



Qualitative Research: Essence, Types and Advantages

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Abstract

The main aim of qualitative research is to explore and provide deeper, comprehensive and detailed description of phenomena from non-numeric data, rather than quantifying and testing hypotheses using numeric data as is the case with quantitative research. Notably, qualitative research describes and explains relationships, individual experiences and group norms. The objective of this article is, thus, to explore and describe the essence, nature and advantages of qualitative research through a systematic review of related literature. Accordingly, the types of qualitative research are: narrative design, grounded theory, phenomenological design, case study design and ethnographic design. Moreover, sampling methods under qualitative research are mainly, purposive, criterion, convenience and snowballing, while data are collected by use of interview guides/schedules, focus group discussions and observation (non-participant or participant). Consequently, the advantages of qualitative studies include: flexibility and spontaneity (allows for the adaptation of interview items as the research progresses and need arises), does not require a large study sample, offers the opportunity to meet the respondents, encourages discussion with the participants, allows for the collection and interpretation of non-verbal cues (smiles, frowns, tears) and offers the opportunity to seek clarification and gain deeper understanding of phenomena under study. Notably, the direct involvement of the researcher provides them the opportunity to get insightful and relevant responses from the participants.

Subject Areas

Research Methods, Qualitative Research

Keywords

Ethnography, Narrative, Phenomenology, Qualitative Research, Purposive Sampling, Interviews

1. Introduction

As opposed to quantitative research (that relies on measurable or numerical data), qualitative studies gather non-numerical data on how people live, think and respond to different situations. Consequently, qualitative studies may be undertaken to get insights into people's experiences, behaviour, beliefs, attitudes and motivation. It typically involves observing the population and conducting in-depth interviews or focus group discussions (Corner *et al.*, 2019) [1]. Similarly, Cleland (2017) [2], contends that qualitative research is concerned with understanding people's experiences in a simple, easy and analytical way and seeks answers to research questions using a systematically pre-defined set of procedures. Accordingly, qualitative methods are especially effective in obtaining information about behaviour, opinions and social contexts of a particular population. Notably, the strength of qualitative studies lie in their ability to provide textual and complex descriptions of why and how people experience certain phenomena. Qualitative methods are also effective in determining and identifying intangible factors such as, socio-economic status, social norms, gender roles, ethnicity and religion, whose role in the research may not be readily apparent (Cleland, 2017) [2].

Furthermore, Moser and Korsrjens (2017) [3] contend that qualitative research is a type of research that explores and provides deeper insights into real-world problems without having to quantify data. This research paradigm gathers participants' perceptions, experiences and behaviour. More specifically, it answers "why" and "how" instead of "how much" or "how many" (Moser & Korstjens, 2017) [3]. It could be a stand-alone study, relying purely on qualitative data or part of the mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative data. This review, thus delves into the essence, types and advantages of qualitative research.

2. Methodology

Thematic analysis and interpretation of studies from websites, journals and data bases in the area of qualitative research was undertaken with the aim of exploring and bringing to the fore the types, essence and advantages of qualitative research. This paper is, thus, a rich and wholesome synthesis of qualitative research as discussed by different authors from various domains.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Essence of Qualitative Research

When used together with quantitative methods, qualitative research helps us to better understand and interpret the complex reality of a given phenomenon or situation and the implications, insights and meaning of quantitative data. Soratto, *et al.* (2019) [4] indicate that the very fabric of qualitative research is the utilisation of open-ended questions whose answers are not easily measured. Accordingly, due to the open-ended nature of the research questions at hand, the qua-

litative research paradigm is not often linear in the same way that quantitative design is. Subsequently, one of the strengths of qualitative research lies in its ability to explain patterns and processes of human behaviour that cannot be easily quantified (Moser & Korstjens, 2018) [3].

Accordingly, qualitative research is effective in obtaining specific information about behaviours, values, opinions and social contexts of particular populations. It provides information about the “human” side of an issue, that is, behaviours, beliefs, opinions, emotions and relationships of individuals as opposed to providing numbers or quantification (Tscholl *et al.*, 2019) [5]. Additionally, qualitative methods are also super-effective in identifying intangible factors, such as socioeconomic status, social norms, ethnicity, gender roles and religion.

Similarly, Corner *et al.* (2019) [1] contend that, qualitative research is a type of research that explores and provides deeper insights into real-world issues and problems by gathering participants’ perceptions, experiences, and behaviour. More specifically, according to Corner *et al.* (2019) [1], qualitative research responds to the “hows” and “whys” instead of how much or how many.

At its core, qualitative research asks open-ended questions whose answers are not easily quantifiable. Phenomena such as attitudes, experiences and behaviours can be hard to accurately capture quantitatively, whereas the qualitative paradigm lets participants themselves explain why, how, or what they were feeling, thinking and experiencing during the occurrence of an event of interest or at a certain time (Moser & Korstjens, 2018) [3].

