

# Qualitative Research

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of qualitative research, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Verstehen
2. Qualitative Research

## 1. VERSTEHEN

Qualitative research is a powerful way to understand what happens in the social world.

German sociologist Max Weber developed the concept of “**verstehen**,” which is a German word meaning “to understand.” Weber thought that good social science should not only observe and document the behavior of individuals, but needed to understand why they do what they do:

- What subjective motivations do people have?
- What's going on in their heads?
- What animates their action?
- What meaning do they give to events, to their lives and the social world?

The researcher, Weber believed, must come to share in the subjective meanings of others. If you're interested in these kinds of questions, then qualitative research is what you should be using to answer your questions.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Verstehen

To understand; understanding human action by examining the subjective meanings that people attach to their lives.

## 2. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

**Qualitative research** is research based on non-numerical data. It encompasses interviews, observations, and historical and cultural documents. It's very useful for exploring a topic in depth and for empathizing with the research subjects to understand how they perceive themselves, their identities and the social world.

When conducting qualitative research, sociologists will often use interviews or participant observations:

1. One-on-one interviews can either be structured with predetermined questions; or conversational and let the interviewee dictate their meanings, their worldview, and how they see what's going on.
2. Participant observations allow the researcher to observe somebody acting in their natural setting. The goal is not to influence what they do, only to observe. It's a good way to see how people actually behave and why they do what they do, which is the purview of historical sociology.

## IN CONTEXT

As a historical sociologist, you might be interested in the Vietnam War, and the social and cultural support or denial of the Vietnam War happening in America.

You could conduct interviews with people who were around back then, which would be a vital part of the research. However, another important part would be to go back and look at the documents--the pamphlets that people were producing at the time, the artifacts of that time period--to get a sense of what people were thinking and to understand the objective view of the war at that time.

This is an example of qualitative research. Sociologists will often use a combination of participant observation, interviews, and background historical research to answer their questions; these are not mutually exclusive ways to do research.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Qualitative Research

Research aimed at gathering non-numerical data typically in the form of interviews, focus groups, observations, and work with cultural and historical documents.



## SUMMARY

Today you learned about **qualitative research** and the concept of "**verstehen**," developed by German sociologist Max Weber.

Source: This work is adapted by Sophia author Zach Lamb.



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