

Things that cannot be counted: Qualitative research for Kingdom impact

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*Not everything that can be counted counts.
Not everything that counts can be counted.*

—sociologist William Bruce Cameron

In our research we are always looking for methods that can enable us to get a clearer understanding of the harvest force and harvest field. Books like *Changing the mind of missions* (Engel & Dyrness, 2000) and studies that have come since then have challenged ideas such as whether counting conversions and other quantitative measures are useful ways to assess Kingdom impact. Qualitative methods of gathering and analyzing information are additional tools that can be used on their own or together with quantitative research methods.

It all comes down to the kind of questions we are asking. When I arrived in Bulgaria in the 1990s, the big questions were “Where are the churches?” and “Where are there no churches?” Under the regime of the Bulgarian Communist Party perhaps the only people who were intentionally keeping written lists of churches and pastors were agents of State Security. So, in 1997 we sent out researchers to look for groups of believers. I learned how to use Microsoft Access and MapInfo. We made a lot of maps and recruited church planters to go to the largest towns and municipalities that had no church.

Today, as it is in many places in the world, different questions are being asked. Qualitative research methods are a way to seek out answers to “how?” and “why?” questions. Quantitative research is about numbers; qualitative research is about words. Experimental research in a laboratory setting can tell us some things about human behavior, but qualitative methods focus deeply on a specific event, a specific group of people, or a specific behavior in a specific location. Qualitative research methods attempt to explore, describe, and explain in a deep, detailed way. The process is inductive.

The qualitative researcher starts by asking questions rather than with a hypothesis to prove or disprove. In this way qualitative methods are very useful in exploring a situation or group of people about whom little is known. Qualitative research can set the stage for a hypothesis that can later be researched quantitatively. On the other hand, qualitative research methods can follow up findings from quantitative research, adding greater depth and understanding.

For the cross-cultural worker, qualitative research can start with the simplest question: “What do I see happening around me that I do not understand?” Or even simpler: “Why do people _____?” Fill in the blank!

In this paper I am presenting a brief overview of the nature of qualitative research and how it can provide knowledge and insight for ministry. I am also using a rather personal approach. The authors of books on qualitative research often write that the researcher is the primary research instrument. The researcher asks the questions. The researcher gathers the data. The researcher analyzes the data. Qualitative research methods were confusing and a bit overwhelming to me at first. I will share how I have approached my own research projects and how I have made decisions about choosing methods to gather data. I would also like to tell you how I managed to walk into the foggy cloud of analyzing my information and came out on the other side alive! These are the kinds of things I wish someone had been around to tell me when I started out, so I hope it will be useful and encouraging for those who want to experiment with a qualitative study. It is a skill that improves with practice.

What is qualitative research?

Even in textbooks on qualitative research it can be difficult to find the author's definition of qualitative research—and often the definition is a good-sized paragraph. Let me start instead with two familiar everyday examples that illustrate some aspects of qualitative research methods.

The first is a funnel. Authors Marshall and Rossman picture the process of qualitative research as a “conceptual funnel.” The researcher asks questions about the people or situation being studied, and each new discovery leads to new and better questions that bring greater clarity and focus. It's a great picture. I can imagine this as initial observations being poured into the funnel like water, swirling around as new questions and answers are added and analyzed. Finally, new knowledge and insight shoot out of the opening at the bottom.

The second example is inductive Bible study. As mentioned above, qualitative research is an inductive process. As with inductive study of scripture, we take the cultural context very seriously. We are seeking to understand the original intention of the author and the understanding of the first hearers, so the meanings of words and how they are used are important.

Let me paraphrase John Creswell's definition of qualitative research: Qualitative research is a way to explore and understand how a person or group looks at a situation or problem. The research process consists of asking questions, adding information, and continuing to ask more questions and acquire more information and insight. Gathering data usually takes place where the people live or work. The researcher analyzes the data inductively, moving from detailed observations to general themes and on to significance and meaning.

While I do not see qualitative and quantitative research as opposites, it is helpful to compare the two in order to see what each one is and is not. The table below is adapted from Miles and Huberman.

