

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The qualitative methodology is a kind of research that produces descriptive data based on peoples' narratives and observable behavior. Qualitative approach is gaining popularity as an effective method of addressing social and economic problems as researchers are being able to collect data and explain phenomenon more deeply and exhaustively. Qualitative data is mainly collected through observations, interviews, surveys and documents analysis in order to find themes and meanings to inform the understanding of a given phenomenon.

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1.1 Introduction

Qualitative approach is gaining popularity as an effective method of addressing social and economic problems as researchers are being able to collect data and explain phenomenon more deeply and exhaustively. Qualitative design focuses on objective measurements, statistical, mathematical and numerical analysis. Data is usually collected through polls, interviews, surveys or observations.

1.2 Definition of Qualitative Research

The phrase qualitative methodology refers in the broadest sense to research that produces descriptive data—peoples own written or spoken words and observable behavior (Taylor, Marjorie & DeVault, 2016). Qualitative research is a broad field of inquiry that uses unstructured data collection methods, such as observations, interviews, surveys and documents, to find themes and meanings to inform the understanding of the world (Silverman, 2013). According to Goyal (2013), qualitative Research is a form of social enquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live.

Qualitative research tends to try to uncover the reasons for behaviors, attitudes and motivations, instead of just the details of what, where and when. Qualitative research can be done across many disciplines, such as social science, healthcare and business, and is a common feature of nearly every single workplace and educational environment. Qualitative researchers empathize and identify with the people they study in order to understand how those people see things (Punch, 2014).

Qualitative researchers generally begin with a less focused research question, collect large amounts of relatively “unfiltered” data from a relatively small number of individuals, and describe their data using non-statistical techniques. It is less concerned with drawing general conclusions about human behavior than with understanding in detail the *experience* of their research participants (Creswell, 2014).

1.3 The Purpose of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research plays an important role in the society through discoveries, testing of ideas and developing theories or refining the existing ones. According to Smith (2008), some of the specific purposes can be outlined as follows:

- It is an effective method of generating novel and interesting research questions.
- It provides detailed descriptions of the behavior of particular groups in particular situations.
- Qualitative research is good at explaining experiences of individuals in a particular group in a particular situation.
- It complements the relative weaknesses of quantitative research.
- Qualitative research can help researchers to generate new and interesting research questions and hypotheses.
- Qualitative research provides rich and detailed descriptions of human behavior in the real-world contexts in which it occurs (Smith, 2008).

1.4 Characteristics of Qualitative Research

Some of the characteristics of qualitative research include the ability to help the researcher understand why and how things are the way they are in a detailed manner and not a

straightforward yes or no. It is concerned with cases rather than variables, and understanding differences rather than calculating the mean of responses. Therefore, in-depth interviews, focus groups, case studies, and open-ended questions are often employed to find these answers. The respondents are required to give their point of view (Sullivan & Sargeant, 2011). According to Darlington and Scott (2002), qualitative research has some of the following characteristics:

- Qualitative research is oriented towards discovery of new knowledge.
- It uses subjective data. – qualitative research is an interpretative and subjective exercise, and the researcher is intimately involved in the process, not aloof from it
- It extracts meaning from data
- It interpret results in context
- Its focus is holistic

1.5 Advantages of Qualitative Research

Rahman (2017) observes that qualitative methods is vital in language assessment and testing research such as, eliciting deeper insights into designing, administering, and interpreting assessment and testing including exploring test-takers' behaviour, perceptions, feelings, and understanding. He notes that qualitative research approach produces a detailed description of participants' feelings, opinions, and experiences; and interprets the meanings of their actions. This implies that qualitative approach achieves deeper insights into issues related to designing, administering, and interpreting language assessment. Qualitative research approach (interpretivism) holistically understands the human experience in specific settings as it encompasses a wider range of epistemological viewpoints, research methods, and interpretive techniques of understanding human experiences. From the perspective of

epistemological position, any language assessment cannot be set apart from context, culture and values of where it was used. Qualitative research through interpretivism research approach is regarded as an ideographic research, the study of individual cases or events and it has abilities to understand different people's voices, meanings and events.

Qualitative research allows the researchers to discover the participants' inner experience, and to figure out how meanings are shaped through. Qualitative research methods such as participant-observation, unstructured interviews, direct observation, describing records are most commonly used for collecting data which allow the researchers to interact with the participants directly such as it happens while data collection through interviews. Therefore, data collection is subjective and detailed. Qualitative research design (interactive approach) has a flexible structure as the design can be constructed and reconstructed to a greater extent which enables a thorough and appropriate analyses of an issue as the participants have sufficient freedom to determine what is consistent for them and therefore enables understanding of complex issues can be understood easily (Rahman, 2017).