Quantifying qualitative data is certainly possible, but the essence of qualitative research/data is to establish patterns and themes that do not require quantification. This approach also ensures that the narrative and context of qualitative studies are not lost by attempting to quantify phenomena that are not meant to be quantified, as the depth of the research would be lost. However, while qualitative and quantitative approaches are different, they are not necessarily opposites and definitely not mutually exclusive. For example, qualitative studies can help deepen and expand understanding of data obtained from quantitative research.

3.2. Types of Qualitative Research

There are five main designs under qualitative research, these are presented as follows:

3.2.1. Grounded Theory

Grounded theory sets out to establish and construct theory from systematically obtained and analysed data. Accordingly, grounded theory involves the generation of a theoretical framework through the observation of a study population. This type of research is inductive as opposed to deductive (as are quantitative studies) and aims to study experiences and social interactions. Essentially, grounded theory studies aim to explain for instance why and how an event occurs or why and how people behave in a certain way. Through observation of the

population, a researcher following the grounded theory approach may then develop a theory to explain the phenomena under study (Folley, 2015 [6]; Corner *et al.* 2019 [1]). Grounded theory can help unravel social actions, experiences and the meanings of people's interactions. Notably, explanations are grounded in the participant's own explanations and interpretations.

3.2.2. Ethnography/Ethnographic Design

This emanates from cultural and social anthropology and involves the researcher getting immersed in the participant's environment. Through this, the researcher/ethnographer may study a particular social/cultural group with the goal of better understanding it and utilize different data collection techniques to produce a complete account of the phenomena that occurred during the research period. Hence, the researcher's aim with ethnographical research is to immerse themselves into the research population and document behaviours, actions and events through the lenses of someone involved in/with the population under study (Grossoehme, 2014) [7]. Accordingly, ethnography is both a process and a product. Furthermore, the direct involvement with the target population is an advantage of ethnographic studies because this enables the researcher to obtain data that is otherwise hard to extract and record. Notably, in ethnographic research, an ethnographer actively participates in the group in a bid to gain an insider's view of the group and to gain similar experiences to the group. In writing ethnographies, the ethnographer provides an account of the group based on his/her participation in the group, analysis of group documents and artefacts and, interviews with the group.

3.2.3. Phenomenological Design

Phenomenology is a school of thought that generally emphasises people's subjective interpretations and experiences of the world. The Phenomenologist attempts to understand and describe how the world appears to others without deduction, theory or assumptions from other fields of study. Accordingly, Smith (2003) [8] defines phenomenology as the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person perspective.

Hence, the phenomenological research design is concerned with the subjectivity of the observer but not necessarily confined to the level of the individual. At first glance, it might seem similar to grounded theory; however, phenomenology looks to determine experiences from the participants' perspective. It essentially looks into the "lived experiences" of the participants and aims to explore why and how participants behaved in a certain way, from their (participants') perspective. The other difference is that grounded theory aims to develop a theory from the social phenomena through an examination of different data sources whereas phenomenology is concerned with explaining and describing phenomena from the perspective of those who experience it. Hence, in phenomenological studies, the ultimate source of all value and meaning is the lived experience of the participants.

3.2.4. Narrative Design

Narrative research weaves together a sequence of events, usually from just one or two individuals, with the ultimate objective of creating a cohesive story/narrative for understanding one or two people's perspectives, feeling, experiences about a phenomenon. Narrative researchers work with small samples of participants to obtain rich and free-ranging discourse and often empower, emancipate and give voice to marginalised populations. It essentially legitimizes peoples' tales as significant sources of empirical knowledge.

Overcash (2018) [9] defines narrative research as the process of collecting and analysing people's accounts in order to describe experiences and provide interpretations. Accordingly, the design is applied in several domains, for instance, oncology clinicians gather tales/narratives while investigating the quality of life, coping, clinical outcomes, all in response to cancer treatment. Evidently, narrative research helps explore personal feelings and experiences beyond the confines of a questionnaire and provides insights into decisions involving screening, treatment, or other health practices, which ultimately guide how health-care services are developed and provided (Overcash, 2018) [9]. Notably, narrative research is applicable in varied situations in our daily lives, apart from its utilization in the health sector.

3.2.5. Case Study Design

A case study is a detailed, in-depth investigation of the development of a single event, individual or situation over a period of time, within a real world context. Case studies are often utilized to explore and lay bare complex medical conditions and social issues. Accordingly, researchers utilize case studies to explore social issues like drug addiction, prostitution, poverty and unemployment (Zamawe, 2015) [10]. Notably, case studies can be both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Case studies in medicine may focus on a particular ailment or individual while in business case studies might cover a specific organisation's strategy. Case studies were one of the first types of research to be utilized amongst the qualitative methodologies in the world and account for a large amount of research presented in articles and books in medicine, psychology, education and history. Apparently, much of what we know today about the empirical world emanated from case studies. Additionally, many of the most treasured classics in different areas of study discipline are case studies.

