

Qualitative Research Process

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Abstract:

This article provides with an overview of the qualitative research methods. Over last few decades, qualitative research is getting very popular in the fields of business, sociology, psychology and others. This article, in its introduction, gives a general idea about the qualitative research. Then it discusses the main differences between qualitative and quantitative research methods. The article also discusses about the ethical issues important for qualitative research. Lastly it discusses about the several approaches and data collection methods of qualitative research.

Keywords:

Qualitative research, quantitative research.

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Introduction:

The main objective of this writing is to give a general overview of qualitative research process. In general, research can be classified into two broad classes and they are quantitative and qualitative. Though Quantitative research has a relatively longer history, in recent years, qualitative research gained momentum. Typically quantitative research methods are used within the positivist research paradigm and qualitative methods are used in the interpretivist paradigm (Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran, 2000).

Positivism offers assurance of unambiguous and accurate knowledge of the world (Crotty, 1998). The origin of positive research lies in the natural sciences. This research paradigm uses precise, objective measures and is usually associated with quantitative data and this research is based on the assumption that there is a set of universal laws out there waiting to be discovered (Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran, 2000). Interpretivist research believes that it is more likely that people experience physical and social reality in different ways, and, that is why, rather than producing general, predictive laws about human behavior, interpretivist research presents a rich and complex description of how people think, react and feel under certain contextually specific situations (Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran, 2000).

Willig (2001) says that: “Qualitative research is concerned with meaning in context. It involves the interpretation of data.... Qualitative research acknowledges a subjective element in the research process. References to creativity and subjectivity can easily invoke romantic notions of artistic endeavor and intuitive insight, which, in turn, are often contrasted with notions of scientific rigors and objectivity”. According to Creswell (2003), qualitative procedures stand in stark contrast to the methods of quantitative research as qualitative enquiry employs different knowledge claims, strategies of enquiry, and methods of data collection and analysis. Qualitative research seeks to collect an in-depth insight into human behavior and the causes that direct that behavior. Qualitative research has its heredity in social science and is more concerned with finding out why people behave as they do. It is concerned with the knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, fears, etc. of people.

Creswell (1998) states that qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem, and in this case, the researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of information and conducts the study in a natural setting. In this case, the researchers depend on the causes behind various aspects of behavior.

Willig (2001) asserts that, qualitative researchers are interested in how people make sense of the world and how they experience events. An advantage and uniqueness of qualitative research is that it lets the subjects being studied to provide with better and richer answers to questions given to them by the researcher. Thus it helps to go for effective insights that might have been ignored by any other method. It is said that qualitative researchers examine the ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions and not just the ‘what’, ‘where’, and ‘when’ questions. For this reason qualitative researchers demand for smaller but focused samples rather than large random samples. These days Qualitative research can be found in all the social sciences – economics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, politics, geography and law – and in the applied fields that derive from them such as nursing research, pharmacy practice research, social work research and so on (Murphy, et. al., 1998).

Quantitative and Qualitative Research: A Comparison:

Generally in doing a quantitative research an overarching structure is needed but it is not the case of a qualitative research. Rather, each type of qualitative research is conducted following specific philosophical bearing that are connected to each observable fact. Most qualitative research results are presented as themes. Statistical analysis is normally avoided. The reason, in this case, is that the participants do not make up a randomly selected representative sample. In most of the cases, the sample size is quite small. It is also not necessary that all the participants will be inquired exactly with the identical questions. One of the greatest strengths of the qualitative approach is the richness and depth of explorations and descriptions and those who are not familiar with qualitative methodology may be surprised by the sheer volume of data and the detailed level of analysis that results even when research is

confined to a small number of subjects (Myers, 2002). Ragin (1994) distinguishes between quantitative and qualitative research as follows:

“The key features common to all qualitative methods can be seen when they are contrasted with quantitative methods. Most quantitative data techniques are data condensers. They condense data in order to see the big picture....Qualitative methods, by contrast, are best understood as data enhancers. When data are enhanced, it is possible to see key aspects of cases more clearly”.

