

Qualitative Research: An Overview

Dr. Tanu Tandon^{1*}

ABSTRACT

Qualitative research methods are increasingly gaining importance among researchers who want to conduct an in-depth study of a phenomena. Qualitative research stands in contrast with quantitative methods as it is not concerned with numbers, frequencies or generalization rather with people, their experiences and see them as unique case. The inquiry done through this method is exploratory, explanatory and more humane, which takes into consideration all the aspects and looks at a situation in totality. The aim is to study each case as a whole, and generalization is not the ultimate goal but understanding a person, his life, experiences and his perspectives. This paper is an overview of qualitative research methods, its evolution, features, characteristics and various axioms of Naturalistic Inquiry. It also touches upon the themes and variations present in qualitative research. Thus, it gives a brief glimpse into theory and concept of qualitative research methods.

Keywords: *Qualitative research, Naturalistic inquiry, Case Study, Axioms*

'Qualitative Inquiry cultivates the most useful of all human capacities: The capacity to learn' (Patton).

Qualitative research is an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomenon in the social world. Following definitions give an insight into it's concept,

“A Qualitative study is defined as an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic perspective, reporting detailed views of informants and conducted in natural setting.” (Creswell,2003).

Any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (Strauss & Corbin,1990).

Qualitative research therefore is type of research which uses non statistical methods and is not concerned with numbers or frequencies; rather more interested in delving deep into lives of people and their experiences. The inquiry done through this method is exploratory, explanatory and more humane, which takes into consideration all the aspects and looks at a

¹Education Consultant

*Corresponding Author

Qualitative Research: An Overview

situation in totality. The aim is to study each case as a whole, and generalization is not the ultimate goal but understanding a person, his life, his experiences and perspectives.

Salient Features of Qualitative Research

- Qualitative Research begins with assumptions, a worldview and the study of research problems; is concerned with inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem.
- Qualitative methods facilitate study of issue in depth and detail. Involves approaching fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis, works towards contributing to the depth, openness and detail of qualitative inquiry.
- Qualitative methods produce a wealth of detailed information from a much smaller numbers of people and cases, which in turn increases the depth of understanding of the cases and situation studied. Generalization is not the goal here, rather in-depth study of a phenomenon or person, group.
- Qualitative findings are longer, detailed, variable in content, hence analysis is difficult as responses are neither systematic nor standardized.
- Open ended responses permit the researcher to understand the world seen by participants. The purpose therefore is to understand and capture the point of views of others, without predetermining them through question categories.
- The direct 'statements or responses from participants are basic source of raw material /data in qualitative inquiry, as they reveal respondent's depth of emotion; the way they have organized their world, their thoughts, experiences and basic perceptions.
- Task of qualitative researcher is to provide a framework within which participants can respond in a way that represents accurately and thoroughly their point of view or experiences. Thus, researcher only gives leads where ever requires, participant have freedom to express their views as data is their natural, contextual experiences, perspectives.

Evolution of Qualitative Research

Any inquiry has certain set of basic beliefs which guide inquiry in different ways. These beliefs are constituted into 'system of ideas' which give us some judgement about nature of reality. These are referred to as 'General Perspectives'. Over the period of time, inquiry has passed through rather has evolved through various 'Eras' which can be described as Pre-positivist, Positivist, Post-positivist

- Pre- positivist: This ranges from time of Aristotle. Here stance of researcher is as a passive observer, who observes the events as they occur naturally.
- Positivist: This era marks the evolution of Scientific method, which has belief in single tangible reality, dualism and generalizations.
- Post-positivist: This era retains belief in scientific method but recognizes multiple realities, and holds that no single tangible reality exists. Qualitative research is guided by Post positivist, also referred as 'Naturalist Perspectives/Inquiry'.

Naturalist inquiry: Philosophical assumptions

Naturalist inquiry is guided by following philosophical assumptions

- Ontology: Deals with nature of reality. It holds that, there is no one single tangible reality; but multiple realities exist.

Qualitative Research: An Overview

- Epistemology: It talks about relationship of knower to known. Researcher and participant are inseparable, influence each other.
- Axiology: It's all about values. Here research is value laden, biases are present.
- Rhetorical: Language of research. Researcher uses informal style, first person narrative to express his views.
- Methodological: Process is contextual, emergent and inductive.
- Possibility of generalization: Inquiry is not aimed at it, rather on developing idiographic body of knowledge
- Causal Linkages: All entities are in state of mutual, simultaneous shaping. Difficult to distinguish cause from effect.

Axioms of naturalistic inquiry: Lincoln and Guba (2005) have postulated following axioms.

