

**Comparing and Contrasting Qualitative Research Approaches:
Strengths and Weaknesses**

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When one thinks of research, some initially get excited, while others throw their hands up in the air, crying “research”, trying to figure out what that means. Qualitative research is rooted in the social, cultural anthropology, psychology, history, and behavioral sciences, “to examine and uncover human behaviors, and intangible factors in a social, cultural, and political context in which they occur” (Salkind, N. J. (2017), while generating new concepts and theories. Qualitative research makes use of “interviews, diaries, journals, observations and immersions and open-ended questionnaires to obtain, analyze and interpret the data content, analysis of visual and textual materials, and oral history” (Mohajan, 2018, p. 2).

In the tradition of research, a research question is asked, then it is determined how to answer such questions through research design, the overall plan of the project. The research question guides the choices on how to carry out our research, while articulating what we endeavor to learn about our social reality, in the form of a story. Therefore, to answer the research questions, the research design, requires research methods, activities and techniques. That is, the collection of empirical data which is the information around us detected by our senses, for which Scott & Garner (2013), describes as “the empirical world is the realm of our senses. The activities are the things we do to carry out the design and to collect the empirical information we need to answer the research question, while research techniques are the actual procedures for implementing research methods” (pp. 7-8).

Research design is classified into quantitative or qualitative methods. In quantitative research, the results and conclusions are based on the numerical, measuring the social world statistically through counting and measurements. For this paper, the concentration is on

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qualitative data, that is not so easily measured, but is based on observations of our social world, through the written word, film and interpretation to explore “the behaviors, feelings, and experiences of people and what lies at the core of their lives” (The nature, n.d.).

There are many approaches to behavioral and social research, which is usually chosen based on convenience, however the philosophies for these approaches differ, and therefore should be understood. Let us journey through these approaches.

The positivist Approach

The positivist focuses on the natural sciences, later, a model for social sciences such as sociology and psychology. Based on the sciences, their belief is in universal laws on objectivity and neutrality, by testing theories and hypotheses, where relationships are casual, and focus is on control and predictions. Qualitative research was critical of the natural science approach.

The theoretical perspective is developed, and the hypothesis is often established before the research begins. Therefore, their knowledge is proven and discovered through observation, experiments, and derived through the senses.

Interpretivist Approach

“The interpretivist stressed that human beings differ from the material world, therefore a distinction between human and matter should be mirrored in the methods of investigation” (Intro., n.d.). They are concerned with how the “phenomena of interest are interpreted, understood, experienced, and produced” (Astalin, 2013, p. 118).

Descriptive Approach

The descriptive approach as with the interpretivist, are rooted in the human sciences, history, philosophy and anthropology, exploring the world of people involving their entire the life in context and culture. As cited by (Sunstein & Chiseri- Strater, 2007, p. 286), “Culture is

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not a “thing” but an individual and social evolutionary process. Through the individual we come to understand culture, and through the culture we come to understand the individual, through the knowledge, language, values, customs, and material objects that are passed from person to person and from one generation to the next in a human group or society” (Saldana, 2011, p.5). Through thick, rich description the detailed of experiences, uncovered feelings and meanings of actions, are described, analyzed and interpreted.

Ground Theory

In this methodology, theories emerge from collected data, through connections and correlations within the data. The researcher does not commence the research with a predetermined theory in mind. The theory is developed through the analysis of the data about a phenomenon, hence, grounded in that data. Therefore, it goes beyond the phenomenology approach, because the “explanations that emerge are genuinely new knowledge and are used to develop new theories about the phenomenon” (Astalin, 2013, p. 121).

Phenomenology Approach

Based on philosophy, focusing on the ontological questions of meaning and lived experience, as cited by von Eckartsberg (1998, p.3), that “the aim is to examine and clarify human situations, events, meaning and experiences as they spontaneously occur in the course of daily life. While Pollio (1997, p. 3) cites the goal as a “rigorous description of human life as it is lived and reflected upon in all of its first-person concreteness, urgency, and ambiguity” (Seamon, n.d.). However, Seamon (n.d.) describes phenomenology “as anything a human can experience, encounter or live through in some way is a phenomenon, from the five senses from architecture, to travel, through light, to jealousy, and relationships, to consider a few.

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The phenomenologist uses the description to uncover commonalities, deeming it a phenomenon. Based on the grounded theory, the researcher is up close and in person, that the results are “grounded into the empirical world, defining meaning in a broader way that includes bodily, visceral, intuitive, emotional, and transpersonal dimensions” (Seamon, n.d.).

In contrast, ethnographic inquiry studies particular people, or groups of people, in particular places, in and at a particular time, but the both give meaning to the groups way of living and experiences.

Psychology of religion

The psychology of religion as cited and describe by Loewenthal (1995), are “several beliefs shared by the major religious traditions, namely in the existence of a non-material (spiritual) reality, a belief that the purpose of life is to increase harmony in the world by doing good and avoiding evil and, in monotheistic religions, a belief t that the source of existence (God) is also the source of moral directives” (Coyle, 2008, p.1).

At times the experiences are place under the phenomenological experience in relation to spiritual experiences, or the interpretive framework of a personal experience, therefore, “any experience may be deemed religious or spiritual if it is interpreted through the framework of religious or spiritual beliefs” (Coyle, 2008, p.2).

Religion is approached through psychological mindset, without assumptions about religious truths and values, and contemplates how psychology “can enrich understandings of people’s religious beliefs, values and behaviors” (Coyle, 2008, p.2).

Similarities of These Approaches

- The theoretical framework is not presumed, it derived strictly from the data.

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- Relationship between the parties are close and respectable, based on equality as human beings.
- Researchers become one in the setting of the people they wish to explore.
- Whether based in the natural or social science, it cannot be void of value, as it cannot be fully objective as the values and background of the researcher affects the research.
- Through thick, rich description the detailed experiences, uncovering feelings and meanings of actions, are described, analyzed and interpreted.

Unlike the positivist view, researchers believe that understanding the human experiences is as important as focusing on explanation, predication and control.

Strengths of Qualitative Research

- Open-ended questions reveal new or unanticipated phenomenon and raises more issues through broad and open-ended inquiry.
- Play a an important role in suggesting relationships, causes, effects and dynamic processes.
- Flexibility to probe initial participant responses.
- It encourages creativity and innovative exploratory frameworks.
- As statistic is not used, through a more narrative, descriptive style, new insights are gained.
- Participatory methods empower, rather than objectify respondents. (Mohajan, 2018, p.18)

Weaknesses in Qualitative Research

- Results in data that is not objectively verifiable.

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- It needs skilled researchers and active listeners to carry out data collection activities.
- It can be time consuming, costly and labor intensive.
- Low levels of standardization.
- Context, event, situations, conditions and interactions cannot be replicated.
- There are no objectively verifiable results, therefore, it is difficult to apply conventional standards of validity and reliability. (Mohajan, 2018, p.19)

Conclusion

Though this is not an exhaustive list of quality research designs and approaches, the emphasis is on quality. The quality of research is not the method used, but the appropriateness of that method to the research questions, the skill with which the method is applied and the way in which data are interpreted in light of appropriate theoretical concepts. During the process of research, collection, and analysis of data, researchers must adhere to methodological and ethical rigor to advance qualitative research into new dimensions. “When used along with quantitative methods, qualitative research can help us interpret and better understand the complex reality of a given situation and the implications of quantitative data” (Family, n.d., p.2), as they are complementary to one another.

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