Qualitative Research: The Mirror of the Social Reality

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Abstract

A lot has been said and done in the tradition of qualitative research. Its history can be traced back to the 17th century when through ethnography, evidences had been recorded and reported (Vidich and Lyman, 2000). Qualitative research methods came to the fore during the 70's and 80's as a criticism to the then prevalent quantitative methods in research. The researcher in a qualitative research embraces a pivotal role. I perceive the tenets of qualitative research to be imbibed by its scholars. Therefore the framework can be best built keeping the researcher as central to the whole process. Henceforth, I present this paper *from the vantage point of a qualitative researcher* who must be thoroughly conversant with various aspects of qualitative research. In the sections that follow, an attempt has been made to decipher qualitative research in relation to the nature of inquiry, methodology and techniques that can be used. The issues of reliability, validity and ethics in this realm have been addressed under different sections.

Keywords: Research, Inquary, Mathodology, Hierarchy, Socity.

Introdution

Qualitative research locates the participants in their own natural environment and looks deeply into the quality of their social life. It is a research 'in-situ', i.e. the researcher becomes a part of the setting he chooses to study. He explores and describes

the setting in its own unique context and records all that emerges in his account, which is analyzed after his fieldwork, is over. The findings therefore are contextual and typical of that particular research setting. Emphasis is placed on 'experience' in qualitative research. The 'qualities' that the experiences center around are the basic unit in qualitative data analysis. The researcher, then, becomes the eyes and ears of the situation for the people who share his research work. The way he makes sense and represents the data highlights the defining features of that research setting. In order to render a study 'qualitative', it must exhibit several attributes. Eisner (1998:32-39) enumerates that for a study to be qualitative it must be 'field-focused' where the researcher employs the 'self as an instrument' to perceive and make sense of the situations, using 'expressive language' that minimizes his subjectivity yet bears his signature to communicate the 'interpretive character' of the emergent reality as well as of the participants in the field, and presenting a 'coherent, insightful and instrumentally utilitarian' account of the setting by 'paying attention to its particulars' that render it as a unique case of the larger social milieu. Similarly, Creswell (2007:38-39) also lists several aspects that a study must exhibit, to be called 'qualitative'.

Qualitative research is not restricted to a particular discipline. Each discipline has its own array of principles and interests that can be explored using qualitative methods. Their usage can be seen in the fields of education, psychology, marketing, management, nursing, communication studies, etc. Common among them are the underlying nature of inquiry, methodologies and the array of techniques that exemplify qualitative research, which will now be elaborated.

Nature of Inquary

The philosophical assumptions with regard to the ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology determine the nature of inquiry in qualitative research. Reality is seen as subjective and multiple. Each participant in the research setting has his own version of the reality thereby resulting in alternate perspectives for the same thing. This emergent and multiple reality calls for multiple tools to tap its qualities. In order to reconstruct this in the writing of his study, the researcher presents the situation by corroborating his findings in verbatim and multiple accounts of several participants. Throughout the study, he strives to build a rapport with the participants so that he is able to get a fuller insight to the interactions and actions that take place. The researcher tries to minimize the "distance" or the "objective separateness" (Guba and Lincoln, 1988:94) between himself or herself and those being researched (Creswell, 2007:18). He acknowledges the fact that research tends to be 'value-laden' and 'subjective in nature' (Walker and Evers, 1986:29), so by making his presence and perspectives explicit during

the writing of the study an attempt is made to minimize them. In qualitative research, the researcher follows 'inductive logic' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:3; Creswell, 2007:19) and adopts a flexible design so that he may incorporate any development in the setting, since reality is understood as dynamic and emergent.

Methodology

The term 'methodology' encompasses the processes of scientific inquiry that take place in a research (Kaplan, 1973). In the field of qualitative research, there appears to be no well-tried and tested tool kit that would direct a novice or even a well practiced investigator in conducting his fieldwork. Grounded theory, ethnography, case studies, phenomenology and narrative studies are only approaches towards qualitative inquiry. Their steps of inquiry cannot be defined because of the nature of reality encountered. Creswell (2007:39) lists "emergent design" as one of the defining features of a qualitative study. It is a major conviction of qualitative research orientation that what is being searched for will emerge as the setting reveals itself (Holliday, 2007:6). An investigator must have a keen and practiced eye so that he may extract hidden meanings things have, in order to gather a rich account of data. The dynamics of a social setting are such that they are complex, always changing and reveal themselves in multifarious (even contradictory) ways; therefore any predetermined set of methods is bound to go kaput. Eisner (1998:170) emphasizes "Going into the field with a preformulated plan of procedure, indifferent to the emerging conditions is the surest path to disaster".

This, however, does not mean that the investigator goes unprepared and without any focus. One must become "opportunist and adventitious" (Ibid). Improvisation skills and creativity on part of the investigator are a must, otherwise he may end up being lost in the research setting. Therefore, "flexibility, adjustment and iterativity are the three hallmarks of the qualitative method" (Ibid). This, according to Bryman (1999:41) is the strength of qualitative research.