- Natural Setting: Research takes place in real world setting, in context. Observations takes place in real world settings, in context of study.
- Human Instrument: Human as data gathering/generating instrument. Human can adapt and adjust to varieties of situations, realities. Has ability to grasp, understand and evaluate meanings of nuances, pauses. Human can take into account resulting biases, mutually shaping elements.
- Utilization of tacit knowledge: Intuitive/felt knowledge reveals the meanings, multiple realities. Mirrors the value pattern of researcher as well.
- Qualitative Methods: More adaptable to multiple realities, more sensitive to mutually shaping influences and value patterns.
- Purposive Sampling: Cases for study selected purposely, as they have the information needed to understand the phenomenon. Sampling aimed at understanding the phenomenon, not generalizations.
- Emergent Design: The research design emerges as function of interaction between inquirer and phenomenon. It allows the data to flow, emerge rather than construct 'a priori'.
- Inductive data analysis: Identifies multiple realities to be found in data. Researcher-participant interaction is explicit, recognizable and accountable. Identifies mutually shaping influences.
- Negotiated Outcomes: Inquiry outcomes depend on nature and quality of interaction between knower and known. Participants are the source of data, they construct their own reality. They are in position to interpret mutual interactions, their experiences.
- Grounded Theory: Guiding theory is embedded or grounded in data. No 'a priori' can encompass multiple, emerging realities which do not fit into encountered situations. Mutual shaping found in particular context, only explicable in terms of context.
- Case Study reporting mode: It is adapted to describe multiple realities, mutually shaping influences. Adaptable to demonstrate interaction between researcher and participant. Offers basis for both, naturalistic generalization and transferability to other site. It can picture all, be it value position of researcher, substantive theory, methodological paradigm or local contextual values.
- Idiographic Interpretations: NI interprets data ideographically, meaning in terms of 'particulars of case'. As interpretations are meaningful for different realities, they depend heavily on local particulars for validity. It depends on interaction between researcher and participant, contextual factors, and local values.
- Tentative Application: Broad application of findings are difficult due to multiple realities, moreover findings depend on interaction between researcher and

Qualitative Research: An Overview

participant. There are mutually shaping influences, value systems vary as with context, hence there can not be generalization of findings.

- Focus determined boundaries: Focus of study emerges as study progresses. Focus is defined and mediated by multiple realities, interaction between researcher and participant and intimate contextual knowledge.
- Special Criteria of trustworthiness: Since there is no single tangible reality hence internal validity fails, Findings can not be generalized leading to failure of external validity. There is no reliability as well as study can not be replicated. Moreover, Inquiry is completely participant's dependent and also on interaction between researcher and participant therefore objectivity also can not be maintained. Judging criteria therefore are, credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability.

Principles/Themes of Qualitative Inquiry

Patton (1990) has given twelve major themes of qualitative inquiry which taken together constitute a comprehensive and coherent strategic framework for qualitative inquiry. These themes are guided by the Axioms of Naturalistic Inquiry. They constitute the Qualitative design strategies, which give a guideline to conduct / design a qualitative study.

Design Strategies

- Naturalistic Inquiry: Observations are done in real world settings where phenomenon unfolds naturally. Open ended questions are asked in familiar, natural context and setting of participants. Open ended conversations like interviews are done with no pre-determined response categories or assumptions.
- Emergent Design: The research design emerges as function of interaction between inquirer and phenomenon. It allows the data to flow, emerge rather than construct 'a priori'.
- Purposive Sampling: Cases for study are selected purposely, as they have the information needed to understand the phenomenon. Sampling is aimed at understanding the phenomenon, not generalization.
- Qualitative data: Observation yields detailed thick description. In depth inquiry, using interviews, open ended questions, direct personal quotations reflect personal experiences, point of view of participants.
- Personal experience and engagement: Direct contact with participants is the essence of inquiry. Intimate connection with people is maintained, situations and phenomenon are closely studied in order to understand them. Researcher's personal experiences and insights play important role in conducting inquiry and understanding the phenomenon.
- Empathic Neutrality and mindfulness: Openness, sensitivity, respect, awareness and responsiveness is extremely important while interacting with participants. Qualitative inquiry demands neutrality, no prejudices or biases, no judgement while interviewing. Researcher must be fully present, mindful in observation, and listening to perspectives of participants.
- Dynamic Systems attention to process: Qualitative research assumes change as on going, continuous process therefore requires researcher to be mindful and attentive to system and situation dynamics.

Qualitative Research: An Overview

Analysis strategies

- Unique case orientation: Each case is unique and special. Each case is studied in depth, in detail and holistically, in context.
- Context sensitivity: Natural context is critical to understanding the phenomenon. It places findings in social, historical and temporal context.
- Inductive analysis and creative synthesis: Qualitative inquiry is oriented towards exploration, discovery and follows inductive logic. It begins by exploring the conforming analytical principles, specific observations and ends with creative synthesis. Dimensions of analysis emerge from open ended questions, without any 'a priori' assumptions or hypotheses, and narrow variables. As it believes and follows the dictum that theory is grounded in data, and emerges from direct field experiences.
- Holistic perspective: Qualitative Inquiry treats and try to understand the phenomenon as 'whole', complex system. Whole is more than sum of its parts, and principle of 'Gestalt' units and holistic understanding is applied here. The focus is on complex interdependencies, system dynamics and context. Qualitative researcher gathers data on multiple aspects of phenomenon under study, and tries to assemble a comprehensive and complete picture of particular phenomenon.
- Voice perspective and reflexivity: Analyst is reflective of his/her own voice and perspective. Inquiry involves self-questioning and self-understanding on part of researcher. Researcher's focus must be balanced, understanding and depicting the world authentically; in all its complexity. To achieve this researcher has to be self analyst and reflective in consciousness.

