

Qualitative Research.

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Qualitative research is the preferred method of research in most setting, so much that when we talk of research, most people presume that we are referring to quantitative research. It has been claimed that: "The almost sole recognition given to quantitative methods has trained students inadequately, established flawed standards of practice and research, and delayed the development of essential medical knowledge.... When qualitative methods are clearly established in our research repertoire, the advance of medical knowledge will be greatly accelerated".¹

However in social sciences and in areas like a third world country where most issues are unexplored, phenomena un-understood and questions unanswered, qualitative research, which has become more popular since the 1970s can be really helpful as it is particularly directed on:

1. Exploring issues
2. Understanding phenomena
3. Answering Questions

Openness of mind and looking deeply beyond the obvious are essential for qualitative research. Researcher has to be close to the subjects, understanding their culture and preferably language as well. Qualitative research has 'many layers of meaning'², and the researcher has to 'lift veils'³ to discover the innermost meanings. Howard Becker writes that when things are so familiar to you, 'it becomes impossible to single out events that occur in the classroom as things that have occurred, even when they happen right in front of you.... it takes a tremendous effort of will and imagination to stop seeing the things that are conventionally "there" to be seen'.⁴

Qualitative research focuses on fairly lengthy and deep involvement in the natural setting and real life experiences. Hence it happens at every workplace and study environment, everyday. It focuses on meanings, perspective and understanding. Unlike quantitative research, which primarily makes assumptions, looks at results and detailed statistics, qualitative research makes as few assumptions as possible, emphasises on the process and is concerned with inductive analysis and grounded theory. Unlike quantitative research, it seeks to answer the "what" question, not the "how often" one⁵. Thus, rather than adopting a simplified, reductionist view of the subject in order to

measure and count the occurrence of states or events, qualitative methods take an holistic perspective which preserves the complexities of human behaviour⁶.

Although there are various methods of qualitative research like official and personal (diaries) documents, an unstructured, unobtrusive interview is a popular way of conducting qualitative research. It allows looking into the depth of the situation and unearths interviewee's meanings and understanding. The researcher carefully avoids leading questions and pays full attention (and showing that he is paying attention) to develop rapport and empathy, hoping that relevant points will come into discussion naturally. The listening, however is active and the interviewer very subtly explores, aiming to get clarity, depth and validity by probing the contradictory statements, seeking opinion, asking for clarifications, requesting explanations, showing surprise, summarising, putting down imaginary situations and even playing devil's advocate. Some of the questions may start with:

- What do you think of.....?
- What do you mean by.....?
- Some people may think/argue that...?
- Then?
- Why?
- Why not?
- Did you not just say...?
- Does it imply that...?
- What about...?
- Would it be fair to say that.....?
- Really?
- Yes, but what if.....?

It is fair to say that qualitative research looks deeply and explores details and meanings paying attention to verbal and non verbal behaviour. As it is conducted in natural setting and pays attention to process, it is often time consuming and may not give conclusive results ("high-risk, low-yield enterprise"). However the statistician J W Tukey pointed out, "far better an approximate answer to the right question ... than an exact answer to the wrong-Question."⁷ Qualitative research has been blamed for being subjective and biased, some of the bias comes through, typically, in the rhetorical presentation of accounts⁸.

Despite all these differences, quantitative and qualitative methods can work well together. Similarly, quantitative and qualitative methods can be used to check the other⁵.

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