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PSYCHOLOGY

PAPER No. 3: Qualitative Methods

**MODULE No. 1 : Introduction to Qualitative Research
& Comparison Between Qualitative and Quantitative
Research Methods**

1. Learning Outcomes

After studying this module, you shall be able to

- Know the basic idea of what a qualitative research is.
- Learn the processes that qualitative research entails.
- Evaluate the importance of qualitative research in psychology and the issues concerning it.
- Differentiate between qualitative and quantitative process of psychological research.

2. Introduction

Introduction to qualitative research

& comparison between qualitative and quantitative research methods

There are two main parts in this module:

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH. This section outlines the process of qualitative research in psychology, beginning with its historical origins and the basic tenets of the qualitative paradigm. It goes on to discuss the process of carrying out research, including sampling, methods of data collection and data analysis. Lastly it contemplates the major issues concerning qualitative studies in psychology.

PART TWO: COMPARISON BETWEEN QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS. Here we analyze as to how the two paradigms differ, and through the comparative study understand the pros and cons of both.

3. Part One: Introduction to qualitative research

3.1 The historical beginnings of qualitative research and the paradigm shift from quanti to quali

Research in the discipline of psychology began with the quantitative paradigm, particularly with experimentation. During the 1880s-1890s period Sigmund Freud was an important figure and his method of study primarily entailed detailed case histories, narratives and the sort, basically qualitative research. Freud and Piaget were then exceptions, who did not conform to the experimental paradigm of their times.

By 1960s, the paradigm crisis had begun. There was growing evidence of awareness within the psychological community that experiments were inadequate for the purposes of

developing a proper understanding of humans (Dyer, 2006). By the 1990s, it was clear that a new paradigm had begun to emerge. A report of the British Psychological Society acknowledged that future developments within psychology would be assisted by the increased use of qualitative approaches in teaching and research.

Although the paradigm shift had not begun at that time, the origins of qualitative research methods can be traced back as early as the 1890s when Booth and Webb used a combination of several methods like observation, interview as well as surveys to study the life and labor of the London poor. Then apart from Freud and Piaget who stuck to qualitative methods in the strictly experimental regime, there were people like Ernest Dichter, a market researcher and a great advocate of the interview technique.

Similarly the use of field research (an important method of qualitative research) saw a growth, particularly due to the tremendous importance given to it by the Chicago school of sociology. The technique went through revolutionary developmental stages throughout 1910 to 60s. And by the 1960s, the observation method was given great emphasis as a social research method.

The 1990s also saw the emergence of new forms of qualitative data analysis like content and the integrated phenomenological approach which greatly pushed the qualitative paradigm further. It also saw the development of the focus group technique.

And from there on, there was an explosion of interest in qualitative methods. The shift in paradigm is significant and is reflected in increasing number of qualitative research articles appearing in journals, dissertations with qualitative projects and the establishment of psychology courses teaching qualitative methodologies.

The latest trend in research, however, is shifting to a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches that has come with a better understanding about the pros and cons of both the orientations.

3.2 Familiarizing with qualitative research

Smith (2003) defines qualitative psychology as concerned with describing the constituent properties of an entity, while quantitative analysis is involved in determining how much of the entity there is. It aims to provide rich descriptive accounts of the phenomenon under investigation, while quantitative research is more generally concerned with counting occurrences, volumes, or the size of associations between entities (Smith, 2003).

Qualitative approach is engaged with exploring, describing and interpreting the personal and social experiences of participants. And researchers attempt to understand a small number of participants' own frame of reference rather than trying to test a preconceived hypothesis on a large sample. The logic of research is not so much to test out given theories about what guides

human behaviour, but instead to develop an appreciation of the underlying motivations that people have for doing what they do (Henn et. al., 2006).

A researcher must first try to understand the meanings that people assign to the world around them, which is in line with the assumption of qualitative research. These meanings tend to govern their actions and help in understanding their behaviour. The emphasis given by qualitative researchers to their studies therefore involves an examination of the perspectives of the people or groups that are of interest to them – their ideas, attitudes, motives, and intentions (Henn et. al., 2006).

