage in dialogue towards a creation of a community of knowing and not knowing.

### **Couplet Four**

**CT: Qualitative researchers attempt to replicate known forms of method in their studies.**

**R: Qualitative researchers attempt to create new method forms for their studies.**

For some, aesthetics and pragmatics in qualitative research mean that researchers attempt to approximate a known, well-practiced, and established form or tradition in their research project at hand (e.g., "In this study, the researcher employed a Glaser and Strauss grounded theory approach.") or improvise on a well-known approach (e.g., "The Spradley ethnographic interview was modified in the following ways..."). Other qualitative researchers feel that particularities of each research project are so unique that they require a distinctive method for every study. They may identify research tradition(s) which inspired their method for a specific project, but they will also allow each study to have its own project-specific method which emerge from the special characteristics of the project.

### **Couplet Five**

**CT: Qualitative researchers' analyses tend to focus on central tendencies and pre-study variables in the data.**

**R: Qualitative researchers' analyses also focus on ranges and serendipities in the data.**

Qualitative researchers have a habit of focusing on what is familiar and central to the study at hand. That which was known through literature searches and previous observations before the study was conducted becomes central in the unfolding process of the research. Also, that which is observed as happening or occurring the most during the study garners the lion's share of the spotlight. What may be missed through this style of inquiry is an opportunity for investigators to know what might not have been known to them prior to the study. Space and time have to be allowed in research to create room for such discoveries. Also, the margins of a project often provide some of the most interesting and informative patterns for investigators if they include a

curiosity for the exception in their work and a hesitancy to explain quickly that which might turn out to be unexplainable.

### **Couplet Six**

**CT: The end product of qualitative research project resembles the style of a classic or traditional research report.**

**R: Qualitative research may produce a variety of final products which include poems, collages, pictorials, videos, and clinical pieces.**

For the most part, qualitative researchers' reports of their work approximate the shapes of a traditional research report: problem, literature review, hypothesis(es) and/or research questions, method, analysis(es), discussion, and conclusion(s). These sections may follow a linear progression or may be presented in a circular or recursive pattern, the choice being dependent on the process followed in the study and/or prescriptions suggested by the publishing source. Qualitative researchers may also choose literary or artistic modes of re-presentation for their work. These choices include novel and poetic forms, as well as expressions of pastiche and collage. Other researchers explore more audio-visual re-productions in the forms of videos, films, and pictorial exhibits. Still other qualitative investigators' reports assume forms usually associated with clinical expression--the case study, for example. For all of these researchers great care is taken in choosing a medium which contributes to the message of the research.

Hopefully, this short series of dialectics helps to exemplify both the popular and the possible when it comes to qualitative research practice and production. It is important that such options are known and explored because all too often, qualitative research suffers from a lack of fit between the intent of researchers in conducting their work and the choices of method that they make in trying to accomplish those goals. Producing compelling and relevant qualitative research begins with awareness, appreciation, and critical consumption of the variety of expressions available to the researchers. In addition, acceptance or dismissal of qualitative research by editors, reviewers, teachers, funding sources, practitioners, and researchers should also emerge from a comprehension of the central tendencies and ranges of these methods.

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### **Author Note**

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