Qualitative Research: Paradigms

Paradigm or world view are basic set of beliefs that guide action. Qualitative research is further shaped by bringing into inquiry paradigms. Various paradigms have been recognized by various researchers. Crotty (1998) elaborates five paradigms as foundations of social research: Post positivism, interpretivism, critical inquiry, feminism and post modernism. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) have proposed seven paradigms namely viz Post-positivist, constructivist, feminist, ethnic, Marxist, cultural studies and queer theory. Schwandt (2001) gave three paradigms of qualitative inquiry, Interpretivism, hermeneutics and social constructivism.

Creswell (2003) has given four paradigms, Post positivism, Social Constructivism, Participatory research, and Pragmatism. Creswell has also mentioned interpretive ones namely critical theory, feminism and queer theory. Let's see these

- Post positivism: It is rooted in logical positivism, retains the belief in scientific method but recognizes that there are multiple realities, believes knowledge is constructed socially, biases are unavoidable, observation fallible and no single tangible reality exists. Application examples are Grounded Theory, Phenomenology
- Social Constructivism: People create their own reality through social interactions, relationships and experiences. Reality is context and socially relative hence multiple realities exist. Application examples are Symbolic interactionism, Phenomenology.
- Participatory Research: Research should contain an action agenda for reform that may change lives of participants, the institutions in which they live and work. Application examples are ethnographic approaches, narrative research.

Qualitative Research: An Overview

- Pragmatism: Focus is on outcome of research be it action or consequences of inquiry. Focus is not on method but on problem being studied and questions asked about problems. Application examples are case studies, qualitative data collection.
- Critical Theory: Has roots in post modernism, addresses what's wrong with current social reality and acts towards social transformation.

Variety in Qualitative Research: Theoretical traditions

- Ethnography: It's study about culture of people.
- Autoethnography: Experience of researcher of his own culture, insight into culture, situation.
- Constructivism: The way people construct their own reality, their perceptions, truths and consequences of their constructions with others.
- Phenomenology: Meaning, structure and essence of lived experience of a phenomenon.
- Heuristic Inquiry: One's own experience of phenomenon and essential experience of others about phenomenon.
- Ethnomethodology: The way people make sense of their everyday lives, activities so as to behave in socially acceptable ways.
- Symbolic Interactionism: The meaning people give to their words. Make sense of their interactions, shared meanings.
- Semiotics: The meanings sign, words carry especially in their contexts.
- Hermeneutics: The various conditions under which a human act took place, interpretations its meanings.
- Narrative Analysis: Analysis of narration to reveal /interpret life, culture, truths of a person.
- Ecological psychology: The way individuals attempt to accomplish their goals through specific behaviours in specific environment.
- Systems Theory: The way a system works as whole, reasons behind.
- Chaos theory: Underlying order beneath any disorderly phenomenon.
- Grounded Theory: The theory embedded/grounded in data, which emerges through systematic, comparative analysis.
- Oriental qualitative inquiry: It begins with explicit theoretical or ideological perspective that determines the conceptual framework which will direct fieldwork and interpretation of findings. Examples are Feminist inquiry, Critical theory and Queer theory.
- Feminist perspective presumes the importance of gender in human relationships and societal processes and orients the study in that direction.
- Critical theory focuses on how injustice and subjugation shape people's experience and understanding of the world.
- Queer theory focuses on sexual orientation, view of self-defined by sexual orientation.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that qualitative research has its unique flavour and characteristics, which can be summed up as

- Primacy of data: The theoretical framework is not predetermined but derives directly from data.

Qualitative Research: An Overview

- Contextualization: Qualitative Inquiry is context bound, researcher must be context sensitive.
- Immersion in setting: Researchers immerse themselves in natural setting of participants.
- The ‘emic’ perspective: Focus on the views of people involved in research.
- Detailed description: location, people, setting, events, verbatim
- The idea of acquiring an ‘inside’ understanding: The participants’ definitions of situations – is a powerful central concept for understanding the purpose of qualitative inquiry.

REFERENCES

- Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. London: Sage.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln, *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 191-215). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Schwandt, T. A. (2001). *Dictionary of qualitative inquiry* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage

Acknowledgement

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Tandon T. (2021). Qualitative Research: An Overview. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 9(3), 687-693. DIP:18.01.065.20210903, DOI:10.25215/0903.065