Philosophical Approaches in Qualitative Research

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Abstract

The main philosophical stances on qualitative research that are covered in this essay are constructivism, interpretivism, positivism, post-positivism, and critical theory. The focus of qualitative research is on the sentiments and viewpoints gathered using various instruments and research techniques. It places more emphasis on quality than quantity. Methods such as focus groups, case studies, interviews, and correspondence with respondents are used to collect qualitative data for research projects. A summary of these methods is provided in the article in the interim. Furthermore, the study demonstrates how these methods are based on the axiological, ontological, and epistemological postulates. The paper's goal is to educate academics and researchers on philosophical approaches to qualitative research. Their familiarity with methodologies and paradigms might aid in selecting the best methodology while doing qualitative research. The paper's conclusion is that a lot of qualitative research uses philosophical stances including constructivism, positivism, interpretivism, post-positivism, and critical theory. Nonetheless, while conducting qualitative research, interpretivism, constructivism, and critical theory are essential.

Introduction

This article describes qualitative research paradigms and approaches. The definition of qualitative research varies among scholars. However, this article includes some general concepts of qualitative research along with a detailed explanation of the philosophical approach of qualitative research. Qualitative research is an iterative process that can achieve a deeper understanding of the scientific community by uncovering new and important distinctions that arise as we get closer to the world we study. Practically, most active qualitative researchers work with empirical material in order to know what is involved in doing qualitative research. However, the definite and clear definition of

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qualitative research may be missing (Aspers and Corte, 2019, p. 139). One of the widely renowned definitions of qualitative research is:

Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretative, 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. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives. (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, p. 2)

The focus of qualitative research is the empirical study that incorporates case study, personal experience, interview, and interaction between the researcher and the subject of the study. This method emphasizes on quality of information collected through different approaches. This paper discusses the philosophical approaches to qualitative research such as positivism, post-positivism, interpretivism, constructivism, and critical theory.

Discussion

In this article, I discuss some of the major overarching philosophical approaches to qualitative research and incorporate some historical background for. Denzin and Lincoln (2013) presents qualitative inquiry as "a field of inquiry in its own right" (p. 5), qualitative research pervades disciplines. Besides, it is depicted in diverse areas of scholarship. I focus here on literature and language, but distinguish the considerable work done in related fields including sociology, anthropology, social work, humanities, and history. The significance of qualitative research has long been justified based on Dilthey's argument that the unique natures of natural science and human science for different approaches. The diversity of qualitative approaches can be confusing and agrees about their suitable use, in what versions, and according to what standards.

The approaches to research rest on differing foundational assumptions about the nature of our world (ontology) and our knowledge about it (epistemology), as well as the role of values in the process of knowledge production (axiology) as conceptualized by Hays and Singh (2012) that fall along different continuums of beliefs (qtd. in 2014). Hays and Singh (2012) take ontology as the study of the nature of reality. Within the context of qualitative research, ontology can be seen as a set of beliefs about the existence of "universal truth" and about objectivity. At one end of the range, ontology is a belief that reality is objective

and there are universal truths about reality which can be recognized. At the other end, it is a belief that reality is subjective and contextual and we cannot understand psychological experiences uniformly. Contexts within which such experiences are must be understood to make meaning of them (qtd. in Leavy, 2014).

Similarly epistemology is considered as the study of the process of knowing or "how we know what we know" (Guba & Lincoln, 2008, qtd. in Leavy, 2014). It relates with how we put on knowledge of what exists and the relationship between the knower (researcher) and the world (research topic). The researcher and research participant can be independent of one another. In this perspective, researchers can use thorough and systematic approaches to analyzing participants objectively. Hence, it can result in being rigorous in research especially in the form of rigid relation to commonly accept formal methods to boosting up objectivity and lessening researcher prejudice.

However, the understanding of knowledge can be constructed by the researcher and participant as well. They can mutually affect each other. The healthy interaction between them can be significant in drawing contextualized experiences of the participant. Despite issues of rigor, experiences can take different forms and meanings. After all, the objective is to increase trustworthiness of the research findings by incorporating and citing diverse perspectives on the focus of the research (Leavy, 2014, p. 83).

