

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGNS: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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### Abstract

The design of qualitative research is a general way of thinking about conducting qualitative research. It describes, either explicitly or implicitly, the purpose of the qualitative research, the role of the researcher(s), the stages of research, and the method of data analysis. A qualitative research design is probably the most flexible of the various experimental techniques, encompassing a variety of accepted methods and structures. Here, four of the major qualitative research designs namely phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory and case study are introduced. Descriptions of all four qualitative research designs are given separately. The design of qualitative research provides for the learner to understand the difference between phenomenology and grounded theory or between ethnography and case study and also provides the appropriate knowledge about itself.

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### Introduction

Qualitative research is a systematic scientific inquiry which seeks to build a holistic, largely narrative, description to inform the researcher's understanding of a social or cultural phenomenon. According to McMillan and Schumacher (1993, p. 479) qualitative research is defined as, "primarily an inductive process of organizing data into categories and identifying patterns (relationships) among categories." This definition implies that data and meaning emerge "organically" from the research context. Qualitative research worked out under a combination of observations, interviews, and document reviews. It gives the importance of looking at variables in the natural setting in which they are found. In the process of qualitative research interaction between variables is important. Detailed data is gathered through open ended questions that provide direct quotations. The interviewer is an integral part of the investigation.

Qualitative research is an umbrella term for a broad range of different approaches and methods, which vary considerably in terms of focus, assumptions about the nature of knowledge and the role of the researcher. Mason (2002) describes qualitative research approaches as all having the following in common:

- Being grounded in an 'interpretivist' position i.e. they are concerned with how the phenomena of interest are interpreted, understood, experienced, produced or constituted
- Based on research methods which are flexible and sensitive to social context
- Based on analytic methods which take account of complexity, detail and context.

Qualitative research is a broad term for investigative methodologies described as ethnographic, naturalistic, anthropological, field, or participant observer research. This differs

from quantitative research which attempts to gather data by objective methods to provide information about relations, comparisons, and predictions and attempts to remove the investigator from the investigation.

### **Design of the qualitative research**

The design of qualitative research is probably the most flexible of the various experimental techniques, encompassing a variety of accepted methods and structures. Four major types of qualitative research design are the most commonly used. They are:

- 1) phenomenology
- 2) ethnography
- 3) grounded theory
- 4) case study

Firstly, I will review the four qualitative research designs the phenomenological, ethnographic, grounded theory and case study perspectives. Case study can be either qualitative or quantitative in their approach to data collection. Descriptions of all four qualitative designs are given below separately.

### **Phenomenology**

The terminology used by different authors can be very confusing and the use of the term phenomenology is one example. However, it is also used to describe a particular type of qualitative research. Literally we know that phenomenology means the study of phenomena. Phenomena may be events, situations, experiences or concepts. Phenomenology is a way of describing something that exists as an integral part of the world in which we are living. We are surrounded by many phenomena. Certainly, we are something aware of it but not fully understand.

Sometimes it happens that our lack of understanding in respect to these phenomena may exist because the phenomenon has not been overtly described and explained or our understanding of the impact it makes may be unclear. For example, we know that lots of people are counselors. But what does “counseling” actually mean and what is it like to be a counselor?

Let us take another example of back pain. There are so many co-relational studies available which tell us about the types of people who experience back pain and the apparent causes. Randomized controlled trials of drugs compare the effectiveness of analgesia against to each another. But what is it actually like to live with back pain?

What are the effects on peoples’ lives? What problems does it cause? A phenomenological study might explore, for example, the effect that back pain has on sufferers’ relationships with other people by describing the strain it can cause in marriages or the effect on children of having a disabled parent.

Finally we can say that wherever is a gap in our understanding and that clarification or explanation will be needed there the phenomenological research can begin in a systematic way with the full confident. Phenomenological research will not necessarily provide definitive explanations but it does raise awareness and increases insight about the phenomena.

