



The Case for Qualitative Designs in Human Trafficking Research

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1 Introduction

Numerous problems in access, validity, and reliability limit the use of quantitative designs and methods in human trafficking research. Since human trafficking is largely invisible even to organizations focused on the problem, access to the sample is difficult. Measuring the extent of human trafficking might be easier for some types and impossible for others. For example, the arrest and prosecution of sex traffickers might require testimony from survivors who are unable or too afraid to identify the key players or do not know the leaders. Qualitative designs should be used to understand the experiences and outcomes of the survivors. Assessing knowledge of practitioners points supervisors and faculty to gaps and deficits in order to improve training and policies, not just for teaching purposes but for expanding the broader state of knowledge about human trafficking.

This book is designed as a text for any discipline and students at all levels. Including a chapter on graduate research from relevant disciplines provides a sense of how qualitative research can build knowledge in those disciplines. In this chapter, qualitative theses and dissertations are examples of how students can design their own studies. No attempt was made to conduct a comprehensive review nor to address quality issues. It is assumed that the faculty who signed off on the studies accepted their merit. Readers can judge the merits of rigor for themselves. An array of recent studies is presented to show current designs used in the disciplines. Of course, the published literature includes data-based articles using many designs, and methods and qualitative design textbooks are widely available.

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2 Overview of Qualitative Research

The basic designs are presented in Table 1 to show the derivation of the design, that is, the discipline from which it was developed. Although qualitative studies can stand alone in terms of merit, it is helpful to think of qualitative research as the first step in theory development. Certainly these techniques represent a beginning understanding of the phenomenon and while qualitative studies are valuable without further research, they also point to directions for follow-up research such as instrument development and experimental design.

A key feature of qualitative research is the way people are described: *participant* not *subject*. Qualitative researchers do not *do things to* the people they study, unlike, for example, experimental investigators who manipulate variables in order to study relationships among variables.

Table 1 Disciplines, designs, and methods

Discipline	Design	Primary methods
Philosophy	Phenomenology	Interviews
Anthropology	Ethnography Life history	Participant observation, interviews, may use quantitative measures as well
Sociology	Grounded theory	Interviews
History	Oral history Biography	Interviews, record review
Humanities disciplines	Case study	Interviews, record review, content analysis
All	“Qualitative”	Content analysis/thematic analysis/discourse analysis
Focus groups		
Participatory action research		

3 Rigor

Accuracy and replicability are essential in documenting rigor in qualitative research [1]. Does the study reflect what the participant meant at that time? Is the study able to be replicated, that is, is enough information provided in the report for another researcher to conduct a study with the same methods even though the results might vary with the participant's evolving experience and opinions. Reflexivity is crucial in qualitative research—does the researcher understand and own his or her biases? It is critical to be self-aware of own opinions and biases when conducting interviews so as not to filter out what the participant is actually saying. When reviewing qualitative studies, readers should look for discussion of accuracy and reliability to determine how much to trust the findings and conclusions.

4 Brief Descriptions of Designs and Methods

4.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology describes the “Lived Experience” of a person or group. The method is interviewing, usually referred to as conducting a semi-structured interview. Interview questions are designed around the general topic but not necessarily asked in order. The goal is to elicit the participant's processing his or her experience. For example, a woman trafficked for domestic labor might be asked a series of questions about her entire journey from home to her current residence and how she felt and what she thought along the way.

4.2 Ethnography/Life History

Ethnography describes a culture or, in the case of a focused ethnography an aspect of a culture. A single culture is defined broadly and might be a community, organization, or region. For example, a small rural town in India might be a center for the organ trade with traffickers setting up shop to arrange for locals to travel to a city for surgery. Research questions for this study would include the history of the community that led to the problem, the key players, and how the community reacts. A focused ethnography, on the other hand, might describe the organ trade in kidneys in the Middle East. Both types can employ mixed methods—e.g., quantitative case record review of vital statistics, population counts, surveys of local leaders, etc.

Life history is the story of one person who represents the culture of interest. For example, a resident of the town in India might describe his life before and after his decision. His story is framed within the cultural context of that community as well as the cultural context of health care about organ surgery. Life history is distinguished from autobiography in that a researcher interviews the participant or key informant and presents the story. Autobiography is written by the person telling his or her own story.