Kumar (2005) states that qualitative and quantitative research methodologies differ in the philosophy that underpins their mode of inquiry as well as, to some extent, in methods, models and procedures used. Creswell (2002) described an eight-step model of research and distinguished the characteristics of these steps between the qualitative and quantitative approaches (Figure 1):

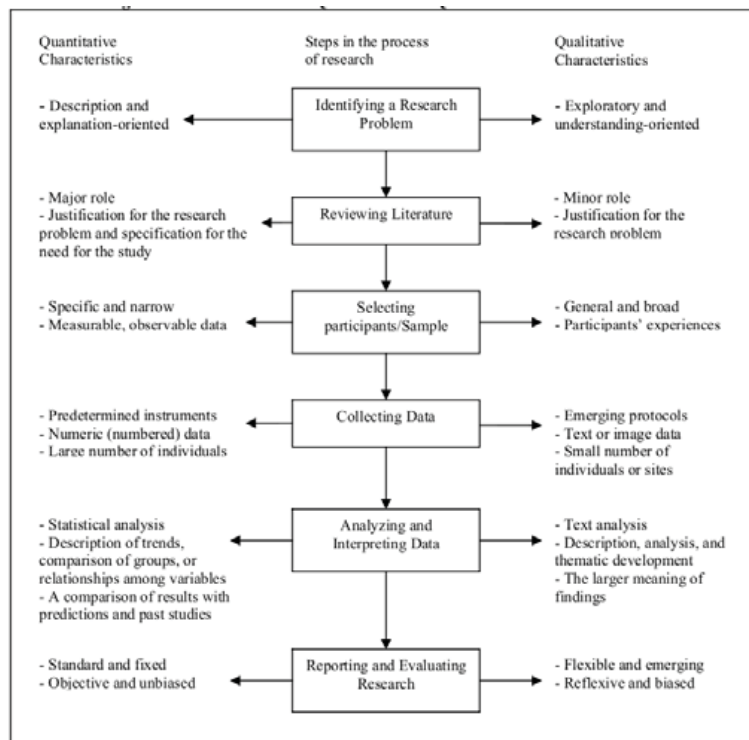


Figure 1: Characteristics of Qualitative and Quantitative Research

Source: Creswell, J.W. (2002), *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*, Prentice Hall, NJ.

Kumar (2005) also states that:

“Though the research process is broadly the same in both, quantitative and qualitative researches are differentiated in terms of the methods of data collection, the procedures adopted for data processing and analysis, and the style of communication of the findings. If your research problem lends itself to a qualitative mode of inquiry, you are more likely to use the unstructured interview or observation as your method of data collection. When analyzing data in qualitative research you go through the process of identifying themes and describing what you have found out during your interviews or observation rather than subjecting your data to statistical procedures. ”

Neuman (1997) identifies the following differences between the qualitative and the quantitative style (Table 1):

Table 1: Quantitative Style versus Qualitative Style

QUANTITATIVE STYLE	QUALITATIVE STYLE
Measure objective facts	Construct social reality, cultural meaning
Focus on variables	Focus on interactive processes, events
Reliability is key	Authenticity is key
Value free	Values are present and explicit
Independent of context	Situationally constrained
Many cases, subjects	Few cases, subjects
Statistical analysis	Thematic analysis
Researcher is detached	Researcher is involved

A more detailed description of these differences can be found in Annexure-1. The study is classified as qualitative if the purpose of the study is primarily to describe a situation, phenomenon, problem or event (Kumar, 2005). Both qualitative and quantitative approaches have their strengths and weaknesses, and advantages and disadvantages and neither one is markedly superior to the other in all respects (Kumar, 2005; Ackroyd and Hughes, 1992).

Characteristics of Qualitative Research:

Creswell (2003) has identified the following characteristics of a qualitative research:

- Qualitative research takes place in natural setting. The qualitative researcher often goes to the site (home, office) of participants to conduct the research.
- Qualitative research uses multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic. The methods of data collection are growing, and they increasingly involve active participation by participants and sensitivity to the participants in the study.
- Qualitative research is emergent rather than tightly prefigured. Several aspects emerge during a qualitative study. The research questions may change and be refined as the inquirer learns what to ask and to whom it should be asked.
- Qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive. This means that the researcher makes an interpretation of the data. The researcher filters the data through a personal lens that is situated in a specific sociopolitical and historical moment.

The qualitative researcher views social phenomena holistically. This explains why qualitative research studies appear as broad, panoramic views rather than micro-analyses. The more complex, interactive, and encompassing the narrative, the better the qualitative study.

The qualitative researcher uses complex reasoning that is multifaceted, iterative, and simultaneous.

The qualitative researcher adopts and uses one or more strategies of inquiry as a guide for the procedures in the qualitative study.