## Ethnography

The social science that studies the origins and social relationships of human beings is known as anthropology. Ethnography is a branch of anthropology that provides scientific description of individual human societies. The term means “portrait of a people” and it is a methodology for descriptive studies of cultures and peoples. According to Van Maanen, "ethnography fieldwork usually means living with and living like those who are studied. In its broadest, most conventional sense, fieldwork demands the full-time involvement of a researcher over a lengthy period of time (typically unspecified) and consists mostly of ongoing interaction with the human targets of study on their home ground". The cultural parameter is that the people under investigation have something in common. The cultural parameters include:

- geographical – a particular region or country
- religious
- tribal – a family construction or its types
- shared experience
- life style – a manner to live together

In the counseling settings, researchers may choose an ethnographic approach because the cultural parameter is suspected of affecting the population’s response to solve their related problems. For example, cultural rules about contact between males and females may contribute to reluctance of women from an Asian subgroup to take up cervical screening. Ethnography helps counselor as well as counselee in the process of counseling to develop cultural awareness and sensitivity and enhances the provision and best way of counseling for people from all cultures.

Ethnographic studies require widespread fieldwork by the investigator in the current sceneries. We are having several techniques for data collection. These data collection techniques include both formal and informal interviewing. Often, interviewing individuals on several occasions and participant observation are used for data collection. Because of this, ethnography is extremely time consuming as it involves the researcher spending long periods of time in the field.

In the Ethnography analysis of data adopts an “emic” approach. In the emic approach, researcher attempts to interpret data from the perspective of the population under study. The results are expressed as though they were being expressed by the subjects themselves, often using local language and terminology to describe phenomena. For example, a researcher may explore behaviour which we traditionally in the westernized medical world would describe as mental illness. However, within the population under study, the behaviour may not be characterised as illness but as something else - as evidence that the individual is “blessed” or “gifted” in some way.

Ethnographic research can be problematic when researchers are not sufficiently familiar with the social mores of the people being studied or with their language. Interpretation from an “etic” perspective - an outsider perspective - may be a misinterpretation causing confusion. For this reason, the ethnographic researcher usually returns to the field to check his interpretations with informants there by validating the data before presenting the findings.

## **Grounded theory**

During their research into illness and dying, Glaser and Strauss developed grounded theory procedures, written in their book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). To move away from the traditional scientific method, Glaser and Strauss suggested gathering data through systematic methodological procedures and developing theories from research that is grounded in the data.

Grounded theory is a type of qualitative research methodology that allows theory/theories to emerge from the data that is collected. Grounded theory research follows a systematic yet flexible process to collect data, code the data, make connections and see what theory/theories are generated or are built from the data. A theory is a set of concepts that are integrated through a series of relational statements (Hage, 1972). In grounded theory, the researcher does not commence the process of research with a predetermined theory in mind, the formulation of theories stem from the data that allows one to explain how people experience and respond to events. The main feature of Grounded theory research is the development of new theory through the collection and analysis of data about a phenomenon. It goes beyond phenomenology because the explanations that emerge are genuinely new knowledge and are used to develop new theories about a phenomenon. In health care settings, the new theories can be applied enabling us to approach existing problems in a new way. For example, our approaches to health promotion or the provision of care.

Many researchers observed that people who were bereaved progressed through a series of stages and that each stage was characterized by certain responses: denial, anger, acceptance and resolution. This is not a new phenomenon, people have going through these stages for as long as society has existed, but the research formally acknowledged and described the experience. Now we use our knowledge of the grief process, new knowledge derived from grounded theory, to understand the experience of bereavement and to help the bereaved to come to terms with their loss. We recognize when a person is having difficulty coming to terms with loss because we use the knowledge to recognize signs of “abnormal” grief and can offer help.

There are so many techniques for the data collection are used to develop grounded theory, particularly interviews and observation although literature review and relevant documentary analysis make important contributions. Basically, grounded theory is the simultaneous collection and analysis of data using a process known as constant comparative analysis. In this process, data are transcribed and examined for content immediately following data collection. Ideas which emerge from the analysis are included in data collection when the researcher next enters the field. For this reason, a researcher collecting data through semi structured interviews may gradually develop an interview schedule in the latter stages of a research project which looks very different to the original schedule used in the first interview. New theory begins its conception as the researcher recognizes new ideas and themes emerging from what people have said or from events which have been observed. Memos form in the researcher's consciousness as raw data is reviewed. Hypotheses about the relationship between various ideas or categories are tested out and construct formed leading to new concepts or understandings. In this sense the theory is grounded in the data.