4.3 Oral History/Biography

Oral history design accesses the memories and experiences of people who lived through a specific time. The COVID-19 pandemic is such a dramatic time in world history that those who lived through it have an opportunity to document so much about it for future generations. One example might be to interview therapists who worked with sex trafficking survivors during the pandemic.

Biography is similar to life history in that the researcher tells the story of an individual. While life history is framed within the cultural context, biography has a historical context. Life history involves interviewing the participant, not always possible in biography since the person might no longer be living.

4.4 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory design is a way of developing theory “grounded” in the experience of real people by systematically collecting and analyzing data at the same time. The goal is to develop theoretical propositions that build theory to explain the phenomenon of interest. The study by Laurent in the table below examined psychological coercion of sex workers.

4.5 Case Study

Case study as a research project describes a single person’s experience or status and might include multiple sources of information. Life histories and biographies might be considered case studies, but a case study does not necessarily include a frame of reference. In contrast to case study is case report. Medical journals often publish case reports, especially when a patient has an exotic disease or there are unusual features to his or her condition.

4.6 Participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an approach that actively involves members of a community as stakeholders to the outcome. PAR might include both quantitative and qualitative methods so it is similar to other designs, but the defining characteristic is involvement of the community. For example, a group of parents and teachers in a community might work with a researcher to develop an awareness program about human trafficking for children. The investigator might start by conducting a focus group with parents, interview teachers about what is currently taught, administer a questionnaire to students to measure knowledge and obtain police data about the extent of the problem.

4.7 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research as an umbrella term is often used when the investigator does not know or wish to use other specific designs or is focused only on the method of data collection. For example, focus groups are a technique to gather opinion data from stakeholders. Focus groups are often used in marketing research to determine quality of a product. An example for human trafficking might be to conduct a focus group in a shelter for survivors of domestic minor sex trafficking to generate best practices for follow-up services.

5 Data Collection

Primary data collection methods in qualitative research are interviews, participant observation, open-question surveys, and focus groups (Table 2). Data are analyzed by identifying concepts and themes. The terms for coding data are content analysis,

Table 2 Summary of studies by discipline

Social Work
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Murray, Lakeia (2022). Yeshiva University. Social Workers' Knowledge of the Psychological Impact of the Aftermath of Human Trafficking: A Grounded Theory Approach (Grounded Theory) [2] 2. Findley, Katherine (2018). Rutgers. Trafficking in Persons for the Removal of Organs in India. (Grounded Theory) [3] 3. Lyons, Aldina (2021). Capella University. Child Welfare Assessments with Human Trafficking Victims: An Action Research Study. (Participatory Action Research) [4] 4. Mulhern, Margaret (2014). University of Central Florida. Social Work Student Perceptions of Labor Trafficking. (Content Analysis) [5] 5. Ray, Nilanjana (2008). Washington University. Vulnerability to Human Trafficking: A Qualitative Study. (Grounded Theory) [6]
Criminal Justice
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Broad, Rosemary (2016). University of Manchester. A Study of Individuals Convicted for Human Trafficking Offenses through the UK Criminal Justice System: Characteristics, Relationships and Criminal Justice Perspectives. (Content Analysis) [7] 2. Van Der Watt, Marcel (2018). University of South Africa. Investigating Human Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation: From Lived Experiences Towards a Complex Systems Understanding. (Phenomenology) [8] 3. Loibl, E. C. (2019). Maastricht University. The transnational illegal adoption market: A criminological study of the German and Dutch intercountry adoption systems. (Case Study) [9]
Law
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gaitis, Konstantine (2020). University of Edinburgh. How is Human Trafficking Regulated in the UK? A Critical Examination of the UK's Anti-Trafficking Response. (Content Analysis and Case Study) [10] 2. Al-Zoubi, Muath Yahia Yoseph (2015). Brunel University. An Analysis of the Crime of Trafficking in Persons under International Law with a Special Focus on Jordanian Legislation. (Content Analysis) [11] 3. Kinney Edith (2011). University of California-Berkeley. Stuck in Traffic: Sexual Politics and Criminal Injustice in Social Movements Against Human Trafficking. (Ethnography) [12] 4. Sultan, Amina (2020). Near East University Institute of Graduate Studies International Law. Analysis of Bonded Labour and Slavery in Pakistan. (Content Analysis) [13]

