

# Creating Library Services to Support Qualitative Researchers

Liz Cooper<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of New Mexico

**Abstract:** What is qualitative research? Why should the library support qualitative researchers and what are ways the library can provide this support? How can a librarian learn more about qualitative research and data in order to build a support program? A social sciences librarian shares lessons she learned creating a program of services and tools to support qualitative researchers at her university.

**Keywords:** Qualitative data, qualitative research, library services, new services, data librarian, data services, databrarianship

## 1. Introduction

Although social sciences and health researchers have used both quantitative and qualitative research methods and data for decades, quantitative data has had a robust history of support in libraries and qualitative data has not. We can date the emergence of programmatic quantitative data support in libraries in the U.S., Canada and Europe to around 1976, when librarians and archivists founded the International Association for Social Science Information Service and Technology, IASSIST (Adams, 2007; Kellam & Thompson, 2016). Since then, quantitative data and research support has continued to grow in libraries in many ways. In contrast, qualitative data support in libraries is still fledgling. It was only in 2016 that a Special Interest Group (SIG) for qualitative data librarians, the Qualitative Social Science and Humanities Data Interest Group (QSSHDIG), was formed in IASSIST. As Cain wrote in 2019, “in the world of data librarianship, quantitative data remains sovereign” (Cain et al., 2019). This article will address some of the reasons for this disparity, while also sharing my experience as a social sciences librarian learning about qualitative data and the



needs of qualitative researchers in order to better support them programmatically in the library.

First, what is qualitative data and research and how is it different from quantitative data and research in the social sciences? In her 2017 text, Lichtman examines definitions of qualitative research from different disciplines and prominent authors and crafts her own working definition:

Q[ualitative] R[esearch] is a way to study the social interactions of humans in naturally occurring situations. The researcher plays a critical role in the process by gathering data and making sense of or interpreting the phenomena that are observed and revealed. (Lichtman, 2014)

Qualitative and quantitative research methods are often defined in opposition to one another (Gerring, 2017). As Lichtman writes, compared to quantitative researchers, “qualitative researchers address different kinds of questions. They go about answering them in different ways. They do not deal with variables, treatment, or hypothesis testing (Lichtman, 2014).” While quantitative researchers are focused on numbers and things you can count (usually from data gathered in a survey), qualitative researchers are focused on human behaviors we cannot count, using data based on words, narratives, and images. It is often said that quantitative research addresses questions of what and how many using large populations to compare observations, while qualitative research addresses questions of how and why delving deeper into smaller samples of data that are often not comparable (Gerring, 2017). Another significant difference is that in qualitative research, the researcher’s role in interpreting the data gathered is acknowledged – the researcher is seen as embedded in the process; while in quantitative research, the idea is that the data gathered is objective and that the researcher stands on the outside (though all research has a bias from the researcher, in quantitative research this is often unacknowledged (Davies & Dodd, 2002; Haraway, 1988)). There are many other differences, as well as similarities, between the two methods and hundreds of books have been written on both. To dig deeper into defining and understanding these methods in the social sciences, Gerring’s 2017 review article on the use of both methods in political science (Gerring, 2017) is a wonderful start.

## **2. Libraries and Methods/Data Support**

Although I have been a social sciences librarian at research intensive universities since 2003, I only came to think about programmatic support for qualitative data and research in 2015, when graduate students in the social sciences began to ask me questions about it. In my own academic career, with an MLIS in Library and Information Science and an MA in Middle East Studies, I had coursework in statistics, but never received methods training related to qualitative research, and was therefore unfamiliar with qualitative methods. In

my first position as a social sciences librarian, I was a liaison to the anthropology department at a university with very high research activity. The anthropology department had scholars engaged in both quantitative and qualitative research. I worked regularly with faculty and graduate students engaged in quantitative research, and though I had limited expertise in that area, I had an excellent colleague in the library's data center with whom I collaborated regularly in instruction, consultation and collections issues related to quantitative data. Graduate students and faculty occasionally asked about access to qualitative data analysis (QDA) software such as ATLAS.ti, and I did investigate software options, leading our university library to acquire licenses to MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software around 2010. I was learning MAXQDA, in order to provide basic support to users, when I left this position. Interestingly, even though I saw the need for this software, I did not think of providing it as part of a plan to support qualitative research, I simply believed I was fulfilling a specific software request. The fact that the library had a data center and data librarians, including a lab space with software and hardware for working with quantitative data, strangely never led me to think that the library should also provide support and spaces for qualitative researchers. Perhaps my perspective came from my background as a systems librarian, but I believe it was the result of a much deeper institutionally created lacuna that did not allow me to conceptualize qualitative researchers as having needs I could support as a social sciences librarian. This gap was invisible to me, most probably because of the dominance of quantitative research in my institution and the social sciences in general, as well as because of my unfamiliarity with the method.