Qualitative	Quantitative
The aim of qualitative research is complete, detailed description.	In quantitative research we classify features, count them, and construct statistical models to explain what is observed.
Researcher may only know roughly in advance what s/he is looking for.	Researcher knows clearly in advance what s/he is looking for.
The design emerges as the study unfolds.	All aspects of the study are carefully designed before data is collected.
The researcher is the data collecting instrument.	The researcher uses tools, such as questionnaires or equipment, to collect numerical data.
Data is gathered in the form of words, pictures, or objects.	Data is in the form of numbers and statistics.
Qualitative data is rich, detailed, time consuming, and more difficult to be generalized.	Quantitative data is more efficient, able to test hypotheses, but may miss contextual details.
The researcher tends to become subjectively immersed in the subject matter.	The researcher tends to remain objectively separated from the subject matter.

All these aspects of qualitative research make it especially useful for missions researchers like us. In terms of the Johari Window, we often find ourselves in situations where there are many “unknown unknowns,” where we do not have sufficient information to guess at a hypothesis.

The qualitative researcher

The qualitative approach gives special consideration to the person and role of the researcher. The subjective aspect noted above means that the researcher needs to think carefully about his or her personal characteristics and role in the research process. Let me share a bit of my personal assessment, as an example.

My experiences with qualitative research methods have been primarily in Bulgaria, where I have lived for almost twenty-four years. I have thought carefully about myself as a researcher and the strengths and potential blind spots I bring with me into each research situation.

I have thought of myself as in inside outsider. I am a fluent in Bulgarian, which has been a great advantage in interviews and focus groups. However, not having grown up in this country, hardly

a day goes by that I do not hear a new word or a cultural reference that is unfamiliar to me. This means I need to be more careful in developing questions and ask for help from others during the process of analysis.

I do not know whether a cultural outsider can actually be more objective, but an outsider does have the advantage of *expecting* to be surprised by new information in the course of gathering it.

From my experience, I would say that the most significant advantage of being from another culture than that of the groups and situations I have studied is that it is an opportunity to ask *more* questions. An outsider can get away with asking questions about issues that might seem obvious to a member of the culture without appearing insincere or as having an agenda.

Gathering data

Data gathering, at its most basic is observing people, what they do and what they say. The list below includes a number of possibilities.

- Observation, including taking in words and actions as well as the physical surroundings
- Participant observation
- Interviewing: non-structured, semi-structured, structured
- Case studies
- Ethnographies
- Focus groups
- Conversational analysis
- Narrative analysis, focusing on a significant story or a personal history
- Surveys or questionnaires with open-ended questionnaires
- Text analysis of documents, records, journals, etc.
- Film or video

“Thick and rich details” is a phrase that is often used to underline the importance of intensity and focus in making observations. This leads to the issue of how to record or preserve what happens in an interview, for example, so that this information can be analyzed later.

When an interview or focus group is planned in advance, an audio recording or even video would be ideal, but there is a down side. Many research participants are uncomfortable with the idea of being recorded, and this may affect their openness to talk and participate. Hidden recording equipment is not an ethical option.

Taking handwritten notes during the course of an interview is a possibility, but it can be difficult to write while trying to observe the interviewee and think of the next question. Taking notes during a focus group would be extremely difficult. The goal is to get raw data: the exact words of the participants, not yet edited or summarized by the person writing the notes. Bringing

another person along to take notes while you ask questions is another alternative, as is training another person to facilitate an interview so that you can take notes.

Returning to your home or office and immediately writing down everything you can remember about a session is less than ideal. Memory is selective, and recent research indicates that our brains have a natural tendency to attempt to make sense of new information by fitting it into our existing understanding of the world. With some methods, like participant observation, writing detailed notes after an event or conversation is the only option. Researchers studying historical documents or a film would have all the time in the world to make observations and take detailed notes.

Other considerations are connected to the people or situation you want to explore. Are these people fairly available for a casual conversation or would I need to arrange for a specific time and place to meet? Do I have any experience or information about trust levels in this society? Do I need permission from parents to talk with children?

Choose a method and plan carefully to make the most of the opportunity to gather information. Consider your strengths as a researcher and compensate for potential problems.

