

Qualitative Research Methods in Social Sciences

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The European Conference on Education 2018
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Numerous written materials and a wide range of reading collections in social sciences were produced to analyse qualitative research methods in social sciences. Qualitative research refers to research about people's lives through insights of their stories and behavioural patterns. It is usually employed in human field studies and social sciences disciplines, including education, sociology, social work, and communications with an additional examination of organisations, relationships, and social movements. Qualitative research involves an interpretive and natural approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study the natural settings and attempt to make sense of, or interpret concepts in terms of the meanings people bring to them. The aim of this paper is to study how people and groups construct meanings, further exploring real life issues through using qualitative research. As an applied research methodology, there is often a greater emphasis on the design and processes of data collection and data analysis. However, the main aim of this paper is to explore more deeply the qualitative research via broader spectrum of critical discussions, specifically by delving into what is unique about qualitative methods and highlighting the features of qualitative methodology. Qualitative research identifies with 'lived experiences' of research participants as the researcher is considered the instrument of data collection and data analysis. Henceforth, the quality of qualitative data depends, to a great extent, on a much deeper and complex layer of methodological skill, cultural sensitivity, and integrity of the researcher, as opposed to the mere technicalities of data collection and data analysis.

Keywords: Research methods, Qualitative research, Social sciences

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Introduction

There are hundreds of books, articles and empirical studies of social sciences researches were written to explain qualitative research methods and to discuss the processes of data collection and data analysis. In order to study how people and groups construct meanings and to explore real life issues, the qualitative research is well known to be employed in human field studies and social sciences disciplines, including education, sociology and social work. With all the strengths and flaws of the qualitative research, the aim of this paper is to contribute to the growing literature of the qualitative research in the human disciplines. Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to review the literature and to discuss more deeply the qualitative research methods by identifying the strengths and general critique mentioned in the literature. Moreover, the purpose is to consider what is unique about qualitative methods and to understand the 'lived experiences' and life stories of the research participants. Qualitative research involves real and interpretive, naturalistic approaches to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret the phenomena in relation to the meanings people bring to them. Therefore, the quality of qualitative data depends to a great extent on the research skill, objectivity, and integrity of the researcher and the extent to which they are trained to be more objective and ethical whilst carrying out fieldwork investigations. Therefore, this paper aims to discuss the implications of considering the researcher as the instrument of data collection and data analysis, as well as to understand the central role in qualitative research of the researcher as the "instrument".

Qualitative Research Methods: Its definitions and importance

Wide range of written materials and social sciences texts about qualitative research were consulted, (e.g., Patton, 2002, 2015; Alase, 2017; Rahman, 2017; Daniel, 2016; Bryman and Burgess, 1994, 1999; Burgess, 1990, 1995; Delamont and Atkinson, 1995), including some that not only outlined the techniques that can be used but guide the researcher to the practicalities of doing this research methodology. Such texts made one duly conscious that:

'Qualitative research has a long and distinguished history in the human disciplines. In sociology, the work of 'Chicago school' in the 1920s and 1930s established the importance of qualitative research for the study of human group life (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998: 1).

Qualitative research methods can refer to research about peoples' lives, lived experience, behaviours, and emotions, as well as the organisational functioning, social movements and cultural phenomena (Rahman, 2017: 103). These are primarily descriptive texts and narrative accounts rather than numerical or statistical analysis.

'It (qualitative research) can refer to research about people's lives, their stories, and behaviour, and it can also be used to examine organisations, relationships, and social movements. Research done in this way produces descriptive data such as people's own spoken or written words or observable behaviour' (Bouma and Atkinson, 1995: 206).

Qualitative methodology allows researchers to apply interpersonal and subjectivity skills to their research's exploratory processes, thus establishing rapport and obtaining detailed and in-depth data. Moreover, a qualitative research approach gives researchers "the best opportunity to understand the innermost deliberation of the 'lived experiences' of research participants" (Alase, 2017: 9). Therefore, this process will enable the researcher to explore the research areas in its natural setting and to allow real stories to be revealed as they are happening in real life.

Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2011: 9) stated that "(Q)ualitative research is a broad umbrella term that covers a wide range of techniques and philosophies, thus it is not easy to define". Defining qualitative research is very important as it is the central focus of this section, although it is a challenge to define this term as it does not have clear theories, obvious paradigms, nor an apparent set of methods or practices that are merely of its own. "This term also involves a vast array of methods and approaches within different subjects of research. Hence, writers have provided the definition of qualitative research distinctively" (Rahman, 2017: 103). Qualitative research thus seems to be an overarching, impactful concept under which a number of issues may be placed and discussed, involving positive and negative perspectives.

Fortunately, qualitative research is an approach that allows you to examine people's experiences in details by using a specific set of research methods such as in-depth interviews, in-depth observations, documents analysis and focus groups. However, qualitative research is much more than just the application of qualitative methods, one main distinctive features of qualitative research is that it allows you to identify issues from the perspective of your study participants and to understand their viewpoints about life experiences and behaviours. This is what makes qualitative research an open-ended and more flexible research methodology.

There are many ways of collecting qualitative data, but the most common ones are: (a) in depth, open-ended interviews; (b) direct observations; and (c) written document (Patton, 1990, p10). In interviews, the researcher can gather plenty of information by asking direct questions about people's experiences, opinions, feelings or knowledge. Nevertheless, direct observation is widely used in qualitative data collection. In direct observation, the researcher can get a detailed description of people's activities, behaviours and actions. Written documents refer to published reports, journals, data from researchers working in the same field, personal diaries and the responses to questionnaires and surveys.

According to Robson (1993: 370), "(N)arrative accounts and other collections of words are variously described as 'rich', 'full', and contrasted with the thin abstractions of number. Their collection is often straightforward". Moreover, selected research areas may be studied in depth about relatively small number of people and selected cases which can make the relationship between the researcher and research participants more personable and direct.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research methodology is a situated activity that locates the researcher in the real world and a natural setting. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices and research tools that makes the world more clearly

visible. These practices transform and turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, documents and photographs, recordings and memos to the self. As a result, qualitative research involves an open-ended, interpretive and naturalistic approach to the world. It is a main feature that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them and to understand the research areas from the perspectives of research participants (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

Patton (2015) stated that qualitative inquiries study how individuals and groups of people construct meanings. In doing so, qualitative methodology devotes and allocates more attention on how qualitative analysts determine what is meaningful and true from their perspectives. This includes a focus on delineating the problems they are facing, including suggestions on possible solutions. In educational practice, this is fundamental in order to identify the real issues teachers are facing in implementing the new curriculum for instance, including the suggested methods and techniques on ways to resolve them in order to improve educational practices (Al Ramahi, 1998, 2001, 2002).

Tracy (2013) added that qualitative data provides insights into cultural activities that may be missed in structured surveys or experiments. Qualitative research can uncover salient issues that can later be studied using more structured research methods. This is the main advantage of qualitative research methodology, and which makes it a unique framework amongst others.

According to Krathwohl (1993: 311), qualitative research methods allow in-depth description of phenomena and events in an attempt to understand and explain them clearly. This description may be used to reveal new principles and explanations that can be generalised. Moreover, qualitative methods are inductive as they let the problem emerge from the collected data or remain open to interpretations of the problem different from those that held initially. Therefore, qualitative methods were characterised as inductive research methodology, allowing for new possibilities, new issues, themes, categories, areas and questions to emerge during the research processes. The flexibility of qualitative approaches was argued to hold also for data analysis. This was considered one main advantage of qualitative research here – “the categories of action developed for analysis are not rigidly fixed, nor is analysis restricted to a stage when the data has already been collected” (Allan and Skinner, 1991: 181).

On the other hand, there is a growing awareness that undertaking qualitative research is an embodied experience and that researchers may be emotionally affected by the work they do. Despite the interest in the emotional nature of qualitative research, there is little empirical evidence about researchers’ experiences and the quality of their methodological skills and experiences in undertaking qualitative research.

In qualitative research, the researcher is considered the instrument of data collection and data analysis. Therefore, the quality of qualitative research depends, to a great extent, on the methodological skills, research abilities, experiences, awareness of ethical standards and the integrity of the researcher, as opposed to the mere technicalities of data collection and data analysis.