Ethical Considerations in Qualitative Research:

Participants play a vital role in case of qualitative research. Qualitative research looks to the human-as-an-instrument for the collection and analysis of data, as in this case, it is believed that only a human can be responsive, adaptable and holistic so as to explore the atypical or idiosyncratic responses that surface during an interaction with

a respondent (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994 and Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran, 2000). Willig (2001) states that:

“The role of participants in qualitative research can differ dramatically from that of the ‘subjects’ of quantitative studies. There are, however, also big differences between qualitative methodologies in this regard. At one end of the continuum, there are qualitative methodologies, such as feminist approaches, participatory action research, or memory work, where distinction between researcher and participant is blurred. Here, the researcher becomes a participant in the research, and the participants contribute to the analysis of the data they generate at the other end of the continuum, there are qualitative methodologies, such as conversation analysis or discursive psychology, where participants generate the type of data required by the researcher without any further involvement in the research.”

So, the treatment of participants becomes a vital issue in case of qualitative research. As a result, the issue of ethical considerations gets a greater emphasis in this kind of research. Elmes et al. (1995) highlights the following basic ethical considerations that apply to the treatment of participants:

- *Informed Consent*: The researcher should ensure that participants are fully informed about the research procedure and give their consent to participate in the research before data collection takes place.
- *No deception*: Deception of participants should be avoided altogether. The only justification for deception is when there is no other way to answer the research question and the potential benefit of the research far exceeds any risk to the participants.
- *Right to withdraw*: The researcher should ensure that participants feel free to withdraw from participation in the study without fear of being penalized.
- *Debriefing*: The researcher should ensure that, after data collection, participants are informed about the full aims of the research. Ideally, they should also have access to any publications arising from the study they took part in.

- *Confidentiality*: The researcher should maintain complete confidentiality regarding any information about participants acquired during the research process.

According to Willig (2001), researchers should protect their participants from any harm or loss, and they should aim to preserve their psychological well-being and dignity at all times.

The Approaches in Qualitative Research:

The main types of qualitative research approaches are: Case study, Grounded theory, Phenomenology, Ethnography and, Narratives (Creswell, 2003).

a. *Case Study*: According to Willig (2001): The case study is not itself a research method, instead, it constitutes an approach to the study of singular entities, which may involve the use of a wide range of diverse methods of data collection and analysis. This is an extensive investigation of just one person, group or event. The focus of case study is upon a particular unit and that is the case. A case can be an organization, a city, a group of people, a community, a patient, a school etc. (Willig, 2001). The social unit being studied defines the case study, whether it is a person, a program, a company, a situation or whatever (Maylor and Blackmon, 2005). The strength of case study is that it can take an example on an activity – ‘an instance in action’ –and use multiple methods and data sources to explore it and interrogate it and thus it can achieve a rich description of a phenomenon (Stark and Torrance, 2005). Neuman (1997) states that a qualitative researcher may use a case study approach where he/she might gather a large amount of information on one or few cases, go into greater depth, and get more details on cases being examined. The case study allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events- such as individual life cycles, organizational and managerial processes, neighborhood change, international relations, and the maturation of industries (Yin, 1994). The case study researcher goes for data analysis in a different way in comparison to quantitative researchers.

Example (taken from Neuman, 1997):

A quantitative researcher surveys 1,000 married couples. He/she discovers that women perform the household chore of washing dishes in 70% of the cases in which the women works outside the home, and in 90% cases when the woman is a full time homemaker. A qualitative researcher conducts a case study. He/she observes all chores and daily activities of 10 married couples for six months. The qualitative researcher discovers that if the woman works outside the home, interpersonal tensions over doing chores is greater, and the male is likely to assist in small household chores but does not take full responsibility of traditional female tasks.

Stark and Torrance (2005) identifies that the weakness of case study is that it is not possible to generalize statistically from one or a small number of cases to the population as a whole.

b. *Grounded Theory*: Strauss and Corbin (1990) states that grounded theory is a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived theory about a phenomenon. Theory develops during the data collection process, i.e., theory is built from data or grounded in the data (Neuman, 1997). Grounded theory is a method of discovering new theory. The purpose of grounded theory is to build a theory that is faithful to the evidence (Neuman, 1997).

c. *Phenomenology*: Willig (2001) states that phenomenology is concerned with the ways in which human beings gain knowledge of the world around them, moreover, phenomenology identifies different approaches to human understanding and it argues that certain forms of knowing may be more constructive than others. In a phenomenological research, the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences concerning a phenomenon as described by participants in a study (Creswell, 2003). For example, Lauterbach (1993) studies five women who had lost a baby in late pregnancy and their memories and experiences of this loss. Patton (1990) says that the key question of phenomenology is ‘what is the experience of an activity or concept from these particular participants’ perspective?’

d. *Ethnography*: The word ‘ethno’ means people or folk and the meaning of ‘graphy’ is to describe something. The origin of ethnography is in cultural anthropology. Ethnography means describing a culture and understanding another way of life from the native point of view (Neuman, 1997). Here the researcher studies an intact cultural group in a natural setting over a prolonged period of time by collecting primarily observational data (Creswell, 2003). Patton (1990) says that the key question of ethnography is ‘what are the cultural patterns and perspectives of this group in its natural setting?’ Ethnography is carried out in a natural setting (not in a laboratory) involving intimate, face-to-face interaction with the participants and it presents an accurate reflection of participants’ perspectives and behaviors by using the concept of culture as a lens through which to interpret results (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999).

e. *Narrative*: Creswell (2003) says that narrative research is a form of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives and then this information is retold or restoried by the researcher into a narrative chronology.

