

# Qualitatively Speaking

*Qualitatively Speaking is a regular column in which a revolving cast of authors offers their thoughts on various aspects of the multifaceted world of qualitative research — in 1,000 words or less! Submissions are welcome. Send your ideas or manuscripts to Quirk's Editor Joe Rydholm at [joe@quirks.com](mailto:joe@quirks.com).*

## *Qualitative researchers as methodologists*

By Margaret R. Roller

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**R**esearchers, in general, tend to fall into one of two broad categories: those who specialize in qualitative research or those whose expertise is in quantitative. Even researchers who provide all types of research services commonly focus their attention on one of the two areas, depending on their own perceived strengths or interests. This is certainly true among qualitative researchers who may cringe at the thought of working with numbers or harbor at least some anxiety when hearing words such as “sampling” or “error.” More than cringe, some may denounce quantitative research as less important than the rich, real-life consumer behavior uncovered in the qualitative process. Indeed, qualitative researchers take pride in the fact (and rightly so) that their research findings do not neatly fit into a structured computer-analyzed framework.

I know this because I am very much a qualitative researcher. But I am also a quantitative researcher with an understanding of many research design methods, and one who attempts to incorporate the vibrant results from qualitative into the total research objective. In this sense, my ability as a qualitative researcher is only as good as my knowledge of quantitative. I would argue that qualitative researchers owe it to themselves, and to their client partners, to gain an appreciation of quantitative design methods and utilize this knowledge when designing, executing, and analyzing their qualitative projects.

The point is this: Researchers should focus on being researchers, not qualitative researchers or quantitative researchers. On some level, researchers should by definition strive to become methodologists. By widening their knowledge and appreciation of quantitative design issues, qualitative researchers will reap several significant benefits. First, we will become better able to understand the “best” design solution to any given research

situation and thereby better serve the users of our research. For example, I was once asked to conduct a series of focus groups concerning a new product design for the residential lighting market. In my initial discussions with the client it became obvious that pricing was a focus of the research. Further probing showed that the client was actually intending to use the research results to justify a particular price point. This was clearly a misuse of qualitative research and an appropriate central location quantitative test design was proposed (and conducted) instead.

Similarly, qualitative researchers with a broader understanding of the research process can more effectively propose two-stage or multi-stage research designs. Even if the researcher needs to subcontract with another research firm for the quantitative piece, the researcher benefits from having better served the research needs of the end user. This can be particularly important when the client is unsure which direction to take and

continued on p. 77



# Qualitatively Speaking

continued from p. 20

leans on the qualitative researcher to develop an appropriate research path. In many instances, preliminary qualitative research is an appropriate and necessary first step to a quantitative phase.

A second key benefit to a methodological approach to the research function is that qualitative researchers who truly understand the nuances of both qualitative and quantitative are better able to conduct qualitative projects. One example is the rotation of visuals in focus group discussions. In quantitative research, it is important to rotate visuals, lists, etc., in order to compensate for possible recency and primacy effects. In qualitative groups or interviews, however, it is important not to rotate stimuli. The reason lies in the unstructured (uncontrolled) nature of group discussions. With the multitude of varying factors confounding the results of these qualitative studies — and, therefore, the impossibility of saying anything definitive about rotation effects — it is usually mandatory to introduce a control variable, i.e., the stimuli, in order to eliminate at least one potential source of bias, that is, the order in which the stimuli were presented. The moderator who understands the nuances of both qualitative and quantitative design approaches, and why one approach is appropriate in one circumstance and not another, is better able to develop more robust qualitative study designs leading to more meaningful analyses of the results.

The third critical advantage to broadening our perspective as researchers is that it serves to enhance the users' understanding of qualitative research as well as their appreciation of how qualitative research fits in the total research process. One of the problems that many qualitative researchers encounter is clients who have limited budgets and want to use qualitative research to make important (costly) marketing decisions. We can discuss the limitations of qualitative research but it is only in the context of discussing qualitative versus

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other research (quantitative) designs that the end user may actually understand the perils of relying on a few focus group discussions to develop a pricing strategy or a nationwide roll-out for a new product. Our ability to suggest a qualitative approach and subsequent quantitative design, or at least discuss what the sponsor of the research will and will not learn in each approach, serves to educate users on the research method, provide a more profound appreciation for qualitative research, and improve the researcher-

client partnership.

Qualitative researchers who mold themselves as researchers first, qualitative researchers second, also become quickly educated on the myriad issues facing the research industry. And getting involved in these issues makes us smarter about what is going on around us in the research community. One such issue has surfaced in response to the increasing use of online research. This research method has raised important questions concerning mixed-mode effects and the impact that mixed modes have on the integrity of the research product. This is a highly relevant issue for all researchers, including qualitative researchers. How will qualitative researchers design, analyze, and report studies employing online groups, face-to-face personal interviews, and telephone discussions? Will we design such studies or advise our clients that the effects of mixing these modes will introduce an unexplainable degree of error, rendering the overall design untenable? What are the implications of mixing these modes? Can the results from one mode of qualitative research effectively assist the development of a subsequent quantitative study designed for a different mode?

The 21st century is a great time to be a qualitative researcher, a quantitative researcher, and particularly, a researcher with tents pitched in both camps. As a qualitative researcher, I look forward to growing further in my profession by continuing to embrace research methods that enhance my abilities as a qualitative researcher and positively impact the total research process. I encourage others to do the same. 