The quantitative focus in the social sciences grew out of positivist methods appropriated from the natural sciences (Lichtman, 2014). Being that the natural sciences have long held prestige and been the pre-eminent disciplines in the academic marketplace, in order to make a claim that the social sciences were also legitimate "sciences," quantitative methods often prevailed (Babones, 2016; Collyer, 2013; Lichtman, 2014; Maxwell, 2010). Collyer's 2013 study of university rankings related to research methodologies used in faculty publications demonstrates that the "natural science model" of research, which emphasizes "quantification, evaluation and standardization," has more synergy with the marketization of academia and its ties to the corporate and global marketplace, leading to quantitative research receiving more funding and being more prevalent at higher ranked universities, especially in the U.S. and Australia (Collyer, 2013). As a professor I worked with often stated, qualitative research has a history of being seen as less-respected, feminine, "loosey-goosey," and is less published in the top journals, which often have a quantitative bias and "in which quantitative standards are inappropriately applied to qualitative research" (Downing et al., 2019; Pratt, 2008). That said, the dominance of quantitative methods has been waning. In the U.K., qualitative methods have long been the standard in sociological research and in the U.S. there is more interest in qualitative and mixed methods than ever (Alasuutari, 2010). As Elman, et al. wrote of research in political science, "the canon has been reworked to

systematize and expand the repertoire of qualitative methods, ground them more firmly in contemporary philosophy of science, and illuminate their strengths relative to quantitative and formal methods” (Elman et al., 2010).

The bias towards quantitative methods in the social sciences has, unsurprisingly, also been reflected in libraries and their support for social sciences research and data (Geraci et al., 2012). Although library support for quantitative data existed in the 1980s and 1990s, it was in the 2000s that interest, positions and programmatic support grew (Kellam & Thompson, 2016). As a social sciences librarian during this period, I can attest that data support moved to the forefront for many social sciences librarians as a focus of our work. Most support related to data planning, management, archiving, preservation, and discovery – for quantitative data. When I began investigating library support for qualitative researchers in 2015, there was not much information available. However, it was at this same time that action in supporting qualitative data and researchers began to grow. Data librarians have been leading the way. In 2014 the Qualitative Data Repository (QDR) at Syracuse University, aimed specifically at archiving and sharing qualitative data, was established (Elman et al., 2010; Kirilova & Karcher, 2017). In 2016, the publication of Kellam and Thompson’s monograph, *Databrarianship: the academic data librarian in theory and practice*, included a foundational article on qualitative research and data support in libraries by Swygart-Hobaugh. The inclusion of this article in a monograph on data librarianship was a step towards seeing qualitative data support as a part of what data librarians do (Kellam & Thompson, 2016; Swygart-Hobaugh, 2016). Similarly, in 2017, Swygart-Hobaugh, Jill Conte and I, three members of the IASSIST QSSHDIG, created a series of four blogposts for the IASSIST blog aimed at data librarians with information on how they might support qualitative researchers’ methods needs; and in 2019 IASSIST Quarterly published a special issue focused on qualitative data (Conte, 2017; Cooper, 2017; Swygart-Hobaugh, 2017b). Additionally, in 2020 there was a concerted effort to get qualitative researchers to use the DMPTool to help with data management planning (Praetzellis, 2020). Although we are in a time of growth for qualitative data research support, there is still a long way to go and qualitative data support is often absent or not integrated into research data support services in most libraries. As Cain, et al. demonstrated in 2019, it is still difficult to find qualitative research support services on library websites and if it exists, it is often not integrated into quantitative data research support programs and websites (Cain et al., 2019).

