



REVIEW ARTICLE

Understanding Theories in Qualitative Research

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to give readers a unique understanding of qualitative research by sketching out its historical background, theoretical underpinnings, and methods of data collection. From this study, qualitative research is deployed in several disciplines, such as behavioural and social science, to better understand human experiences, cultures, beliefs, and values. In its broad terms, it can also be thought of as a research approach that has its theoretical roots in sociology, social psychology, anthropology, and linguistics. This type of research is ideal for delving into complex phenomena that are difficult to quantify with numerical numbers and statistics, despite its trustworthiness being a concern for some readers. It therefore can be time-consuming compared to quantitative research because chains of data are generated in qualitative research that requires hours of analytical processes that cannot be performed by a software program.

Keywords: Qualitative research, constructivist-interpretive, paradigm, post positivist

Methodology

The scope of this review is a result of questions and sub-questions about the credibility of qualitative research, as well as reasons why qualitative research is still superior in measuring and providing a clear understanding of topics that quantitative research struggles to provide insight on. For that reason, a comprehensive online database was searched to gather relevant studies that addressed related themes in qualitative research such as its history, theoretical underpinning, and methods of data collection. Initially, the intention was to include all recent relevant studies that addressed the above themes. However, due to the diverse nature of relevant studies, the intention was to prioritize studies between 2000 to 2021 as much as possible, followed by others if necessary.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria for the studies included in this study were determined by the researcher's extensive content analysis of why those studies are important in meeting the study's aims and objectives. Most important if the content of the study clear addressed the importance of theories in qualitative research.

Introduction

In every research, researchers are presented with the task of selecting approaches and methodologies to deploy in a research inquiry. The selection criteria are often not due to an approach being easy or interesting but based on some scientific rationales such as the nature of the research question, the researcher's epistemological viewpoint, knowledge, and

training [1]. For that reason, researchers often have to choose between quantitative or qualitative research methods. But many quantitative researchers appear to believe that qualitative research is a relatively low level of scientific inquiry, so they seem not to be interested in its meaning, concepts, users, processes, and merits. However, qualitative research strives for an extensive and distinctive perspective inquiry, and such an approach is useful in attempting to comprehend human experiences, which is an essential component of research in health and psychology [1].

Similarly, it is a research method that is designed to investigate and explain little-known constructs rather than to establish a causal relationship. According to [2], qualitative research attempts to get to the emotional core of what actually occurred to participants, what spurred them to the choices they made, as well as how the choices impact them in diverse ways. Hence, it can be a pivotal technique for extracting specific information about values, opinions, feelings, and behaviours [3] even though its dependability is frequently doubted by readers due to traditional notions of validity and reliability [4]. The purpose of this study is to present an exploratory explanation of key elements in qualitative research. This includes its history, underpinning theories, and methods of data collection.

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As such, when the content of this study is used properly and objectively, readers and researchers will be able to change their notions about qualitative research. Moreover, in psychological related research, qualitative concepts and analytical techniques are still presumed to be new [5], so the content of this study will assist new qualitative researchers in navigating their views and notion about qualitative research.

History and Definition of Qualitative Research

Stepping back into history, the origin of psychological qualitative research is something that is not well epitomized. However, [6] traced back its history to the ancient works of Aristotle, followed by emphasizing Darwin's classic naturalistic investigation of emotions and morals as one of the few early works in psychological qualitative research. But, even before that, Freud relied on case history investigation to describe new findings throughout his investigations on psychopathology and psychiatric illness [7]. Thus, psychological qualitative investigations began in the work of various individuals long before it became a topic of scholarly interest.

Despite that, the term qualitative as a caption in psychological studies entered scientific discourse in the 1980s [8], and from then, it has developed as a distinctive domain of investigation in health-related research [9]. This development was brought by numerous psychologists who contributed in developing multiple sequences of linguistic data analysis. Notably, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, John Austin, Jacques Derrida, and Ludwig Wittgenstein's viewpoint on the pivotal role of language in psychology and science [6]. This resulted in the acknowledgment, rationalization, and massive development of innovative works in qualitative research.