In the absence of a robust methodology that would ensure success in the fieldwork and the analyses that follow, there are some basics to which an investigator may stick to in order to stay afloat in the field. First and foremost is *'getting access'* to the field. Access is the starting point of all fieldwork, obtaining which is a crucial and sensitive matter. Since consent of those who we seek to study is needed, full disclosure of the research to the participants is expected from the investigator. Since qualitative research by its very nature is dynamic, therefore even the exact aims of the study are prone to change with the passage of time, as the study unfolds. In such a situation Eisner (1999:172) suggests that as an investigator "it is better to provide a general rather than

specific description of aims, if for no other reasons than so they (investigators) can shift gears when necessary".

Once access has been acquired, the researcher is exposed to the surroundings that he had chosen to explore. Depending upon the research question, an investigator may already have a clear idea about what to look for in the field- a prefigured focus (Eisner, 1998:176), or, may allow the situation to speak for itself- allow for an emergent focus (Ibid). In both the cases one must be prepared for the emergence of the unanticipated, and locate it within the larger social context and as part of the scheme of things. Initially a novice would take time to make sense of what exactly he is looking at, since he is usually overwhelmed by the intensity of the place that makes it difficult for him to sieve out the relevant information. With time, he will get the 'feel' of the setting and gradually things will get sorted out in his mind. Themes and focuses will emerge later on during the analysis part, and he would develop a keen eye and a sharp mind to bifurcate the data. Staying focused is the key therefore.

Analysis of the data involves extraction of themes on the basis of recurrence of the messages construed from the events observed (Eisner, 1998:189). Themes must be so extracted that best portray the situation that had been studied. These themes provide structure to the writing of the research report.

In qualitative research one has the liberty to use a range of data collection techniques and portray the analysis in the best possible way. "Use what you need to use to say what you want to say" (Eisner, 1998:187).

Techniques

"Methods are not passive strategies; they differently produce, reveal and enable the display of different kinds of identities" (Fine and Weis, 1996). Qualitative research employs a host of techniques in order to collect data that is rich and useful, namely participant observation, interviewing, focus groups, diaries, case studies and discourse analysis. Of these, participant observation is the method central to qualitative research, followed by interviewing, therefore, major emphasis will be on them in this section.

Participant observation: Through this technique the observer obtains data as a member of the group or setting he chooses to study. "The observer lives with the people, eats the food they eat, gets closer to them and takes an active part in their activities; in other words, he participates in the life of the people by adopting a role" (Srivastava, 2004:28). The information he gets thereby is first-hand information. By being an 'insider', he enjoys access to all the resources and activities that people perform as members of that group. Consequently, it is believed that people's 'reactivity syndrome'

gets transcended since the investigator's presence is not a threat to them, as then he is a member of the same group. The duration of such a technique may span according to the profundity of the data and analysis required. Yet, there are debates about whether an investigator is actually able to bridge the psychological divide in the other members that label him as an 'outsider', regardless of the time he has spent and the degree of involvement he practices. While planning observations, field researchers must consider issues such whether the observations will be covert or overt, degree of involvement, site of the observations, structure of observations and the focus of the observations (Flick, 2002:137-149). Based on the degree of involvement, Gold (1969) and Junker (1960) provide a continuum along which a researcher's role can be located in a research setting: complete observer, observer as participant, participant as observer and complete participant.

A complete observer simply observes and a participant observer takes part in daily events. For many researchers the degree of engagement is highly variable. Out of the whole plethora of things that are available, an observer may direct his focus on aspects such as "spaces, objects, actors, acts, activities, events, time, goals and feelings are the various aspects that must be observed in any research setting" (Spradley, 1980:78). Ethical considerations over the 'covert mode of observation' have been raised, therefore this mode has been condemned widely as it takes the form of surveillance and deception and the result thereby is largely claimed to be as half-truths and 'manipulated', according to those observed.

Interviewing: In qualitative research where participant observation is not possible and/or required, interviewing provides the requisite data for the research. "The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations" (Brinkmann and Kvale, 1996:1). Every interview process entails construction of knowledge through the interaction that takes place between the interviewer and the interviewee, since it is an interchange of views and ideas between them, on a topic of mutual interest. Every interview has an underlying structure and purpose and whatever interaction takes place is within the parameters set by the interviewer. In this vein, "interview is not a conversation between equal partners, because the researcher defines and controls the situation" (Ibid). The decision to interview must be a conscious one in the sense that a researcher must adopt interviewing as tool to collect data considering the nature of the data required, time at his disposal and the research questions of the study. Interviewing is best suited for situations when the researcher "has less time and the settings or people are otherwise not accessible" (Bogdan and Taylor, 1984:80-81).