‘Qualitative inquiry methods promote empathy and give the researcher an empirical basis for describing the perspectives of others while also legitimately reporting his or her own feelings, perceptions, experiences, and insights as part of the data’ (Patton, 1990: 58).

Patton (2002) added that data for qualitative analysis comes from fieldwork (like interviews, observation and focus group. During fieldwork, the researcher spends a long period of time in the setting to obtain detailed and in-depth data to study a program, organisation, community or situations of importance. In doing so, researchers spend a significant portion of their time observing a study, interviewing people and analysing documents. “The researcher makes firsthand observations of activities and interactions, sometimes engaging personally in those activities as a participant observer” (p. 4). Therefore, the quality of the data collected in qualitative research depends to a great extent on the methodological and research skills, sensitivity, objectivity and integrity of the researcher (Patton, 2002). This means that the quality of qualitative research could be low and cannot be generalised. In case the researcher is not well trained and fully equipped with the right research skills, this may affect the objectivity of the results, and lead to subjectivity and emotionally colored research results.

Critique of Qualitative Research

Privileging empathy and understanding the process in context, and in such approaches, have been regarded as not without limitations by those holding harder models of science. One recurring criticism is that they are ‘impressionistic and non-verifiable’ (Allan and Skinner, 1991: 180). The impression-seeking and empathic researcher can influence objectivity. The researcher, as the instrument of both data collection and data interpretation can get too involved with the people and the situation under study. Thus, the collection of data can be influenced by the researcher’s biases. Methods that promote empathy and give researchers the basis for describing the perspectives of others can also lead to a situation where, in Allan and Skinner’s terms ‘the researcher’s perspective colours the data generated’ (1991: 182). Even worse, ‘from the perspective of the logical-positivist scientific paradigm, subjectivity is the very antithesis of scientific inquiry’ (Patton, 1990: 54). Moreover,

‘Serious ethical problems arise when observations include acts that are either legally or morally reportable to authorities. To report them at the least interrupts and more probably terminates the study. Not doing so can have serious consequences both for persons being abused and for the tacitly consenting observer and must be rationalised’ (Krathwohl, 1993: 335).

Even in circumstances less dramatic than these, observers do have to improvise, sometimes under emotional stress, and this can lower the validity of the qualitative research. ‘In qualitative inquiry the researcher is the instrument. Validity in qualitative methods, therefore, hinges to a great extent on the skill, competence, and rigor of the person doing fieldwork’ (Patton, 1990: 14), though they are often insufficiently trained in relevant research skills, such as probing, listening and establishing trust with interviewees. Its popularity in recent decades, particularly among research scientists, has rested on its all too easy, apparent accessibility.

Other limitations review mentioned by Rahman (2017) who stated that results of qualitative research was considered of low credibility by policy-makers who frequently use quantitative research when investigation is called upon. For example, in terms of educational practice in the United States, state policymakers sought to quantify teacher's and student's performance, and in social sciences, quantitative methods are frequently given more status. Moreover, in terms of research method, smaller sample size raises the issue of generalisability to the whole population of the research.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to critically discuss the strengths and weaknesses of qualitative research methods as well as highlighting its uniqueness as an inductive research methodology. Perhaps most importantly, good qualitative research helps people to understand the world, their society and its institutions better. Moreover, qualitative methodology can provide knowledge that targets societal issues, questions or problems, and therefore serves people of various cultures.

In summary, qualitative research is detailed and holistic; focusing on real life experiences and contextualised lived stories which can help to explain and interpret quantitative data. Having said this, we may list some of these features of qualitative methodology as it involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to investigate real life stories and experiences. Qualitative research identifies with 'lived experiences' of research participants, as the researcher is considered an instrument of data collection and data analysis. Henceforth, the quality of qualitative data depends, to a great extent, on the research methodology skills, objectivity and integrity of the researcher as opposed to the mere technicalities of data collection and data analysis. Therefore, researchers are required to be well trained and acquired the needed research skills which may lead to more objective and valid research results as well as raising the quality of the qualitative research methodology.

Acknowledgement

I would like to show my greatest appreciation to Miss Haneen Shubib who helped to revise and edit my conference paper.

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