Thus, the advantages of qualitative research can be summarized as follows:

- Open-ended questions elicit responses that are meaningful and culturally salient to the participant.
- The data collected is unanticipated by the researcher and therefore new knowledge is discovered.
- The data collected is rich and explanatory in nature
- It allows the researcher the flexibility to probe initial responses for clarity purposes
- It allows in-depth examination of the phenomenon

- Uses subjective information focusing on what works
- Qualitative research is not limited to rigidly definable variables
- Examine complex questions that can be impossible with quantitative methods
- It deals with value-laden questions
- By generating new knowledge, qualitative research is able to build new areas of research
- It allows the researcher the flexibility to probe initial responses for clarity purposes

1.6 Disadvantages of Qualitative Research

Silverman (2010) observes that qualitative research approaches sometimes leave out contextual sensitivities, and focus more on meanings and experiences. Phenomenological approach, for instance, attempts to uncover, interpret and understand the participants' experience. The sampling also tends to be selective and purposive and therefore may not be representative enough. Another limitation is that policy-makers may give low credibility to results from qualitative approach as most of them prefer quantitative research that gives figures and statistics. Ravitch (2010) concurs with these views noting that many social sciences prefer quantitative research.

Similarly, a small sample size raises the issue of generalizability to the whole population of the research. Data interpretation and analysis is also more difficult time consuming and complex as noted by Rumsey, Thiessen, Buchan and Daly (2016).

Hence, the disadvantages of qualitative research approach can be summarized as follows:

- Due to the amount of data generated, qualitative research can only involve few respondents.

- Subjectivity leads to procedural problems. Subjectivity implies that researchers and participants bring their own histories, assumptions, values, perspectives, politics into the research which is reflected in the results.
- Replicability is very difficult. It is not easy to generalize as individual respondents have different points of view.
- Researcher bias is built and unavoidable
- In-depth comprehensive approach to data gathering limits the scope
- It is labour intensive and expensive
- The method is not well understood by ‘classical’ researchers

1.7 How to do Qualitative Research

1.7.1 Deciding on the Research Question

The research question may be inductive or exploratory. The question should be framed as an aim, objective or hypothesis. It is also necessary to focus on a single idea, phenomenon or concept.

1.7.2 Carrying out Literature Review

Literature review enables the researcher to identify what others have found out about the topic (Creswell, 2014). By conducting literature review, the researcher is able to identify other researches that have been done and what questions have already been answered. Through this process, the researcher is able to identify knowledge gaps that need to be filled.

Therefore, conducting of literature review is fundamental to the research (re-search) process as the researcher need to establish what is already known before deciding with certainty exactly what questions need to be asked. Critical evaluation of the literature that is identified creates a rationale for the study by explaining what is missing and identifying what the project will add. Hence, literature review should be a coherent account of the relevant studies identified, their findings, their failing and what the new study will add to the existing body of literature.

1.7.3 Research Methods

This step involves deciding on the best research approach. Qualitative method is useful when a question cannot be answered by a simple 'yes' or no' hypothesis. Then, consider the ideal sample size. Qualitative research requires a small sample size due to the difficulties involved in data collection. Qualitative research typically involves purposeful sampling. Upon sampling of the sample size, data is then collected through various methods such as interviews, focus groups, observations and textual data. The collected data is then analyzed and the write up of the research done.

1.8 Types of Qualitative Research Methods

Creswell (2014) identifies several qualitative research types as follows:

Action Research – Action research focuses on solving an immediate problem or working with others to problem solve and address particular issues. Action research identifies the research question (diagnosis), determine the actions to be taken (action planning), conduct and monitor the planned actions (action taking) and then determine if the actions have addressed the research question (evaluation) (Creswell, 2014).

Ethnography – Ethnography is the study of human interaction and communities through direct participation and observation within the community you wish to study. Ethnographic research comes from the discipline of social and cultural anthropology but is now becoming more widely used (Creswell, 2014).

Phenomenology – Phenomenology is the study of the subjective experiences of others. It researches the world through the eyes of another person by discovering how they interpret their experiences (Creswell, 2014).

Grounded Theory – The purpose of grounded theory is to develop theory based on the data systematically collected and analyzed. It looks at specific information and derives theories and reasons for the phenomena. Silverman (2013) concurs noting that grounded theory is firmly rooted in the assumption common to qualitative researchers and is intended to construct a theory.

Case Study Research – This method of qualitative study is an in-depth study of a specific individual or phenomena in its existing context. Case studies are empirical investigation of phenomena within their environmental context, where the relationship between the phenomena and the environment is not clear. Hence, a case is examined to understand an issue or provide input to an existing theory or a new theoretical concept. A case study method may have single or multiple cases from where a conclusion could be drawn up from similarities or differences among the cases involved. Single case design is ideal for studying extreme cases, to confirm or challenge a theory or for cases where a researcher does not have access previously. Multiple case design is appropriate when a researcher is keen to use more than one case to gather data and draw up conclusion based on the facts retrieved.

Multiple case design serves to confirm evidence which enhance the reliability and validity of a research work (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008).