On a similar note, axiology is related to the way values and assumptions of the researcher affect the scientific process and the actions the researcher takes with the research produced (Lincoln et al., 2013, qtd. in Leavy, 2014). Some questions are very crucial in this discussion on axiology including what place the emotions, expectations, and values of the investigator have in the research process, whether systematic steps should be taken to ensure that the process is kept independent of these in order to not influence the participants and the results, Or if such a search is meaningless. Besides, whether the researcher can identify, describe or endeavor to bracket her values in a considerable way (Wertz, 2011). Indeed, qualitative research stands on the belief that investigation is "radically relational" and is inexorably shaped, and even deliberately informed, by the investigator's orientation, values, and personal qualities (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 84, cited in Leavy, 2014). The role of philosophical methods in conducting qualitative research is crucial in the sense that philosophical approaches guide qualitative research. These approaches are positivism, post-positivism, interpretivism, grounded-theory, constructivism, critical theory, feminism, and queer theory. The brief overview of these approaches can make sense to the readers of this paper.

Positivism

The first philosophical approach is positivism, which is based on the ontological assumption that objective reality exists independent of our beliefs and structures. These can be determined by direct observation and experience. This effort aims to establish universal natural laws. Within psychology, there are universal laws regarding human development and experience. Gaining this knowledge and confidence requires systematic steps. These are the basis for making verified truth claims. In this perspective, hypotheses are generated and tested using validated measures of operationally defined variables that serve as primary tools. The goal is to be able to confidently transfer the knowledge gained to the larger general universe (Leavy, 2014, p. 83).

Positivism resulted from foundationalism and empiricism. Positivists focus on objectivity and seek to prove or disprove research hypotheses (Ryan, 2018, p.1). Commonly associated with experiments and quantitative research, positivism is considered a form of or a progression of empiricism. Phillips and Burbules (2000) suggested that empiricism is one of two forms of foundationalist philosophy – rationalist or empiricist –that believes that knowledge should be objective and free from any bias stemming from the researcher's personal values and beliefs. Ontologically, positivists believe that there are facts that can be proven, and reality is the same for each person, and observation and measurement tell us what that reality is. According to Bryman (2008), there are four important characteristics of positivism:

a. Phenomenalism – only knowledge confirmed by the sciences is authentic knowledge.

b. Deductivism – theory generates hypotheses that can be examined for provable 'laws'.

c. Objectivity – science must be value-free.

d. Inductivism – knowledge is gained by collecting facts that build foundation for laws (Ryan, 2018, p. 4).

Post-positivism

Although post-positivism is closer to positivism, its concept in research is different. Post-positivism is rooted in logical positivism. This term was coined by a group of scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers in the early 1900s known as the Vienna Circle. It is built up on the "positive philosophy" of Auguste Comte. However, post-positivism emphasizes

the importance of formal logic in scientific investigation. The thinkers ascertained that science needed a methodical way of organizing our direct observations of experience and pursued to inductively build laws of the natural world based on the formation of significant and definite logical statements (Packer, 2011). The statements of fact could be verified through empirical examination meaningful in the scientific attempt.

Post-positivism developed out of the positivist view of science. The impact of this approach can be seen in psychology for much of the field's history (Packer, 2011). Post-positivism introduces the concept that hypotheses can never be proven without any doubt and that theory should be examined to be falsified and verified. The issues of validity and reliability are crucial in qualitative research within post-positivism. This paradigm lies in the belief that reliable alternative hypotheses can explain the phenomena which are being studied.

Post-positivism holds on the belief in sensible physical realities and the existence of established truths. However, it struggles that a fully precise representation of them can never be achieved with certainty (Popper, 1934/1959). Although things exist beyond observable realities, it is known that our knowledge of this world is socially constructed. It focuses on the fact that research bias is inevitable. Whatever we observe is fallible due to the fact that they are affected by personal and cultural biases (Leavy, 2014, p. 84). The next crucial qualitative research paradigm is interpretivism that contradicts to positivism.