My experience

I have wanted to understand better the experience of Bulgarian Christians during the communist era. Not being too certain about what the potential participants' trust levels and concerns might be, I decided to try one-on-one, semi-structured interviews in a location of the participant's choice. I planned to ask for permission to take notes while we talked and to write detailed notes at home if the participant was uncomfortable with my note-taking.

A few Christian leaders in Bulgaria have talked and written quite publicly about their experiences under communism, including their arrests and imprisonments. I wanted to research the experiences of every day believers who were not well-known. I started recruiting participants by talking to my Christian friends and colleagues, asking if they had an older friend or relative who was a believer or who came to faith during that time. I explained what I wanted to do and why and the kinds of questions I wanted to ask my interviewees. My friends were go-betweens for me in recruiting participants.

Overall, the interviews were very effective in gathering information from participants. Some interviews were in homes, others in coffee shops. All the participants allowed me to take notes. After some initial awkwardness, all of them talked very freely. I sensed that this chance to process some of their pasts experiences was almost therapeutic for them. The concerns I observed in some of my first interviews led me to assure participants in advance that in my analysis they would only be identified by initials and that the final document would not be made available publicly.

Several questions were prepared in advance of the first interview. Each interview gave new ideas for questions to ask in the interviews that followed. (Remember the funnel!)

I have had a great interest in Sofia's young adult, non-Christian population. My casual observations and reading indicated that Bulgarians are among the most unhappy people on earth. Urban youth culture seemed very, very far from the values and behavior of Bulgarian evangelicals. According to what I read, young adults had little trust for religious figures. More than that, I remember very clearly reading an interview in which a young man expressed the view that the only reason foreigners come to Bulgaria is because they have been failures in their homeland.

I chose to study this group as an academic project. For several months I wondered which data gathering method to use. During this time, I kept on reading and kept a sort of research journal on my observations of young adults around me. I had thoughts of doing in-depth interviews. In fact, I can clearly remember sitting on a tram, reading a book about interviewing and imagining how wonderful this would be. Then I remembered what I had read about the low levels of trust in Bulgarian society and dropped the idea. Using participant observation seemed uncomfortably similar to the *donosniks* of communist times: the neighbor, coworker or teacher who would report everything they saw to State Security.

Eventually I decided that focus groups watching and discussing a film would be a better, less direct approach. The participants would be able to interact with one another and not only with me. My role as a facilitator would be clear to all. Each participant could choose to self-disclose a lot or not at all. In this case the fact that I was doing focus groups for an academic requirement was an advantage. Participants would be able to understand why I needed to record our interaction, for example. Eventually two young adults at my church put me in contact with a few of their friends—and after that friends of friends of friends participated in the five focus groups we organized.

Developing questions for interviews or focus groups

Preparing questions in advance is so important. The main challenge is to develop questions that are appropriate, relevant, understandable, and open-ended. Good open-ended questions get more information from participants and allow them to reveal as little or as much about their personal lives as they wish. Indirect questions that use phrases such as “you or people like you” or “most adults” are also less confrontational. To say, “There are no wrong answers” sounds like a cliché, but that is what open-ended questions need to solicit.

If you are working in a language that is not your first language, it is worth the time to write your questions and possible follow-up questions and show them to a native speaker. This can help you avoid mistakes in grammar and terminology that can cause confusion and frustration for research participants. In the two studies discuss above, with each interview and each focus group I gained a better understanding of which questions elicited more response, and I added questions that touched on issues that seemed to be more relevant to participants.

Analyzing the data

This is the time when the researcher's hard work begins to bear fruit. We are getting further and further down into the funnel, circling, getting closer to discovering new insights.

As mentioned above, inductive study of the Bible has several similarities to the inductive approach used in qualitative research. Inductive Bible study methods have specific guidelines for the analysis of a passage. The scriptural text is extremely important, as are the words and actions of our research subjects. Historical context is important in both cases. In studying the Bible and in doing qualitative research, we try to be aware of our own blind spots and not allow our personal assumptions or biases to affect our interpretation of scripture—or of our research data. Our interpretation of scripture is to be grounded in the text itself. In the same way, in qualitative research our analysis must be grounded in the words and behavior we observe. We bring all that we learn through examining every aspect of a biblical passage to draw out conclusions, meaning, and application. We also are careful not to import our own ideas and preferences into the text. This is good advice for a qualitative researcher as well.