In its broadest sense, qualitative research means research that produces findings that are not obtained by means of statistics. It takes a naturalistic pathway in understanding complex phenomena in people's lives, narratives, and behaviours that has more to do with individual functioning, health, and social relationships. According to Gay and Airasian (2000), qualitative research entails gathering data in a naturalistic setting to gain a comprehensive understanding of its variables, through a means that does not rely on other types of research. In the same vein, qualitative research has also been defined as an inductive, explanatory, and naturalistic approach to studying people, natural events, interpersonal relationships, and processes in their natural context to uncover their descriptive properties and the meanings people attach to them [10]. Whereas, [11] defines qualitative research as a method that upholds the core idea of intersubjectivity, an approach that seeks to comprehend how people agree or construct meanings.

With the above varying definitions in mind, [12] saw qualitative researchers as people who work in the real world of lived experiences, attempting to make sense of social phenomena

and the connotations people assign to them. As a result, qualitative researchers recognize the fact that they are not neutral in their reporting of facts; rather, they place themselves in the world of the subject and seek to explain how the world is constructed from the subject's point of view. This results in the formation of multiple hypotheses or the redefinition of previously determined hypotheses, which are then examined for further understanding.

Underpinning Theories in Qualitative Research

In comparison to quantitative research, qualitative research has had a rocky relationship with theories for a long time. Because, the wide range of theoretical approaches presented as underpinning core elements of qualitative research can be off-putting at times [13]. Thus, to make sense of it, it is important to view the research process as a series of different phases that stems from the researcher's set of basic assumptions. These assumptions serve as the framework of ideas and theories that the researcher desire to investigate. Namely, qualitative research is underpinned by constructivist-interpretive, critical, post positivist, post structural/postmodern and feminist paradigms [14].

The constructivist-interpretive posits that people construct the meanings of their experiences, and thus they construct the realities in what they lived [15]. From this viewpoint, reality, therefore, appears as a construct in the minds, rather than in an outward entity. As such, the researcher makes an effort to decipher how participants construct their individualistic and shared meaning around a subject [16] as meanings are hidden and must be revealed through reflection. By and large, deeply understanding the individualistic and shared experiences around a subject of interest is guided by the dialogue between the researcher and the participants [17]. So, in the constructivists-interpretive paradigm, the researcher and the research participants are constantly constructing constructs guided by findings based on their dialogue and interpretation of events, experiences, and feelings.

For the critical paradigm, reality is constantly been shaped by political, cultural, social, economic, and gender attitudes and values. Therefore, realities are constructed socially [18], and language actively shapes and molds what is called reality [19]. In this regard, the critical paradigm regards reality as a product of language and certain aspects of a self-contained world. Thereupon, language can both empower and weaken reality. The researcher, therefore, attempts to explore taken-for-granted norms, beliefs, and social structures that highlight a problem and the social structures underpinning it [20]. Whereas in the postpositivist world, the position is that the researcher's values, predetermined hypotheses, theories, and background knowledge surrounding a subject are forces that influence what can be observed [21].

This approach stemmed as a result of criticisms and modifications to the positivism model [22]. To the postpositivist researcher, it is important to pursue objectivity as well as acknowledging the likelihood of being biased to certain aspects of the subject of interest. For this reason, the post positivists turn to give equal importance to both quantitative and qualitative variables of the study [23]. For the postmodern, reality is not a static reflection in human understanding of events and experiences but rather a mental re-construction and evaluation of events and experiences that are influenced by individualistic attitudes [24]. Therefore, reality is constantly recreated or it is subjected to change as people learn and progress throughout life. That being said, the postmodernists researcher, rejects the idea of fixed, and universality of reality, as he or she views reality as dependent on culture and culture change over time. Efforts are therefore being made to value the subjective and diverse opinions of individuals rather than the predetermined realities of the researcher.