Interpretivism

Interpretivism is similar to positivism in terms of origin. Interpretivism has its historical roots in anthropology. Nevertheless, it is in opposition to positivism. Therefore, it is sometimes known as anti-positivism (Flick, 2014). Interpretivism holds the belief that truth and knowledge are subjective and culturally and historically contextualized. Truth and knowledge are based on personal experience and understanding. Therefore, there are no universal truths as positivism claims. Different people experience the same phenomenon in different ways. Therefore, its meaning and understanding differ from person to person. It cannot be claimed to be the ultimate truth, as multiple meanings and understandings exist.

Investigators can never be completely separate from their personal values and beliefs. Therefore, they are affected by their background and mindset while collecting, interpreting and analyzing data. It is difficult for researchers to be objective according to interpretivism. Interpretivists believe that subjectivity does not allow researchers to be completely objective.

The 18th century philosopher, Giambattista Vico originated interpretivism. Vico opposed Descartes, arguing that there is a difference between the natural and social world. More importantly, social organization and social experiences form researchers' perceptions of reality and truth (Costelloe 2016). Similarly, interpretivists believe that reality is not objectively determined. However, this reality is socially constructed (Husserl, 1965). The underlying postulation is that by placing people in their social contexts, it becomes greatly more possible to understand the perceptions researchers have of their own activities (Hussey & Hussey, 1997). By its nature, interpretivism fosters the value of qualitative data in search of knowledge (Kaplan and Maxwell, 1994). Speaking briefly, interpretivism is related with the distinctiveness of a specific circumstance that contributes to the profound search pursuit of contextual depth (Myers, 1997). Nevertheless, while interpretive research is recognized for its value in providing contextual depth, results are often criticized in terms of validity, reliability and the ability to generalize, referred to collectively as research legitimization. Interpretivism is a research paradigm, which is associated with qualitative research.

Similarly, interpretivism can be associated with the ethnography of non-Western communities in the 19th century, and remains a popular method for elucidating human behavior and social phenomena today. An interpretivist perspective leads researchers to explore the importance of understanding human behavior, interactions, and society as a whole. This involves researchers' efforts to develop deep personal meanings in people's lives and experiences. The difference between natural science and social science is that natural science requires researchers to observe and interpret nature's methods. However, in the social sciences, researchers need to observe phenomena and understand the interpretations that individuals have already made. The goal of social work research is to explain human behavior and social phenomena, not to isolate and objectively evaluate different variables or to emphasize progressive conclusions (Venkat et al, 2018, p.9).

Grounded Theory

Two sociologists, Barney Glaser & Anselm Strauss have developed grounded theory as one of the qualitative research approaches (Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 2009; Strauss, 1987). They define 'grounded theory' as the theory derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 12). Indeed, grounded theory is all about data collection and their analysis. This approach aims to construct a theory grounded in the data (Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 2009; Strauss, 1987). In the viewpoint of Glaser (1992) grounded theory

deals with only inductive approach rather than deductive approach of research. Moreover, Punch defines the grounded theory approach:

[Grounded theory is not a theory at all. It is a method, an approach, a strategy. In my opinion, grounded theory is best defined as a research strategy whose purpose is to generate theory from data. 'Grounded' means that the theory will be generated on the basis of data; the theory will therefore be grounded in data. 'Theory' means that the objective of collecting and analysing the research data is to generate theory. The essential in grounded theory is that theory will be developed inductively from data. (1998, p. 163)]

Charmaz (2014) highlighted that grounded theory is centered on inductive strategies for information analysis. It begins with abstract concepts and explains and understands data. Although the grounded theory was developed in 1967 by Glaser & Strauss, it has been in the process of amendments for the last four decades. Besides, grounded theory is split into two versions by its pioneers, which are called the Glaser's version (Glaser, 1978, 1992) and that of (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) version. Glaser continued focusing on the earlier concept and remained consistent with it, the one he discovered with the Strauss. They defined grounded theory as a method of discovery, treated categories as embryonic from the data, relied on direct and, often, narrow empiricism, and analyzed a basic social process.