In phenomenology, there are many concepts for those we are aware but do not fully understand, there are aspects of health care which might be informed by the development of new theory. We have one example that is related to spirituality. In any holistic programme of care

health care professionals may talk about the need to meet the spiritual needs of patients. However, we understand very little of what this means. At first view, spiritual needs might be interpreted as referring to religious beliefs but many people would say that spiritual needs are more than this. It may be an individual's sense of well being, happiness or peace of mind. Grounded theory research could provide health care professionals with a better framework for providing truly holistic care.

## **Case study**

According to the Thomas the case study is defined as: "Case studies are analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that are studied holistically by one or more methods. The case study can be done in social sciences and life sciences. Case studies may be descriptive or explanatory. Like surveys, case study research approaches can be treated as a qualitative or quantitative. Case study research is used to describe an entity that forms a single unit such as a person, an organization or an institution. Some research studies describe a series of cases. The latter type is used to explore causation in order to find underlying principles. They may be prospective, in which criteria are established and cases fitting the criteria are included as they become available, or retrospective, in which criteria are established for selecting cases from historical records for inclusion in the study.

The case that is the subject of the inquiry will be an instance of a class of phenomena so as to provide an analytical frame an object within which the study is conducted and which the case illuminates and explicates."

## **Types of cases**

Three types of cases may thus be distinguished:

1. Key cases
2. Outlier cases
3. Local knowledge cases

According to the frame of reference of particular choice of the subject, the case study (key cases, outlier cases and local knowledge cases) can be made between the subject and the object. The subject is the "practical, historical unity" through which the theoretical focus of the study is being viewed. The object is that theoretical focus – the analytical frame. For example, a researcher can make interest in the expansion of western culture in India.

As a research design, the case study claims to recommend a wealth and depth of information which is not usually offered by other methods. With many variables the case studies can be identified as a complex set of conditions which produce a particular demonstration. It is a highly multipurpose research method. It can employ any and all methods of data collection from testing to interviewing. The most simple is an illustrative description of a single event or occurrence. More complex is the analysis of a social situation over a period of time. The most complex is the extended case study which traces events involving the same actors over a period of time enabling the analysis to reflect changes and adjustments.

Now a day, case study researches have a wide scope in the field of health care centers. For example of the case study approach would be to describe and analyze the delivery of health services, evaluation of a particular care approach and organizational change in the planning as in

pilot projects. Another example, a case study may be conducted of the development of a new service such as a collaboration of hospital to run under the discharge liaison scheme. So that an outreach teenage health service set up as an alternative of general practice based teenage clinics centers in promoting teenage health.

### **Misunderstandings about case study research**

Bent Flyvbjerg (2006) identifies and corrects the following five prevalent misunderstandings about case study research:

1. General, theoretical knowledge is more valuable than concrete, practical knowledge.
2. One cannot generalize on the basis of an individual case and, therefore, the case study cannot contribute to scientific development.
3. The case study is most useful for generating hypotheses, whereas other methods are more suitable for hypotheses testing and theory building.
4. The case study contains a bias toward verification, i.e., a tendency to confirm the researcher's preconceived notions.

It is often difficult to summarize and develop general propositions and theories on the basis of specific case studies.

### **Conclusion**

Here we discussed the four types of qualitative research designs. These various qualitative research designs do not form a comprehensive list and some research methods can be applied with either a qualitative or a quantitative orientation. The language of qualitative research is somewhat difficult for the beginner researcher to understand the notion used in its design.

It is very clear that the differences between the assorted qualitative research designs can be difficult to understand at first. The differences are somewhat slight and are mainly concerned with the original research question, the people or situations being studied and the way the data is analyzed, interpreted and presented. It is very easy for the learner to understand the difference between phenomenology and grounded theory or between ethnography and case study. The main purpose of the various qualitative research designs is to provide the appropriate knowledge about the different qualitative methodologies and what the terms mean.

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