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Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Science Research: Towards Relativist Ontology and Interpretivist- Constructivist Epistemology

Egara Kabaji

Student, Department of Business Administration (MBA),
Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Kenya

Dr. Clive Mukanzi

Senior Lecturer, Department of Business Administration,
Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Kenya

Abstract:

This paper examines qualitative research methodology and its suitability for social science research. It argues for adoption of relativist ontology and interpretivist-constructivist epistemology within the realm of qualitative Research Methodology. It first focuses on quantitative research methodologies and their limitations in social science research before outlining qualitative methodologies and their applicability. It concludes that qualitative methodologies are essential in humanistic inquiry.

Keywords: *Qualitative research methodologies, relativist ontology, Interpretivist-constructivist epistemology*

1. Introduction

It has been argued that quantitative research is intended to gather cold, hard facts and numbers. In many ways quantitative data is structured and purely statistical. Researchers who employ this methodology aim at making general conclusions about a given subject of research. But in qualitative research, we aim at collecting data that will help to describe and explain a phenomenon more than measure it. In qualitative research, we are more concerned with perceptions, impressions, opinions, and views.

Qualitative surveys have yet another quality. They direct enquiry into deeper layers of the phenomenon under study with the purpose gaining information about people's motivations, thinking, and attitudes. In view of this, qualitative data is not easy to analyze due to the depth of information that demand critical evaluation of the data from a multiplicity of perspectives.

We wish to agree with Denzin and Lincoln (1994) who argue that "qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (1994:2).

2. Critique of Quantitative Approaches

Quantitative approaches simply consider the number of people who said this or the other, period. In analysis of social, psychological and cultural dynamics, this approach is shallow and cannot unearth deep motives, innuendos and hidden feelings or the "non-dit" — the veiled, the sublime and perhaps the shameful and unconventional. It assumes that human motives can be measured in bytes and binary combinations. In many instances quantitative approaches are used in opinion polls. It is important to note that opinion polls are just one of the many forms of research surveys whose findings get to the public domain. Unfortunately, without exception, they all utilize quantitative research methods. The challenge, especially in trying to understand human motives, is that they fail to visualize the social dynamics and treat society, not as a social system, but a techno-economic system. From this premise, their generalizations are small specks scratched from the tip of the iceberg, Egara Kabaji (2017).

At best, quantitative research methods are suitable for natural sciences. It is our view that human beings are not atoms or plants to be measured in numbers.

Advocates of quantitative methodologies believe that quantitative researches are controlled, objective and generalizable in revealing truth about phenomena. They operate from the premise that facts can be obtained by asking simple questions. This approach simply produces numerical data amenable to the fallacy that bytes and binary permutations can tell you the truth about human motives. A good example of failure of opinion polls to reveal the truth happened in United States of America. President Donald Trump's win in the American elections may have surprised many,

but it has been used to fundamentally reveal the deficiencies in research paradigms used in opinion polls. It showed that the simplistic approaches employed are not reliable and scientific enough for a holistic trustworthy picture.

Quantitative approaches only give a fraction of the truth and cannot present a holistic picture. They do not take cognizance of the character of human creatures and the processes through which they create meaning that is either overtly expressed or hidden. Bluntly said, it is a mirage to imagine that human perceptions can be measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency.

3. A Plea for Qualitative Approaches

We agree with Charles Ochieng' Ong'ondo and Julius Ouma Jwan (2011), the famous duo of qualitative research methodologies, when they argue that we have to rethink use of quantitative research methodologies in humanities, cultural studies and social science research. As an active operator in the academy in Kenya, we are aware of various schools of thought on research paradigms. The first group subscribes to quantitative research methodologies, the second is persuaded by qualitative approaches while a third group subscribes to a hybrid approach that combines the two. The wars between these groups are often fought in boardrooms especially during defenses of both Masters and PhD theses. Often, those who suffer as the titans lock horns are the students. But this should really never happen. The truth is that some research areas, especially those in humanistic sciences, do not render themselves to quantitative methods.

In management theory, quantitative methods have failed to capture the human aspects of the social and work environment. The quantitative researchers keep on churning out figures and graphs about phenomena, but all these give only a fraction of reality in human sciences. Quantitative researches fail because the methodology they use is not imbued with capacity to listen to what is not said.

4. Qualitative Research Tenets that are Amenable to Human Sciences

In human science research, we need to problematize the socially constructed nature of reality from a multiplicity of viewpoints. We can only arrive at reliable interpretation when we generate and analyze holistic data, but in a rather rigorous manner within sound theoretical paradigms. Sometimes it may mean we interpret and describe the voice, tone, reflexive movements and examine patterns of words. We have to pay critical attention to unique circumstances of the context and participants to derive meaning.