An interview process consists of a number of steps. The first is framing questions. One needs to carefully word the question, so that suggestive clues are not delivered unintentionally. This holds true for unstructured interviews as well where the interviewer frames questions instantaneously. Then comes the step of accessing the setting, followed by understanding the language and culture of the respondents coupled with deciding how one would present oneself in front of the respondents (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:654-55).

One of the most decisive issues in interviewing is choice of informants. The informant must be an insider who can provide vital information to the researcher on a range of issues pertaining to the research setting. Interview process also consists of recording and transcribing the information thus collected and then analyzing it in order to extract themes and connections between various elements of the setting under the study. There are various types of interviews such as journalistic interviews, legal interrogations, academic oral examinations, philosophical dialogues, and many more. Interviews can be broadly classified as structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews depending upon the extent to which the interviewer attempts to control the focus of the respondents' answers.

Significance of the Self and Ethics

The researcher is an integral element in a qualitative research. His self is an undercurrent in the trajectory that the study takes, and also how it is written. Eisner (1998:169) elaborates "qualitative inquiry places a high premium on the idiosyncratic, on the exploitation of the researcher's unique strength, rather than on standardization and uniformity". This is the reason why all qualitative writing bears a 'signature' (Ibid: 34) of the writer. The lens through which the researcher perceives and portrays the research setting is an outcome of his own interest, attitude, aptitude and context.

The issue of 'ethics' in research encompasses all the above four domains of the researcher's personality. In my opinion, ethics are a part of the affective behavior of a person, the researcher in this case. It is the issue he must bear in mind while doing his fieldwork, ensuring that no threat is imposed on the integrity of the people who are participants in his research. Covert researches have been widely condemned and are considered unethical on various grounds. Ethical issues are concerned with matters of informed consent, deception and confidentiality. The American Sociological Association Code of Ethics places prime importance on these three aspects. It is imperative to fulfill the requirements pertaining to them. Informed consent is required if the "data are collected from research participants through any form of communication, interaction or

intervention" (ASA, 1999:12). The issue of 'deception' largely overlaps 'informed consent'. Deception happens when participants are unaware that they are part of a study and/or are misled about the purpose or details about the research and/or are not aware about the true identity of the researcher (Bailey, 2007:20). 'Confidentiality' is an agreement whereby participants are assured that their identity and sensitive information would be concealed and protected under all circumstances. The subject of ethics is embedded throughout the process of field work and therefore the researcher is required to consistently take decisions regarding them.

Writing The Research Report

The rigor in a research work is reflected in one's writing. Writing is representational and transforms our experience in the process of making it public (Eisner, 1998:28). While writing his research a qualitative researcher must articulate his rationale for the choice of social setting, the methodology, emergence of themes and focuses, data recording technique and his own stance on the research setting as a whole. Since interpretive character is the highlighting feature of qualitative research, the researcher's subjectivity, the consequent value-ladeness and the tendency to judge have always borne a question on the reliability and validity in qualitative research. It has been accused of lack of objectivity. In addition, Denzin and Lincoln (1998:8) state "Qualitative researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning." In order to strengthen their position as objective participants in the fieldwork, Geertz (1993:6) suggests "thick description" of the field accounts so that the validity of the research work is not questioned.

The researcher must stay for a prolonged duration in the field so that he has the time and resources to cross check and clarify any contradictions in his findings. Eisner (1998:110-114) suggests 'consensual validation, structural corroboration and referential adequacy' in the writing as a step towards ensuring validity of the research and rendering the research true to life. Stating the exact narratives enable readers to make sense of the context independently, thereby further reducing the scope of bias of the writer. Other measures of ensuring validity include negative case analysis, auditability, confirmability, bracketing, and balance (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Voice of the writer is an important aspect in his writing. "The written study itself takes on an agency of its own story- the argument" (Holliday, 2007:91). He must make explicit all his arguments and assumptions that he thinks played a role in influencing his perspectives of the situation.

For the purpose of ensuring reliability, the researcher must triangulate his findings and request for peer evaluation who can give him critical comments on the nature of his research. But in qualitative data analysis there is no test of significance to determine if the results "count"; in the end, what counts is a matter of judgment (Eisner, 1998:28).

CONCLUSION

Through the paper an attempt has been made to explore the realm of qualitative research, in reference to the nature of inquiry, methodology and techniques that are employed to extract the different aspects of our ever-changing real world. The paper traces its history and looks at qualitative research from the researcher's point of view because I think that any reading on qualitative research inherently focuses on the qualities that a researcher must imbibe in order to stay afloat in his work. The themes of reliability, validity and ethics have been discussed under different headings keeping in mind the issues they are related to, according to me. As a researcher, I realize that they are highly important in order to give a credible shape to a research. A corpus of qualitative research has thereby been erected that would help a researcher in guiding him throughout his research work.

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