As Henn et. al. (2006) aptly point out, these are certain characteristics of qualitative research methods:

- Research is carried out in ‘real-life’ settings. The researcher attempts to study human behaviour as it naturally occurs, with as little disruption to people’s lives as possible.
- The objective is to take detailed descriptions of people’s behaviour and thoughts in order to highlight their social meanings. This implies that the researcher adopts an insider perspective in research, in which there is closeness between the researcher and the people studied, rather than an impersonal and distanced relationship.
- The researcher is likely to adopt an approach in which the research issues and concepts are not specified. The focus of the research may change during the course of collecting data, as new ideas may develop and particular issues become important.
- The qualitative approach encompasses theory construction and not theory testing. Theoretical ideas tend to develop from the initial data collected which then leads to future data collection – a cumulative spiral of theory development and data collection thus develops. There is an inductive approach. Qualitative researchers often begin with a rather general topic of interest pertaining to some social phenomena. It is only during the course of data collection and analysis that researchers narrow down their research problem and begin to formulate and test hypotheses.
- The researcher studies one or a small number of cases, often over an extended period of time. The data collection process is characterised as being intensive. It involves a very detailed study with large quantities of data collected from a small number of informants and settings.
- Unstructured interviews and observations are usually the main sources of data, but public and private documents and even official statistics and questionnaire data may be used.
- There is minimal pre-structuring of the data that is collected. Therefore, the observations and interviews used by qualitative researchers are often referred to as ‘unstructured’.
- Qualitative research data is generally reported in the form of verbal descriptions and explanations. Statistical analysis and quantification is rarely used.

3.3 Sampling in qualitative research

Comparatively, there is less focus on sample’s representativeness when it comes to qualitative research. The focus is rather on the representativeness of concepts in the research, and of being

able to access the social processes in which the researcher is interested; i.e. importance is given to how the sample or small collection of cases, units, or activities illuminates social life. The primary purpose of sampling here is to collect specific cases, events, or actions that can clarify and deepen understanding (Neuman, 2006). The concern of qualitative researchers is to find cases that will enhance what they learn about the processes of social life in a given context. Typically theoretical sampling or snowball sampling is used. Snowball sampling is used where there is no obvious list to refer to in order to generate a participant base for a study. It relies on the researcher to obtain a strategically important contact who can then recommend other possible participants. These participants can then be approached to take part in the study.

Theoretical sampling is entirely governed by the selection of those respondents who will maximise theoretical development. The sampling should aim to locate strategic data which may refute emerging hypotheses. Sampling stops when 'theoretical saturation' is reached, that is, when no new analytical insights are forthcoming from a given situation (Arber, 1993).

3.4 Data collection; methods of qualitative research

The most established methods of qualitative data collection include:

- **Interviews:** They are in-depth one to one interactions where the interviewees talk about the subject in terms of their own frames of reference, i.e. they are open ended.
- **Observations or ethnography:** in depth observations of people, behaviors, institutions, cultures, and customs etc. Researchers take detailed field notes.
- **Case studies:** here the researcher examines, in depth, many features (including psychological characteristics) of a few cases over time. Cases could be individual, groups, organizations etc and data is collected through observations, interviews or combination of both.
- **Focus group discussions:** Here a group of participants are brought together to share and discuss their views on a topic. These are used when a researcher wants to assess how several people work out a common view, or the range of views about a particular topic. The intention is to stimulate discussion among people and bring to the surface responses that otherwise might lay dormant.

3.5 Data analysis in qualitative research

In contrast to quantitative research the data collection in qualitative methods involve naturalistic, textual or verbal reports. Hence data analysis involves interpretation of what these textual data means or implies. There are several methods of qualitative data analysis like thematic/content analysis, grounded theory analysis, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and narrative analysis. The interpretation is conveyed to the scientific community through detailed narrative reports of the participant's perceptions, insights of the researcher and understanding about the phenomenon. Visual presentation of data may be possible like through maps, diagrams or photographs.