To the feminism paradigm, the goal is to emphasize on issues that concern diversities. This includes issues of race, gender, social status, health, and women's interests [25]. This paradigm stemmed as a result of feminists' disgruntlement with the dominant of positivist research, which exempted women from research and disregarded their viewpoint and personal narratives as knowledge and critical realism [25]. Thus, the feminist researcher is often sensitive as to how gender and power pervade all aspects of society [26]. And the aim is to listen to how women think about their lives in comparison to men while criticizing how traditional researchers see women. This allows the researcher to identify and analyse the discrepancies that emerge when women attempt to fit their existences into societies that have already pre-conceptualized situations that have to do with women [27].

Data Collection Methods in Qualitative Research

Qualitative researchers rely on comprehensive and distinctive data to achieve the level of insight required in qualitative research. Qualitative data is typically not quantifiable and can be obtained through observation, open-ended surveys, interviews, or focus groups. Responses from such data collection methods are more likely to provide explanations for why and how a specific phenomenon is understood.

Observation

Observation is a method of gathering data that requires watching other people, happenings, or noting characteristics in their naturalistic environments. The stand of the researcher in the observation setting is an important consideration in determining the validity of the study and the quality of the data collected. As such, observation can be overt, or covert, participant, direct or indirect observation. However, the ideal method of observation is overt observation, in which the participants are aware of being observed [28]. Observation

assists the researcher in determining his or her relationships with the informants. This aids in understanding how people interact and how tasks are completed, prioritized and organized in the observed settings [28]. For that reason, observation is critical in studies that focus on people in social settings. In psychology, for example, observation may be used to determine client responses to specific stimuli, how often a student repeats a Behavior, or even how clients with social phobia express themselves in certain instances.

Interviews

For decades, interviews have been used as a method of data collection in qualitative research, and the method is still regarded as the most commonly used data collection structure in most qualitative research. This is because qualitative research interviews, or simply qualitative interviews, provide an in-depth examination and exploration of events on which the interviewee has extensive knowledge of the subject [29]. By conducting a qualitative interview, the researcher gains access to how people experience and perceive the world. Qualitative interviews are termed "structured and purposeful" conversations [30] because the aim is to understand certain aspects of an event or occurrence from the subject's frame of reference. This leads to the understanding of meanings and experiences that are peculiar to participants, as well as capturing and presenting actions, behaviours, and experiences in participants' own choice of words and emotions.

Although conducting a qualitative interview may appear to be a simple process, it is rarely as simple as many people think. Interview questions should contribute to the exploration of the unknown and should encourage further interaction [30]. It is therefore important for the interviewer to get acquainted with the interview schedule. To also ensure the interview process is effective and productive, the researcher is expected to possess skills and techniques that enable them to extract comprehensive data during the interview phase.

Focus Groups

Focus groups have similar features with interviews; however, it is more of an in-depth group interview with discussion. Focus groups are used to collect data about collective beliefs and the meanings that underpin those beliefs [31]. Focus groups have several benefits. Through group discussion, individuals within the group tend to provide candid responses [32]. Similarly, participants can strengthen each other's ideas and points of view. To use focus groups as an effective method of data collection in qualitative research, the researcher must first define his or her expectations. This includes understanding the purpose of the focus groups as well as the type of data required from the group. With that, participants can be selected and guided to hold discussions that centered on the aim and objectives of the research study.

Conclusion

Since psychology is concerned with people and their behaviours in various settings, a quantitative approach is often not regarded as an adequate method for conducting insightful research. Due to its failures to address the whole scope of human experience and the fundamentals of what it means to be human. Qualitative research is exploratory, attempting to understand the how and why of a phenomenon. Such research does not always adhere to rules, and the lack of rules does not imply that qualitative research is based on widespread irrelevance. What this means is that qualitative researchers are operating under a paradigm that guides their interpretations of phenomena. And within these guided paradigms there are conflicting ambiguities that must be accepted and tolerated because what is viewed as a final expectation in qualitative research is not always available. For that reason, qualitative findings are often disregarded by some readers and quantitative researchers because of the concepts of validity and reliability. However, the ability of the researcher to exhibit transparency by providing rationales to explain decision-making and analytical method is what determined a good and credible qualitative research.

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