To achieve reliable results, researchers have to establish connections through application of multiplicity of interconnected interpretive practices for a cumulative view of the subject matter. For opinion polls to be reliable they have to interrogate experiences of human beings in a variety of situations. Qualitative approach is useful especially when dealing with human feelings and perceptions. Generally, qualitative research method enables the researcher to explore a subject in detail. It further helps the researcher to capture data, using a non-standardized way of collecting data (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2016). Qualitative methodology affords the researcher an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon under investigation. This approach is in line with relativism and interpretive constructivist ontology and epistemology respectively. These paradigms acknowledge the non-existence of objective reality as multiple realities are derived from persons who experience a given phenomenon.

Creswell J. (2009) argues that qualitative research uses multiple sources of data and it is done in a natural setting. Thus, the researcher holds a face to face interaction with the study participants. We also benefitted from Strauss and Corbin (1998) who states that qualitative research is an inductive process that is interactive between the researchers and co-researchers, the phenomena under investigation and the world where research is applied.

Qualitative research methodology allows for collection of data through multiple sources using probing questions, in-depth interviews, FGDs and narratives. We advocate for use of qualitative approaches when the researcher is guided by the "interpretivist" philosophical paradigm. This means that he is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced or constituted. It is important to note that qualitative research is based on methods of data generation, which are both flexible and sensitive to the social context in which data is produced. In the same breath, qualitative method is based on methods of analysis, explanation and argument building, which involve understandings detail and context.

According to Patton (2002) there are three characteristics of qualitative research. It is first a naturalistic inquiry where real world situations are studied as they unfold naturally. It is also non-manipulative and non-controlling. Secondly, qualitative research has some acceptable degree of flexibility. That is why a researcher employing this approach is not locked into a rigid design that can eliminate responsiveness and pursuance of new paths and discovery as they emerge. Thirdly, under design strategies, it is important to foreground the fact that the sampling has to be purposive because cases for study are selected for, they are information-rich and illuminative. The aim is to get deep insights about the phenomenon under study.

Qualitative data collection has to involve interviews and observations that capture people's lived experiences and perspectives. It enables the researcher to interact directly with the participants, situation or phenomenon under study. While using this approach the researcher has to engage in emphatic neutrality in order to get a vicarious understanding without judgment. In other words, the researcher was able to enter the realm of the participant's world without bias.

It is more interesting when a researcher employs this approach in a case study situation. The case study becomes special and unique in orientation for analysis. Data analysis involves an inductive analysis and creative synthesis. The process has to be guided by principles rather than by rules. In essence, we can only define a study as qualitative if it agrees with its tenets in terms of design, data generation and in analysis strategies.

5. The Humanistic Angle

Many social science researches are naturalistic inquiries (NI) and the human person is the main source of data. This is in line with the participatory worldview and advocacy paradigm. According to Glaser (2003) and Lincoln and Guba (1985), what is of importance is the natural setting of the participants. The ultimate goal in such studies is to create knowledge that will make it possible to interpret the phenomenon under study. In NI negotiated outcomes are sought. According to Glaser (2003) NI prefers to negotiate meaning and interpretation with human sources from which the data has chiefly been drawn. This is because it is their constructions of reality that the inquirer seeks to reconstruct since inquiry outcomes depend upon the nature and quality of the interaction between knower and known. In most humanistic researches, the participants are natural human being in given environments. The interviews and FGDs generate data from the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants who are purposefully selected. The data is analyzed using thematic analysis.

We wish to argue here that qualitative approaches also use phenomenology as a method of research. Phenomenology is the study of lived, human phenomena within the everyday social contexts in which the phenomena occur from the perspective of those who experience them. Phenomena refer to anything that human beings experience in life. According to Holloway (1997) Phenomenology is used in research for gaining insight into people's motivations and actions.

6. Sampling in Qualitative Research

In qualitative research, the sample size is fairly small because the individual interviews and the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) are expected to be passionate and intense. The sampling of the study should be done with focus on information rich cases. Durepos and Wiebe (2010) argue that such a sample for an in-depth study is ideal. According to Mills et al, a large sample in a qualitative study would hinder an in-depth study because it would be difficult to process the large output of data. Thus, a smaller sample would allow the process to extract thick rich data. However, to achieve a balance as noted by Sandelowski (1995), the sample should not be too small as to inhibit data saturation.

The qualitative researches mostly use non-probability sampling techniques to arrive at the sample sizes for the individual interviews and FGDs. Purposive sampling is used to get the sample participants. According to Patton (2002), in purposive sampling, people are selected because they are information-rich and illuminative, and offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interests.