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Education
1. Morris, Carson (2020). University of Nevada-Reno. A Qualitative Study of the Lived Relational Experiences of Sex Trafficked Women. (Phenomenology) [14]
2. Williams, Jodi (2017). University of Missouri-Columbia. Human Trafficking Survivors: Aftercare Services and Institutional Betrayal: A Qualitative Perspective on the Effectiveness of a Victim Advocacy Program. (Content Analysis) [15]
3. Thomas, Danielle (2022). Liberty University. A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Lived Experiences of Professionals Supporting Minor-Aged Human Trafficking Survivors in Northeast Non-Metropolitan Communities. (Phenomenology) [16]
4. Spires, Robert (2012). University of Georgia. Human Trafficking and Education: A Qualitative Case Study of Two NGP Programs in Thailand. (Ethnography) [17]
Public Health
1. Recknor, Frances (2017). University of Texas. Human Trafficking: Responses by the Public Health and Health Care Sectors. (Case Study) [18]
2. Ashi, Anastasia Iliwo (2020). Walden University. The Lived Experience of Child Marriage and its Health Effects Among Young Mothers in Nigeria. (Phenomenology) [19]
Nursing
1. Lipkin Leveque, Noelle (2017). University of San Diego. The Health of Human Trafficking Victims in San Diego, California: A Retrospective Study. (Qualitative) [20]
2. Ernewein, Charita (2021). University of Central Florida. Survivors of Human Trafficking: Reintegration into the Community and Society. (Content Analysis) [21]
Medicine
1. Ceasar, Daniel (2019). Harvard University. Intersections of Human Trafficking and the Opioid Epidemic, and Barriers to Data Collection in Human Trafficking. (Content Analysis) [22]
Humanities
1. Policy: Konneh, Shirley (2017). Walden University. An Exploration of Efforts to Combat Human Trafficking in a Small Community. (Content Analysis) [23]
2. Sociology: Price Kathleen (2019). University of Massachusetts-Boston. Defining Worthy Victims: State-Level Legislative Decisions to Prevent the Criminalization of Commercially Sexually Exploited Children in the United States. (Mixed Designs-Content Analysis of Interviews) [24]
3. Psychology: Alves, Catarina Durante Burgue (2020). Southern Illinois University. A Qualitative Analysis of Survivors' Experiences with Sex Trafficking. (Grounded Theory) [25]
4. Psychology: Wilson, Ruth (2021). University of Hertfordshire. The Role of Oath-Taking in Human Trafficking Experiences of Survivors. (Thematic Analysis) [26]
5. Laurento, Rebecca Ann, (2021). Walden University. Psychological Coercion Among Trafficked Sex Workers: A Grounded Study Approach. (Grounded Theory) [27]
6. Global Affairs: Poucki, Sasa (2012). Rutgers. The Quest for Root Causes of Human Trafficking: A Study on the Experience of Marginalized Groups, with a Focus on the Republic of Serbia. (Mixed Design-Ethnographic Interviews) [28]
7. Anthropology: Marconi, Veronica (2020). Oregon State University. Demystifying the Sensationalism of Human Trafficking: An Anthropological Study on the Systemic Exploitation of Migrant Labor in Tuscany Italy. (Ethnography) [29]

thematic analysis, and discourse analysis. For example, an interview would be recorded, then transcribed so that the investigator can code the participant's words into categories that lead to concepts, that lead to propositions, that ultimately lead to theory. That theory might be limited to that participant or group or used as a building block for a comprehensive theory about the phenomenon under investigation.

6 Summary

Qualitative research methods and designs are useful in beginning theory development and as a foundation for developing interventions that help specific vulnerable populations. Among the most vulnerable are survivors of human trafficking. This chapter introduced readers to a variety of designs used in different disciplines. Application of those designs are based upon the most relevant research questions for the discipline.

Discussion Questions

- Compare and contrast the primary design used in your discipline to the other designs and how they are used.
- For any of the above studies, suggest three studies that might be appropriate as follow-up research.
- Propose a qualitative study for a type of human trafficking or a region not covered in the above studies.

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