### **3. Why the Library?**

As a study in 2000 demonstrated, many graduate students have not received the training in qualitative methods that they need to conduct their work, so they must become “entrepreneurs in creating their own learning experiences to ensure the most fundamental of understandings about qualitative research methodologies” (Cotner et al., 2000). Unfortunately, I found this was still the

case at my university in 2015, as many students approached me with fundamental questions related to qualitative methods and data, often while meeting with me for more traditional library support, such as finding books and articles related to their research question. Although qualitative and mixed methods coursework and training is increasingly required in academic programs, there are still many programs in which it is not offered. In addition, graduate students may find that their advisors, often trained when quantitative methods were even more dominant, have no training in these methods and cannot help them. As a social sciences librarian I received qualitative research related questions from graduate students related to how to conduct and record focus groups, how to transcribe interview recordings, whether a survey was an appropriate way to gather data for a research question, and which qualitative data analysis (QDA) software was best for a project and to how to use that software. They had many questions, all of which boiled down to: how can I learn more about qualitative research methods and collecting/handling qualitative data. These students were acting as the entrepreneurs Cotner described, reaching out to a librarian for support with qualitative research that they were not receiving elsewhere.

In 2015, when I began investigating the qualitative research support available at my university, I found that support did exist, but it was fragmented. Students had to dig to find it – they might have to track down faculty in other departments to consult (and I often helped make these connections), they might have to learn about a course in another department or an off-campus workshop, they might have to visit a lab in another unit on campus, or meet with a librarian to learn more about finding resources about different methods or ask about QDA software. Students should not have to cobble together the resources and support they need to do their work. As explained in section two, libraries have a long history of supporting quantitative research and data, so support for qualitative researchers is a natural fit and libraries are an appropriate place to host qualitative research and data services. In addition, libraries have a tradition of facilitating work across campus units and programs and of being central neutral spaces, often with the longest open hours on campus. If libraries can help facilitate, build and host programmatic support for qualitative research on campus, this can help contribute to student success.

Librarians are often asked to do more with less, and it would be easy to think: oh no, not something else to learn about and manage, I already have too much to do – and this is a valid response. Each institution has different resources, capacities, and needs. There is not one way to support social sciences researchers, and services can and do grow and change over time. Although I advocate for libraries to take on the role of supporting qualitative researchers, I believe this support can be offered at a variety of levels, which I will explain more in section five.

#### **4. What Do Qualitative Researchers Need?**

Novice qualitative researchers have a variety of needs, related to theory and practice, that center on: methods, tools, workflows, data management planning, finding resources and learning more (about qualitative and quantitative methods and data).

As Swygart-Hobaugh writes, many have not had training in qualitative methods for reasons including:

- their particular discipline does not widely embrace qualitative research,
- their discipline just recently began emphasizing mixed methods . . . when previously it was predominantly quantitative-based,
- they are in an interdisciplinary academic program without a strong research methods training component (Swygart-Hobaugh, 2017a).

As many are conducting qualitative research for the first time and have no training, they need methods support on everything from how qualitative methods differ from or complement quantitative methods to learning more about the different approaches to qualitative research (e.g. phenomenological study, grounded theory, case study, narrative analysis, ethnography); to learning about specific qualitative techniques, such as conducting a semi-structured interview or a focus group; to determining a research design and making sure that their methods match their aims.

These researchers also often need assistance choosing and using tools (hardware and software) for recording, transcribing, coding, analyzing and organizing their research. For example, I have had many questions about how to record an interview: which type of recording (video or just audio) would be best for a situation – is an audio recording sufficient for a focus group or is video needed? What kind of microphone would be best in the research environment? Which software is best for recording? Which software is best for transcribing and do you need a foot pedal (and what is a foot pedal?)? Can someone be hired to transcribe and what about automatic transcription? Where can one find the needed tools -- does the library have them to use or checkout? Similarly, students, especially those who have had some training in quantitative methods, often fundamentally misunderstand how QDA software works. They believe it will produce an output like that generated by quantitative analysis tools such as SPSS, and do not realize that QDA tools are essentially for organizing and managing data and workflow. Therefore, educating researchers about the role and purpose of QDA software and answering their questions about how to choose and use the software is often a large part of supporting novice qualitative researchers.

As these methods and tools are new to the researcher, novice researchers also often have questions related to workflow – the most efficient and effective ways to integrate their chosen method of research with the appropriate tools at every stage of the process. For example, how and when to anonymize data; when, why and how to write memos; how and when to create codes; how to code in a team; and how to integrate coding with analysis. They also have questions related to how to organize and manage the data they collect and how to archive and share it when they are finished using it, especially if a funding organization or institutional review board (IRB) has asked them to submit a data management plan.

A more traditional role for librarians, helping researchers find primary and secondary resources, is also very important. Qualitative researchers often need assistance finding existing quantitative or qualitative data sets (either for secondary analysis or as a model), published studies modeling the methods they will be using, and primary sources (digital and in print) that they can use for qualitative analysis. In addition, they need support finding more information, texts, learning opportunities (workshops or tutorials), and support groups/communities in order to learn more about qualitative methods, tools, and workflows.