1.9 Qualitative Data Collection Methods

Gill, Stewart, Treasure and Chadwick (2008) observes that there are a variety of methods of data collection in qualitative research which include, interviews, observations and textual or visual analysis from books or videos. However, the most common methods used are interviews and focus groups from individuals or groups. Specifically, data collection methods include the following:

- **Direct observation** – Direct observation of a situation or your research subjects can occur through video tape playback or through live observation.
- **Participant observation** – Participant observation is the immersion of the researcher in the community or situation being studied. These techniques strive to gather first hand data on programs, processes or behaviours being studied (Islam, 2016).
- **Interviews** – Qualitative interviewing is basically the process of gathering data by asking people questions.
- **Surveys** – Written questionnaires and open ended surveys about ideas, perceptions, and thoughts of respondents
- **Document analysis** – involves examining written, visual, and audio documents that exist
- **In-depth interviews** are ideal for collecting data on individuals' personal histories, perspectives, and experiences, particularly when sensitive topics are being explored.

- ***Focus groups*** are effective in eliciting data on the cultural norms of a group and in generating broad overviews of issues of concern to the cultural groups or subgroups represented (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008).

1.10 Ethical Guidelines in Qualitative Research

Ethical issues need to be addressed when carrying out research. Ethics involves doing good and avoiding harm. Harm can be prevented or reduced through the application of appropriate ethical principles. This calls for the protection of human respondents. According to Orb, Eisenhauer and Wynaden (2001), the research process creates tension between the aims of research to make generalizations for the good of others, and the rights of participants to maintain privacy. Qualitative research focuses on exploring, examining, and describing people and their natural environments which call for appropriate relationship between researchers and the participants.

Ethical dilemmas are likely to arise from an interview and are difficult to predict. An interview involves self disclosure and therefore should entail confidentiality, informed consent, and privacy. It also arouses old wounds and sharing of secrets therefore opening new risks to both researchers and participants. Respect the dignity of all research participants by protecting their vulnerability and autonomy. It is therefore important for the researcher to commitment to minimize psychological and social risks associated with research and ensure fair distribution of the risks and benefits resulting from research by making sure that the participants' benefits from the knowledge generated from the research. It is also imperative that the researcher respect communities' values and interests where research is being conducted including the participants by seeking their informed consent on whether to participate in the study or not (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2001).

1.11 Sampling in Qualitative Research

Qualitative sampling requires that the researcher continue sampling until there is no new information or insights and therefore it calls for a small number of respondents to be able to conduct intensive interviews, get narratives or and conduct focus groups interviews. In most cases convenience sampling is used where a group of individuals believed to be representative of the population from which it is selected are conveniently selected. Creswell (2014) outlines the following sampling techniques in qualitative research method:

Purposive sampling: It groups participants according to preselected criteria relevant to a particular research question. In this case, the researcher strives to obtain a sample that appears to be representative of the population (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003).

Quota sampling: Is sometimes considered a type of purposive sampling as one decides while designing the study how many people with which characteristics to include as participants. Characteristics might include age, place of residence, gender, class, profession, marital status (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

Snowball sampling: Also known as chain referral sampling – is considered a type of purposive sampling where the participants with whom contact has already been made use their social networks to refer the researcher to other people who could potentially participate in or contribute to the study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

1.12 Analyses of Qualitative Data

Gandeebo (2015) suggests that Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) is the range of processes and procedures that involves turning the collected qualitative data into some form of explanation, understanding or interpretation of the people and situations being investigating.

The qualitative data is gathered from nonnumeric form through methods such as interview transcripts, field notes, videos, audio recordings, images and document from reports, minutes and emails among others.

Creswell (2014) outlines the following steps that are involved when carrying out qualitative data analysis:

- *Coding* – In coding, you assign a word, phrase, or number to each category identified.
- *Descriptive Statistics* – You can analyze your data using statistics. Descriptive statistics help describe, show or summarize the data to highlight patterns
- *Narrative analysis* – Narrative analysis focuses on speech and content, such as grammar, word usage, metaphors, story themes, meanings of situations, the social, cultural and political context of the narrative.
- *Hermeneutic Analysis* – Hermeneutic analysis focuses on the meaning of a written or oral text
- *Content analysis/Semiotic analysis* – Content or semiotic analysis looks at texts or series of texts and looks for themes and meanings by looking at frequencies of words

1.13 Conclusion

The study has shown that the qualitative research paradigm is essential in achieving deeper insight into designing, administering and interpreting personal experiences. Qualitative research method involves the use of qualitative data, such as interviews, documents, and respondents observation, to understand and explain social phenomena. It focuses more on interpretation of situations or phenomena in their natural settings.

It helps to understand the candidate behaviour, interviewer behaviour, interlocutor behaviour, and cross-cultural influences on behaviour. However, this approach uses a small sample size which can make the results unreliable and ungeneralizable while many policy makers may refrain from qualitative research.

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