Constructivism

Honebein (1996) describes the constructivism philosophical paradigm as an approach that asserts that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. It is based on the analogy or basis that people form or construct much of what they learn through experiences (Cashman et al., 2008; Hein, 1991). Likewise, to the constructivist, constructing meaning is learning. Indeed, there is no other way of getting sense of what we experience. This paradigm nullifies the traditional concept of learning. The constructivist philosophy portrays the idea that learning does not just happen from the traditional method of teachers standing in front of students and teaching and lecturing them. Nevertheless, to the constructivist, learning occurs only when learners explore the knowledge through the principle of experimentation and doing something in the classroom (Kalender, 2007). It means learners have to work on making sense out of the things they are learning about. This is the practical way of learning.

There have been scholars and researchers who advocate for the energetic and enthusiastic involvement of learners in the teaching and learning processes more than the teachers

and lecturers in the classroom environment. The engagement of the former helps them to construct meaning. Jerome Bruner, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and John Dewey are prominent figures and proponents of this philosophical approach to qualitative research. Their contribution in the academia especially for constructivism is highly paramount. They are the leading figures of this philosophical model (Honebein, 1996). Nevertheless, scholars including Maria Montessori and George Kelly cannot be ignored as they have also contributed to the understanding of constructivism, the philosophical paradigm in qualitative research.

Critical Theory

Critical theory refers to a concept that believes in criticizing political and intellectual contexts. Its political and intellectual origins lie in the period after the Russian Revolution and in the movements that arose in the first decades of the 20th century. Orthodox Marxism established a rigorous scientism that could foresee the inevitability of revolution and the emergence of communist social transformation. Orthodox Marxists considered the core of Marx's contribution to be a scientific understanding of history based on class struggle. This class struggle regarded the process of historical change as essentially mechanical and systematic. Class society functioned according to certain laws, laws that prescribed the inevitable collapse of capitalist society and the mobilization of the working class into revolutionary consciousness and activity.

Nevertheless, reality has shown that this model of social change is never true. Consequently, a crisis in theory based on political failures of socialist movements emerged which needed to restructure the practical and political form of working class movements (Bronner 1994). There are four thinkers Karl Korsch, Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, and Wilhelm Reich as leading figures in the movement away from that dogmatic, orthodox Marxist approach to political consciousness among people of the working class. Consciousness among the people is pivotal. Especially Korsch and Lukács saw that there was an essential and ethical, subjective moment that opposed to orthodox Marxist perspective (Thomas, M.J., 2017, p. 3-4).

The thinkers including Karl Korsch, Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, and Wilhelm Reich constitute a decisive break in the direction of Marxist theory in the early twentieth century. Besides, they set the basic framework of critical theory. Their focus on the subjective and psychological dimensions of the individual pays the attention to the cultural and institutional life world, which shapes consciousness. This insistence on the new form of consciousness becomes able to breach the shackles of ideology sought during the pulses

of everyday life (Thomas, M.J., 2017, p. 6). Critical theorists pursue to challenge the rigid establishment by igniting the fire of questioning among the readers. They foster the power of looking at the world critically and with doubt.

Conclusion

The paper has explored the multiple approaches employed in the qualitative research. The qualitative research emphasizes on the quality of information rather than quantity. The methods used for collecting qualitative data are interviews, focus group discussion, case study, narrative analysis, introspection, and interaction with the respondents. The foundational assumptions are ontology—the nature of the world, epistemology---the knowledge about the world, and axiology—the role of values in the process of knowledge production. Similarly the philosophical approaches to qualitative research are positivism—factual knowledge gained through observation, post-positivism—observation influenced by the researcher, interpretivism—the involvement of the researcher's subjectivity in interpretation, constructivism—formation of knowledge through interaction with the subject of the study, and critical theory—critical analysis of social action. Interpretism and constructivism are the most sought after philosophical approaches to qualitative research.

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