



WHY QUALITATIVE INQUIRY IS THE HERO FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative research is a form of inquiry that analyzes information that is conveyed by language and behavior in a natural setting. It helps to interpret covert information about beliefs, values, feelings, and motivations in the behavior of the subject being studied, something that quantitative methods are unable to do. While qualitative methods are gaining usage in a variety of disciplines and traditions because they offer a way of unearthing information that other methods cannot reach and are finding favor with researchers to substantiate their work, the use of these methods continue to be questioned and distrusted by some, because they usually does not provide a strong foundation for concrete decision making. The present study tries to assess the importance of qualitative methods in the projects undertaken by management students as part of their course work.

KEYWORDS: *Qualitative, Quantitative, interpretation, deductive, inductive*

INTRODUCTION

The qualitative approach to research is an analytical methodology commonly used for social science research. It seeks to obtain a comprehensive understanding social behavior and analyzing underlying attributes present in the topic of research. An interesting aspect about Qualitative Research Methods is that there is no one conclusive or 'fixed' definition. This is a result of the inherent nature of qualitative research that avoids fixed rules and restrictions. *Thus, flexibility is the core of the qualitative approach.*

Essentially, qualitative research refers to that form of inquiry that analyzes information that is conveyed by language and behavior in a natural setting. It helps to draw expressive information about the beliefs, values, feelings, and motivations hidden in the behavior of the subject being studied, something that quantitative methods fail to do. Qualitative methods emerge from a variety of disciplines and traditions. Qualitative inquiry has often been championed as a way of "reaching the parts other methods cannot reach." While qualitative methods are used by many researchers to substantiate their work it also continues to be distrusted by some, because it usually does not provide a strong or generalizable foundation for concrete decision making.

Some qualitative approaches use technical methods (such as statistical content analysis) to

determine the significance of findings, while others rely on researchers thoughtful reflection. Ethnography is a form of inquiry that can combine these approaches.

Ethnography is a semi-structured way of learning about people and their culture. With specific questions in mind, ethnographic researchers immerse themselves in an environment to discover the meanings, conventions of behavior, and ways of thinking important to individuals of a group as they emerge in unrehearsed encounters

However, broad definitions of the approach do exist. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) define qualitative research as "an approach to social science research that emphasizes collecting descriptive data in natural settings, uses inductive thinking, and emphasizes understanding the subjects' point of view".

Essentially, the main distinction of the qualitative approach and the quantitative approach is that the former not only explores the *what, where* and *when*- which may be derived from both approaches, but more effectively qualitative research also intuitively explores the more elusive *why* and *how*. Qualitative research also relies on smaller variable sampling compared to large complex data used by quantitative research.



MAIN FEATURES OF QUALITATIVE APPROACH

Three main features of qualitative approach and

1. *Focus on Context and Meaning rather than getting to the “truth”*
2. *Flexibility of the Research Design*
3. *Important Role of the Researcher(s)*

Understanding these features of qualitative research will help us to understand the strengths and limitations of this form of inquiry. Let us examine the three features:

1. Focus on Context and Meaning rather than getting to the conclusive “truth”: Qualitative approaches stress on human condition and reality so instead of unearthing “*the truth*” or a final, definitive conclusion from participants, the qualitative researcher collects information from which some level of knowledge can be gained. The information is not collected in a vacuum, rather in a particular context. Research data depends on several situational variables such as the physical environment and the mode or manner of gathering data. Undertaking qualitative research does not emphasize finding a definitive conclusion and that the pre-determined hypotheses are significant in understanding and analyzing the data.

2. Flexibility of Research Design: “Qualitative researchers have one great advantage over quantitative colleagues. They can add new pieces to the research puzzle or conjure entire new puzzles— while gathering data—even late in the analysis. The flexibility of qualitative research permits you to follow leads that emerge.” Flexibility in research design is a distinctive feature of qualitative research, allowing for exploratory research in a ‘Naturalistic’ setting. This is significant as qualitative research primarily aims at producing findings that are not pre-determined and are applicable beyond the immediate boundaries of the conducted study. This flexibility also permits the researchers to dig deeper and interpret things in greater detail than a rigid and structured research approach would, wherein the research ‘unfolds naturally’, is ‘non-manipulative’ and ‘non-constraining’ for the researcher, allowing new themes to emerge while research is underway. For example in a study about the status of women in society, the qualitative approach made obtaining and interpreting the data to understand the societal expectations from women more convenient and less restrictive. This type of research also allows the researcher to focus on a very different aspect later in the research than what had initially been planned.