3.6 Issues in qualitative research

Validity: The validity of qualitative researches has always been a question; whether the results accurately reflect the phenomenon under study.

Reliability: qualitative research is criticised both for lacking structure and system, and for an inability of researchers using this approach to generalise the findings to the larger population. The replicability of studies is also poor.

Generalisability: implications from a study of few cases can never be generalised to human behaviour per se. but many researchers feel that since the goal of qualitative research is to describe a specific group in detail and to explain the patterns that exist, the question of generalizability itself should not be raised.

The issue of reactivity: People may consciously or unconsciously alter the way they behave or modify what they say if they are aware that they are being researched. This will most likely be the case if the researcher is studying a sensitive area (Henn et. al., 2006).

The subjectivity of the researcher: ultimately it is in the hands of the researcher what to make of the data collected. It depends on the researcher what parts of the data should be considered significant, what is to be filtered out and what implications are to be derived out of the compiled data.

Over-identification with the subjects: this is especially applicable to the observation method, wherein if the researcher over a long period of close association with the subjects begins to identify with them then he/she may become biased and may not be able to analyse objectively.

Access to target subjects: often researchers face constraints in reaching out to the subjects of their interest for e.g. studying juvenile delinquents. They may face a lot of political and legal barriers.

Ethical issues: researchers may have to resort to deception and often not overtly state their objectives of research since it would compromise their study. And this betrayal of confidences poses ethical considerations.

4. Part Two: Comparison between qualitative and quantitative research methods

4.1 Quali Vs quanti; a cold war?! Some claims worth considering:

- Qualitative methods provide a more complete understanding of the subject matter of the research. Some qualitative researchers argue that quantification fails to come to terms with or misses crucial aspects of what is being studied. Quantification encourages premature abstraction from the subject matter of research and a concentration on numbers and statistics rather than concepts (Howitt & Cramer, 2011)

- Human experience and interaction are far too complex to be reduced to a few variables as is typical in quantitative research.
- Qualitative methods are a preliminary stage in the research process which contributes to the eventual development of adequate quantification. Quantification is, in this formulation, the ultimate goal of research.
- Only the quantitative data lead to results in the actual sense of the word, whereas qualitative data play a more illustrative part (Flick, 2009)
- Qualitative methods can live very well without the later use of quantitative methods, whereas quantitative methods need qualitative methods for explaining the relations they find.
- Now the conventional rigid dichotomy of quantitative–qualitative methodologies is inadequate to differentiate different types of research. The dichotomy implies that research inevitably falls into one or other of these apparently neat boxes. This is not necessarily the case. Between these extremes of quantification and qualitative data gathering are many intermediary possibilities (Howitt & Cramer, 2011)

4.2 A summarized table of differences between quantitative and qualitative orientations to research:

QUANTITATIVE	QUALITATIVE
i. It measures objective facts	i. It constructs social reality. It looks into what is normal behavior and what is abnormal. So there is a lot of subjectivity.
ii. The focus is on variables, which are properly and finely defined.	ii. Focus is on individual cases, interplay of processes, events etc.
iii. Reliability is the key.	iii. Authenticity is the key.
iv. It is value free. It is not based on any moral principles.	iv. Values are present and explicit. The researchers' subjective principles have a bearing on the research.
v. Theory and data are separate. There is a distinction between the two and theory is stated before data is begun to be collected.	v. The theory and data are fused. There is a fine line between the two and theory evolves along with the process of data collection.
vi. It is independent of context. The context of the society, events or history have no bearing.	vi. It is situationally constrained. The context is critical.