## **5. What Support Can You Build?**

It can seem that a novice qualitative researcher's needs are endless. Supporting them could be a full-time job. Some institutions, such as the University of North Carolina's Odum Institute for Research in Social Science, housed in the University's library, have full-time staff dedicated to supporting many of the needs addressed above. Most institutions, however, do not have the resources for this type of support. Support can start very small and build slowly, depending on an institution's needs and resources.

Building support can start with investigating the needs of your institution related to qualitative research support. This will help you understand what support may already be being provided on campus and help you identify any gaps. Before you begin, it can help to learn some basics about qualitative research so that you will understand what you find. As you investigate, you will learn if there are qualitative research needs and if so, who, if anyone, on campus is meeting them. Talk to your library colleagues (especially social sciences librarians, public services librarians, data librarians), to learn if they have encountered any qualitative research needs or have any experience or interest in working with qualitative research, if so, these people can be allies as you work to build services. Meeting with social science department (and other related departments) chairs, faculty and graduate students to learn their needs as well as learn about departmental methods courses requirements and current research projects can also be very useful. In addition, meeting with other support units on

campus – statistical services, graduate student services, and other colleges/units/departments that deal with research and research methods can provide valuable information. For example, at my university I found that the College of Nursing and the College of Education both provided their students some support for qualitative research (methods consulting, support groups, labs, etc.), and when I asked if students from other colleges could use their services they were open to it, they just had never considered it.

It helps to document whatever support you find, so that you can share it with others. If you did not know a service existed on your campus, it is likely that others do not know of it either and creating a clearinghouse of information can help students, faculty, staff and other library and campus colleagues navigate these resources more easily. Gathering and organizing this information on a webpage or research guide is an excellent first step. Perhaps you can create a list of methods courses offered across campus, labs/software available in departments, or a directory of faculty members with strengths in qualitative research who are able to act as a resource for others (Cooper, 2017). It is useful if you can get other units, especially quantitative support or graduate support units, on campus to link to your guide.

Once you have identified existing services and gaps, in addition to starting a guide documenting campus resources, you can gather your allies to prioritize needs and brainstorm potential services. You may want to think of providing services in tiers, depending on the expertise and resources you have available. For example, related to supporting the methods needs of novice researchers, an entry-level low-tier support option could be providing a bibliography of key methods books and articles at your library. This may lead to you purchase new books or resources that you find are missing from your collection. At my institution, this led me to advocate for subscribing to the Sage Research Methods Online (SRM) ebook and multimedia collection, a great one-stop resource for students and faculty looking for information on all aspects of research methods, including teaching resources for faculty. Sage is a major publisher of methods books, and our graduate students love this online collection because before we subscribed, they often found that our print methods monographs were either checked out or had been stolen (our methods books were some of our most frequently unreturned books). Another low-tier support effort could be to include tips on a research guide about searching in library databases for articles that utilize qualitative methods. Providing bibliographies, collections, and tips on searching are more traditional library support roles and should be fairly easy to integrate into existing workflows. A higher-tier level of support might be to hire graduate students or create a staff position to provide methods-related consultations. Many of the more robust support programs have methodologists that researchers can meet with for help in research design as well as assistance using research tools such as hardware and software.



In addition, providing lists of conferences, workshops and online webinars (both on and off-campus) is useful for novice researchers wanting to learn more. Workshops led by ICPSR, ResearchTalk's Qualitative Research Summer Intensive, the Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research (IQMR), and conferences such as the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI) and the Ethnographic & Qualitative Research Conference (EQRC) may be useful to novice researchers.

Related to hardware and software tools, QDA software is probably the tool people ask about and need support with the most. Low-tier support for QDA could include providing links on a guide to information about access to affordable cloud-based tools that individuals could subscribe to on their own (many QDA software packages now have monthly subscription models) and links to tutorials and videos on how to use those tools. A higher level of support might include purchasing a few licenses to a QDA software package to be installed in lab for users to learn and do basic training with. My library has done these things, and I provide basic training in one QDA package (NVIVO) to get users started and become familiar with the package and know where to go for more support. A higher level of support could be helping to coordinate a site-wide campus license for a QDA software package and providing regular workshops to train users how to use and integrate it into their research workflows.

Helping qualitative researchers build community is also something you can do at different levels. A researcher may be the only qualitative researcher in a department, feel isolated and have an interest in connecting with other researchers across campus, or, researchers may have an interest in participating in a community of practice with others they can learn from.