Coding is the term used for identifying reoccurring topics or themes in the data. Like the analogy of the funnel, the researcher identifies topics and themes in the data, considers their meaning and significance, and then returns to the data with new questions that test or clarify the new discoveries. In the process, new connections between themes come to light. The researcher gets closer and closer to formulating conclusions that contribute to the knowledge and understanding of a group of people or a situation.

My experience

I have found that coding is a difficult concept and skill to understand until you are in the middle of trying to do it. Coding sounds very complex until the researcher realizes that it is basically identifying topics, ideas, or themes that come up frequently. The researcher then goes back and rechecks or rereads all the marked notes or quotations and asks more questions about the relationships between different codes (themes).

Having worked both from my own notes written during and after meetings with research participants and from recordings and transcriptions, I do not have the words to express how much easier it is to have the actual, unfiltered words to work with. Some of the major themes that I identified in my focus groups with young adult non-Christians came from comments that I had forgotten—but had the chance to listen to and reread because the sessions had been recorded and transcribed. When I thought I might be discovering a new connection between two concepts, I could go back to the transcripts and see what exactly had been said.

The qualitative researcher needs to test his or her conclusions by looking for alternative explanations, but the researcher must also be prepared to be surprised by unexpected results. In my study of communist-era church life, the most significant conclusion and the biggest surprise for me was that the experiences of different believers during that time varied so

greatly. Some experienced almost no negative consequences for their faith and little anxiety, while others were frequently called in for questioning, sent into internal exile alone or with their families, and even imprisoned. The wide variety of experiences contributes to the continuing ambivalence and tension that Bulgarian believers have about those years.

The biggest surprise coming out of the focus groups of young adult non-Christians was how many of them were nostalgic for the days of communism, even though they had barely been born back then! They longed for the stability and economic security that their parents and grandparents had told them existed under communism. The participants seemed disinterested or simply unaware of any of the negative aspects of life before the political changes in 1989.

The validity of qualitative research findings

I was invited a few years ago to make a presentation of some of my qualitative research work to a retreat organized by of a Christian organization in Bulgaria that is known for the many physicists, computer scientists, astronomers, and so on among its members. When the time came for questions and discussion, one asked, “And that’s all you do?”

Some of the skepticism surrounding qualitative research methods come from a misunderstanding of the goal of qualitative research, which is to explore complex situations or behavior in a deep and detailed way. Unlike much work done with quantitative methods, the purpose of qualitative research is not to generalize to larger populations and different settings. The goal is deep, not wide.

Qualitative researchers look for ways to confirm or validate the discoveries they are making. Another missionary in my city conducted interviews with Bulgarian cross-cultural workers to learn what their positions were on several theological questions, their views on the health of the Bulgarian churches, and their assessments of the effectiveness of foreign missionaries. After analyzing her data, she invited the participants to attend a half-day meeting where she reported her preliminary results. They confirmed that her analysis was an accurate description of their views.

Another researcher studying Muslim-background followers of Christ asked others with knowledge and experience to look at his data and findings. The researcher can also show her preliminary findings to other members of the group being studied—but who were not participants.

Qualitative research findings may produce theories or hypotheses that can be tested using quantitative methods.

Examples of qualitative research methods in mission contexts

The mission organization Josiah Venture was founded in 1993 and is active in Central and Eastern Europe. In 2013 Josiah Venture published the book *Deep Dive*, which tells the story of

how they carried out qualitative research projects in six of the countries where they have staff. The introduction to the book states it very well.

Each team identified one critical obstacle to ministry fruitfulness. As a team and under the guidance of a researcher, they designed a qualitative research project to discover what they needed to know better and understand more fully. They took the issue that was most puzzling to them and set out to talk to people about it.

The book is fascinating and a great example of how young cross-cultural workers with not many years of experience can do research and apply the findings in their ministries.

Publications that frequently feature findings from qualitative studies:

- *East-West Church & Ministry Report*
- *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*
- *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*
- *Mission Frontiers*

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