vii. There are many cases or subjects. Research is done on a large scale and the method is equipped to deal with large numbers.	vii. There are few individual cases done at a time and the data collected is in detail and very exhaustive.
viii. Statistical analysis is done on the data and it uses tests like t and F tests and correlational analysis.	viii. Qualitative methods of analysis include thematic, discourse, grounded theory, narrative etc and the main feature is the culling out of the main emerging themes.
ix. The researcher is detached. Often data collection is carried out by assistants who can be easily briefed about it.	ix. The researcher is actively involved in the data collection and interacts fully with the participant.
x. The major step involved are: selection of topic, focusing of the question, which involves formulation of hypothesis and operatively defining variables, then making the research design, data collection, analysis and interpretation.	x. The major steps are acknowledging the self, adopting a perspective, study design formation, data collection, analysis, interpretation and then reporting. There is no formulation of hypothesis.
xi. The research question is preplanned.	xi. The research question is emergent.
xii. The hypotheses are enumerated and stated along with the formulation of the research question.	xii. No hypothesis is stated. The researcher has no idea as to how the data will emerge.
xiii. The concepts are in terms of variables and are concrete.	xiii. The concepts are in terms of motifs, themes, generalizations etc.
xiv. The data is hard and in the form of numbers which can be made into computer readable formats.	xiv. The data is soft since it is made up of words, sentences, gestures, symbols, non verbal cues etc.
xv. The data is visually presented in terms of charts, tables etc with statistical implications.	xv. The data can't be put into tables since they take the form of verbatim, transcriptions etc. visual presentation may include photos, maps or diagrams.
xvi. Methods of data collection include	xvi. Methods of data collection include

structured questionnaires, instruments, scales like the likert etc.	open ended interviews, observations, taking narrative accounts etc.
xvii. The theory is stated before hand and the data sort of substantiates the theory. It is a deductive approach.	xvii. There is no theory to begin with. It is an inductive approach and theory emerges along with data and its analysis.
xviii. The theory is mostly causal.	xviii. Theory may be causal or non causal.
xix. There is a reconstructed logic approach. There are precise rules, procedures, systematic and standardized way of research.	xix. It uses logic in practice. There is bricolage and a practical orientation to completion of task. No norms or set rules exist.
xx. The way is linear, every step is clear cut, straight and defined.	xx. It is a non linear way of research. It is circular, iterative, back and forth.
xxi. Objectivity is the emphasis. The validity and reliability vouch for the research.	xxi. Emphasis is on the trustworthiness and integrity of the researcher.
xxii. Ther is stress on detailed preplanning.	xxii. The emphasis is on getting rich data.
xxiii. The concern is on the measurement of variables.	xxiii. Concern is on the richness, texture and feelings of the raw data.
xxiv. Procedures are standard and replication can be done.	xxiv. Procedures are particular and replication is rare.
xxv. There is a positivist approach to social research.	xxv. There is a constructivist, interpretative approach.
xxvi. An individual element has an importance of next to nothing.	xxvi. It is all about individual differences.
xxvii. Generalizations are easily made to the global human behavior.	xxvii. Since emphasis is on individual difference it is not equipped to make generalizations.
xxviii. Certain things or phenomena that can't be quantified can't be studied by this	xxviii. Such events can be studied only through this approach. E.g. trauma

method.	due to a natural disaster.
xxix. It cannot provide causative explanations or the why of behavior.	xxix. It answers the why of behavior; the causes and the reasons.

5. Summary

- The qualitative paradigm of psychological research developed gradually after the quantitative methods were established. The paradigm shift was fuelled by the growing awareness that experiments were inadequate to capture the essence of psychological study.
- Although less structured compared to the quantitative methods, qualitative research has its own basic tenets and is a scientific procedure with proper methodology at every step involved in the process.
- Evaluating the process of qualitative research, there are several issues that need to be considered. But the pros of the method make it indispensable to psychological research.
- The two paradigms differ greatly in their approach to research but research in the field would be at a loss if either of them were to be excluded. The best approach is perhaps to use the two to complement each other and develop quali-quantitative mixed researches.