3. Important Role of the Researcher(s): The role of researchers is perhaps one of the most unique aspects which distinguish qualitative research. As this approach results in production of text rather than numerical outputs, the role of the researcher is instrumental in

analyzing and interpreting data. Qualitative researchers require a whole new way of thinking about what counts as evidence. Qualitative research requires the researcher to possess a skill set beyond traditional requirements such as organization, data collection etc. The researcher using this approach is required to be adept in active communication and participation in the research (with the subjects) and must possess the skill to draw out data and find connections within retrieved information. The researcher’s own opinions and thoughts are extremely important. However, if they are not acknowledged and checked, they may cause an imbalance or bias which is a limitation of this research method. In fact the relationship between the researchers is of paramount importance in this approach.

TYPES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Several types of qualitative research have been observed. Let us examine the various types of Qualitative Research:-

Phenomenological Method

The goal of phenomenological method of research is to describe how any one participant experiences a specific event. This method uses interviews, observation and surveys to gather information from subjects. Phenomenology refers to how participants feel about things during an event or activity. An example of the use of this method may be when businesses use this method to develop processes to help sales representatives effectively close sales using styles that fit their personality.

Ethnographic Model

The ethnographic model is one of the most popular and widely recognized methods of qualitative research; it immerses subjects in a culture that is unfamiliar to them. The goal is to learn and describe the culture’s characteristics in the way that anthropologists observe culture and motivation of a group. This method often involves the researcher as a subject for extended periods of time. In a business model, ethnography is vital in order to understand customers. Testing products personally or in beta groups before releasing them to the public is a good example of ethnographic research.

Grounded Theory Method

The grounded theory method attempts to explain why a course of action evolved the way it did. Grounded theory looks at large subject numbers. Theoretical models are developed based on existing data in existing modes of genetic, biological or psychological science. Businesses use grounded theory when conducting user or satisfaction surveys that target why consumers use company products or services. This data may help a company to maintain customer satisfaction and loyalty.



Case Study Model

Unlike grounded theory, the case study model provides an in-depth look at a specific test subject. The subject could be an individual or family, business or organization, or even a town or city. Data is collected from various sources and compiled using the details to create a bigger conclusion. Businesses often use case studies when marketing to new clients to show how their business solutions solve a problem for the subject.

Historical Model

The historical method of qualitative research describes past events in order to understand present patterns and anticipate future choices. This model answers questions based on a hypothetical idea and then uses resources to test the idea for any potential deviations. Businesses can use historical data of previous ad campaigns and the targeted demographic and split-test it with new campaigns to determine the most effective campaign.

Narrative Model

The narrative model occurs over extended periods of time and compiles information as it happens. Like a story narrative, it takes subjects at a starting point and reviews situations as obstacles or opportunities occur, although the final narrative doesn't always remain in chronological order. Businesses use the narrative method to define buyer personas and use them to identify innovations that appeal to a target market

DRAWBACKS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Like any other method, the qualitative approach also tends to have its drawbacks. The biggest problem with qualitative research method is that of **bias, reliability, validity and lack of restriction (on the research design and researcher).**

Bias is extremely important to consider as it impacts all the concepts.

- 1) It can occur at any point of the research- from the final interpretations and findings to even sometimes in the inherent design as bias can be displayed in the selection of the participants, data collection tools etc.;
- 2) Eliminating bias is extremely hard as the researcher may not understand or acknowledge her/his bias.
- 3) Bias hampers the validity of results as the selection of tools or methods may result in a finding which is not applicable to an entire section of the society.

- 4) The reliability and relativity of the information is also unsure as the role of the researcher plays a significant role..
- 5) There is a greater chance for bias to exist when there are no restrictions or fundamental guidelines that the research has to stick to in terms of identifying key aspects or to underline statements or interpretations.

CONCLUSION

Qualitative research emerged because the everyday reality which produces statistical relationships between the variables of quantitative analysis began to be given more attention. Since the rise of qualitative research has primarily taken place at the expense of non-empirical or theoretical rather than quantitative articles, one can argue that it has contributed to an overall systematization of social research. Overall, qualitative inquiry simply carries on one aspect of social science, the mission to study 'the social body,' the practices that make up social institutions and produce the regularities reflected in statistical relations. Qualitative research is extremely useful primarily in finding answers to pressing social issues. Qualitative approach helps the researcher to be more interpretative and exploratory, detecting deeper connections between society and social norms whereas quantitative methods would have been more objective limiting me in understanding and identifying unique contexts and situations. Undertaking qualitative research in the form of discourse analysis thus makes it possible to analyze the *bigger picture* and does not confine the interpretation to only measurable aspects of a topic.

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