Another popular approach of qualitative research is ‘action research’. Action research is intended to result in the solution or improvement of a practical problem (Krathwohl, 1998). This kind of research can solve the problems especially in the field of education, social work, library science etc. This kind of research is mainly carried out by the persons facing a problem or considering adopting a practice (Krathwohl, 1998).

Main Methods of Data Collection in Qualitative Research:

There are three main methods for collecting data in qualitative research. The resulting data is generally recorded and then examined using one of a range of methods for analysis. The three main methods of data collection are:

a. *Focus groups*: In this method of data collection, the researcher brings together a small number of subjects/respondents to talk about on the area of interest. The group size is kept consciously small, so that its members can convey opinions unreservedly. A 'topic guide' to facilitate conversation is usually prepared in advance and the researcher typically leads the group to ensure that a variety of facets of the topic are discovered. The discussion is normally tape-recorded, then transcribed and analyzed.

b. *Direct observation*: In this method, data can either be collected by an external observer (often termed as a non-participant observer) or by a participant observer who can be a part of staff performing normal duties while observing the processes. In this type of study the researcher tries to become a part of the population being examined. In this way the researchers they can get an in depth insight of the values and beliefs of the members of the population.

c. *In-depth interviews*: In interviews, normally, subjects are interviewed individually. Interviews in qualitative research are generally broad ranging, penetrating issues in details. They rarely involve asking a set of preset questions. As a substitute, they persuade subjects to convey their views in details. This can disclose more about beliefs and attitudes and behavior. The researcher may be able to acquire more thorough information for each subject.

The concept of sampling has a little importance in case of qualitative research. Kumar (2005) says that in qualitative research, to explore the diversity, the researcher needs to reach what is known as saturation point and when he/she finds that he/she is not obtaining any new data, or the new information is negligible, the researcher is assumed to have reached saturation point. This point is a subjective judgment that is decided by the researcher.

Conclusion:

Qualitative research has been criticized for its flexibilities by many quantitative research supporters. One of the most criticized issues is that in this kind of research, only small numbers of subjects can be

investigated and analyzed as the data collection methods are very much labor intensive. There is also a chance of researcher's bias. In case of qualitative research, analyzing the data in a precise way is a very difficult task. Qualitative research suffers from the inability of reproducibility and generalization of the findings. The findings may not be valid to other subjects or settings. Even after having these drawbacks, qualitative research is addressed as a good research approach among so many research schools of the world for its in-depth analysis capacity and attractive description styles.

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Annexure-1:

Differences between Qualitative and Quantitative Research
(Kumar,2005)

DIFFERENCE WITH RESPECT TO:	QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH	QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
Underpinning philosophy	Rationalism: Human beings achieve knowledge because of their capacity to reason.	Empiricism: The only knowledge that human beings acquire is from sensory experiences.
Approach to inquiry	Structured/rigid/predetermined methodology	Unstructured/ flexible/ open methodology
Main purpose of investigation	To quantify extent of variation in a phenomenon, situation, issue etc.	To describe variation in a phenomenon, situation, issue etc.
Measurement of variables	Emphasis on some form of either measurement or classification of variables.	Emphasis on description of variables.
Sample size	Emphasis on greater sample size	Fewer cases
Focus of inquiry	Narrows focus in terms of extent of inquiry, but assembles required information from a greater number of respondents.	Covers multiple issues but assembles required information from fewer respondents.
Dominant research value	Reliability and objectivity (value-free)	Authenticity but does not claim to be value free.
Dominant research topic	Explains prevalence, incidence, extent, nature of issues, opinions and attitudes; discovers regularities and formulates theories.	Explores experiences, meanings, perceptions and feelings.
Analysis of data	Subjects variables to frequency distributions, cross-tabulations or other statistical procedures.	Subjects responses, narratives or observation data to identification of themes and describes these.
Communication of findings	Organization more analytical in nature, drawing inferences and conclusions, and testing magnitude and strength of relationship.	Organization more descriptive and narrative in nature.