3.3. Sampling in Qualitative Research

The main sampling methods in qualitative research are purposive, criterion, convenience and snowballing. In purposive sampling, the sample selection is based on the researcher's rationale in terms of being the most informative while criterion sampling selects the sample based on pre-identified factors. Sampling selection in convenience sampling, on the other hand, is based upon the availability of the respondents while sample selection in snowballing is done through referral from other participants or by persons with knowledge of potential par-

ticipants. Other sampling techniques in qualitative research are extreme case sampling (concerned with targeted selection of rare cases) and (typical case sampling) which involves selection of the sample on the basis of the need for regular or average participants.

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis in Qualitative Research

The three most common data collection methods in qualitative research are: in-depth interviews, observations and focus group discussions. Subsequently, each method is best suited for obtaining a specific type of data (Palermo *et al.*, 2019) [11]. Accordingly, interviews may be structured or unstructured. In unstructured interviews, the interviewer adapts and aligns the interview items to the relevant responses. Structured interviews usually have a predetermined number of questions that all interviewees are asked.

Furthermore, the interviews can be one-on-one or over the telephone and could be appropriate for sensitive topics or topics needing an in-depth determination (Moser & Korstjens, 2018) [3]. Consequently, in-depth interviews are optimal in the collection of data on individuals' personal perspectives, histories and experiences, particularly during the exploration of sensitive topics.

Focus Groups Discussions (FGDs) on the other hand are typically held with 8 - 12 target participants and are suitable when collective views and group dynamics on a topic are desired. Houghton, *et al.* (2019) [12] contend that focus group discussions are effective in eliciting responses on group cultural norms and in the generation of broad overviews and issues of concern to the cultural group or sub-group under study. Accordingly, FGDs are a good way to gather in-depth information about a community's opinion and thoughts on a topic. The course of the discussion is usually planned before hand and most researchers moderate the discussions based on a guide or outline to ensure that all topics of interest are covered. Moreover, the researcher can be a participant-observer to share in the experiences of the respondents or a non-participant observer. Accordingly, participant-observation is suitable for data collection on naturally occurring phenomena and behaviours in their usual contexts.

A focus group discussion involves gathering people from similar backgrounds or experiences together to discuss a specific topic of interest. It is a form of qualitative research where questions are asked about their perceptions attitudes, beliefs, opinion or ideas. Furthermore, in focus group discussions, participants are free to talk with other group members. It generally involves group interviewing in which a small group of usually 8 to 12 people is led by a moderator (interviewer) in a loosely structured discussion of various topics of interest.

3.5. Analysis and Interpretation of Qualitative Data

Qualitative research often amounts to a lot of data. Subsequently, data is transcribed then coded manually or with the use of Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) such as NVivo ATLAS.ti (Houghton, *et al.*

2019 [12]; Soratto, *et al.*, 2019 [4]; Zamawe, 2015 [10]). Presentation of qualitative research data can be in the form of predominant, sometimes pre-determined themes and at other times, theory or model development.

3.6. Advantages and Essence Qualitative Research

The use of open-ended questions and probes offers respondents the opportunity to respond freely in their own words, than having to choose from a fixed set of responses, as with quantitative methods. Notably, open-ended questions evoke responses that are rich and explanatory in nature and that may not have been anticipated by the researcher. The responses are also usually culturally salient to the participant. As Cleland (2017) [2] contends, qualitative methods ask mostly “open-ended” questions that are not necessarily worded the same way with each respondent. Moreover, in open-ended questions, respondents are free to respond in their own words, and the responses are often more explanatory and descriptive than simply “yes” or “no”.

Qualitative methods too, allow for flexibility to probe (how and why?), the responses received. Consequently, the researcher listens carefully, engages with the respondents according to their individual styles and personalities and “probes” them for further elaboration and explanation on the given answers. Something the quantitative paradigm only does to a limited extent as the majority of the items in quantitative data collection tool (the questionnaire) are pre-determined and close-ended, leaving little room for elaboration. Hence, qualitative methods are typically more flexible, as they allow greater modification, adaptation and spontaneity of the interaction between the participant and the researcher. Moreover in the qualitative paradigm, the relationship between the participant and the researcher is often less formal than in quantitative studies and participants have the opportunity to respond in greater detail than is usually the case with quantitative methods (Tong, Salisbury & Craig, 2007) [13].

Furthermore, participant responses affect how and which questions the researcher will ask next. Additionally, the study design is iterative, implying that research questions and data collection techniques are adjusted according to what is gathered or learned. Qualitative studies also provide the opportunity to meet the respondents and document other non-verbal cues that, together with the verbatim, help make the right interpretations and conclusion. Notably, the types of data that qualitative research generates can be audio (and sometimes video), field notes, recordings and transcripts.

4. Conclusion

Conclusively, qualitative research helps gain a complex and rich understanding of a specific context or phenomenon. It can help establish real-time activities at the workplace and help draw the management’s attention to what needs to be done. However, it is worth noting that, qualitative research does not often exist as an island, apart and distinct from quantitative research, but rather as an

integral part of research methods to be utilized for a better understanding of the world around us.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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