Libraries, often seen as neutral ground on campus, have an opportunity to play a unique role as facilitators building this community by connecting people and leveraging resources from across campus. Some activities you might consider to help build a qualitative research community include:

- Establish/host/contribute to a campus listserv for those with questions or who need help working with qualitative methods and tools.
- Partner with faculty/graduate students or other campus departments to establish/host a qualitative research support group on campus. These could be informal brown bags, reading groups, or a place for attendees to meet others and ask questions of those interested in similar issues.
- Consider helping to establish a mentor program partnering those new to qualitative research with more experienced researchers.
- Host/co-sponsor a qualitative research event/symposium which can help foster a vibrant qualitative research community and demonstrate the library's commitment to this community.

- Offer library spaces and resources to support qualitative groups, events, etc. (Cooper, 2017).

Conducting consultations with researchers about these issues and referring them to other resources is a major part of supporting them. This also includes working with faculty, both novice researchers who may be new to qualitative research themselves, as well as experienced qualitative researchers who may teach methods courses and need help identifying sample data sets and teaching resources or who may want to stay up to date on the latest software and digital support tools around qualitative research.

Creating services to support qualitative researchers is really about creating a plan and a base level of services that you can grow over time, as needs change and resources permit.

## **6. Learning about Qualitative Research**

How can a librarian learn about qualitative methods – especially when there is so much to learn? When I began my journey with qualitative research, I did not know much. I began by trying to learn about existing support on my campus related to qualitative research while simultaneously searching our library catalog and Googling to find resources to read and learn more. Identifying foundational methods texts and reviewing them was a helpful start. I also found several workshop and conference opportunities that were focused learning opportunities that helped me to build a foundation. My experience with the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research's (ICPSR) summer training programs for quantitative methods, led me to find that they also offered a multi-day workshop on qualitative research methods. I was fortunate enough to travel to attend this workshop, hosted at the University of North Carolina's Odum Institute for Research in Social Science. I also found and attended a week-long workshop on qualitative methods that was offered for graduate students participating in the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center for Health Policy at my university. I saw an advertisement for the workshop, aimed at graduate students, and reached out to the organizers explaining my desire to learn more about qualitative research methods in order to better support graduate students. The organizers accepted me into the program, which was a great opportunity, not only for me to learn more about methods, but also for me to better get to know graduate students on campus who have an interest in qualitative research.

I also did what I could to find a community of librarians and academics interested in qualitative research. I attended conferences, such as the International Conference of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI), where I was able to attend workshops on QDA software tools as well as meet PhD methodologists, QDA software developers, and academics in other disciplines that use qualitative methods in their research. I joined IASSIST, the professional organization for data librarians, and became a member of their new special

interest group for qualitative research (QSSHDIG) where I met other librarians interested in qualitative methods. The IFLA Social Sciences Libraries Standing Committee, of which I have been a chair and member, has also recently begun to offer webinars related to qualitative research. I also joined the [QUALRS-L@listserv.UGA.EDU](mailto:QUALRS-L@listserv.UGA.EDU) to connect with a wide network of qualitative researchers and investigated graduate level coursework, like that offered by the University of Georgia's PhD program in qualitative research and evaluation as well as methods courses offered by different departments at my university. I am always on the lookout for individuals and communities that present an opportunity for me to learn more. You can find training and workshop opportunities both in person and online in many international venues.

In addition, I have found one of the best ways to learn about qualitative research methods is to use them! I began doing my own research projects using qualitative methods, and learned more by doing my first project than I could ever learn from a book. Conducting interviews -- recording, transcribing, coding, analyzing -- and then writing up my results was an exceptional learning experience. Similarly, leading workshops and instruction sessions on campus about coding and using QDA software has forced me to learn and keep up with developments in software in order to teach them.

## **7. Conclusion**

Qualitative research and mixed methods continue to be more valued in the academy and qualitative research support continues to grow in libraries. A decade ago it was rare for a social sciences librarian to consider it her role to support qualitative research tools and methods, but including this support in a social sciences librarian's repertoire is now more common. In 2015, when I began my journey supporting qualitative research, I found very little to emulate, but now there are many more librarians taking on this role and creating innovative services.

There is not one way to create services for qualitative researchers and not all libraries will have this need. A common-sense approach to assessing and prioritizing needs and building services that fit within an institution's needs and resources is key. In my own institution, we have been building these services slowly. The COVID-19 pandemic slowed us down considerably, but I look forward to re-assessing and revitalizing our services in the upcoming year.

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