According to Creswell (2003), the idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select respondents or sites that will best help the researcher understand the problem. Owing to this, we propose that purposive sampling of qualitative research should not exceed twenty items of study.

7. Research Instruments in Qualitative Research

Semi structured interviews are preferred in qualitative research to get personal accounts from participants which address the pertinent issues of the research questions. According to Kvale (1996) interviews allow people to convey to others a situation from their own perspective and in their own words. The semi-structured interviews allow the participants the freedom to give as much information as they should. Semi-structuring is for the purpose of guiding the research to avoid the discussion getting out of topic, as it happens when participants get a chance to give personal accounts.

Individual interviews are preferred because they yield in-depth data. Boyce (2006) further outlines the advantages of interviews. Boyce notes that in-depth interviews are used where a research has already been done and has measured certain important concerns and through interviews more insights are explored as to why the situation is the way the measurement was deduced.

8. Data Collection Procedures

Data collected from the FGDs is important in qualitative research. According to Morgan (1998), FGDs produce valuable information which personal interviews may not yield. They also cut on resources and yield as much information. The responses can be clarified and expanded upon probing. Group members react and build on each other's responses, consequently yielding information they might not have given individually. In essence therefore, the field experience of qualitative research is quite intensive because data generation entails in-depth interviews both in the individual interviews and FGDs.

During the process of qualitative data collection, close reference research questions are important in ensuring consistency in data collection. Semi structured interviews and document analysis should be utilized. More importantly, the respondents should be encouraged to speak freely about their perceptions and attitudes. It is also necessary to follow up the interviewees using informal conversations in their natural setting. Jwan and Ongondo (2011) contend that interview under natural setting guarantees more accurate data. The different data sources ensure that the issue under investigation is looked at from various perspectives. It is our contention that one single kind of source of evidence is not sufficient to sustain a case study. It is with this in mind that we propose that multiple sources of evidence are more reliable because of they provide extended description of the subject.

9. Use of Narratives in Qualitative Research

The use of narrative as a data generation tool is used in order to capture firsthand experience. According to Gregory (2010), narratives are discourses with clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way and offer

insights about the world or people's experiences. We submit that it is vital to consider narratives in research because every individual has complex, unique and subjective ways of interpreting experiences of their own world. Using narratives for case studies provide a forum for human beings to narrate their experiences in their own words.

Moen (2006) posits that the narrative approach is appropriate for individuals who relate meanings to personal social-cultural experiences through story telling. We postulate that when individuals tell their stories, they are not isolated and independent of their context. Narratives capture both the individual and the context. Narrative is therefore an ideal data collection tool. According to Moen (2006), narrative approach finds its basis on the qualitative or interpretative research method and it therefore implies that researchers study things in their natural settings in an attempt to make sense of and interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. As noted earlier, narrative strategy enables the researcher to gather detailed and rich information. This further raises the need for a small sample size.

10. Data Processing and Analysis in Qualitative Research

It is our view that the data be analyzed thematically. The themes are categorized as per the research questions. Thematic analysis according to Braun and Clark (2006) is the search for themes or patterns in relation to epistemological and ontological positions. A theme is what captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response.

The flexibility of thematic analysis allows for the generation of rich data, which explore the research questions in an in-depth analysis. All units of data such as words, sentences, pauses, and body language are extracted and examined in detail. In order to come up with a final report of the data analysis, the steps of thematic data analysis have to be followed. These stages are: transcription, organizing of data into retrievable sections, re-familiarizing of data, coding, and organizing data into themes and sub-themes. The researcher has to examine non-verbal cues as they too communicate meaning.

After transcription, organizing data is the second stage of the thematic data analysis. Here data is organized into easily retrievable sections. Winnowing or cleaning of data is done because the raw data collected is usually large. The winnowing of data is necessitated by the fact that in the process of the interviews and discussions, it is not possible to stop or interrupt the participants in the event that they digressed as they explain themselves. Doing so would make the participants uneasy and consequently they would guard or withhold important information.

Each interview and FGD session have to have a code. Field notes are usually broken up into sections identified by contexts. Interviewees are given pseudonyms and FGDs referred to by codes. The participants in FGDs are coded with pseudonyms. Sensitive materials that require confidentiality should be handled carefully and given the necessary anonymity. Any material that could identify a participant should carefully be edited to retain meaning, but not put the identity of a participant in jeopardy. The final stage is thematic analysis. One of its key advantages is flexibility. Another advantage of thematic analysis occurs when it is situated within a participatory paradigm with participants as collaborators.

11. Conclusion

In view of the above discussion, we do not hesitate to strongly recommend adoption of relativist ontology and interpretivist-constructivist epistemological approach within the realm of qualitative research methodology. Grounded within post modern theories, this approach would provide deep insights into humanistic researches.

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