Qualitative Research Design: A Discussion on its Types

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Abstract

This review paper attempts to examine the key qualitative research designs, including case study, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and narrative inquiry. The main purpose of writing this paper is to provide basic idea and knowledge about major types of qualitative research design which are commonly used in the field of education. In order to prepare this, write up, different books and journal articles were consulted and reviewed. In this paper each design of qualitative research is analyzed for its methodological approach, underscoring its main objectives, sampling methods, data collection tools, and process of data interpretation. The paper also addresses the criticisms associated with each design, including concerns about generalizability, researcher bias, and the subjectivity of interpretation. This paper provides insights into the diverse methodologies within qualitative research and their contributions to understanding complex human and social phenomenon.

Keywords: qualitative research, case study, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory

Introduction

Research is a process of investigating the new thing in a systematic way. It is an organized and systematic approach of inquiry on specific phenomenon. The study of related literature provides the researcher with various definitions given by different

scholars in the field. Research is a process of steps used to collect and analyze information to increase our understanding of a topic or issue. At a general level, research consists of three steps: posing a question, collecting data to answer the question, and present an answer to the question (Creswell, 2015). It shows that research is not something difficult rather it is a way of asking question, exploring the answer of that very question and presenting that explored question to the people so that other people also get chance to be familiar with that new thing.

Research is a fusion of logic and philosophy (Smith, 2022). Research is logic in a sense that research depends heavily on logical reasoning. Researchers use logic to formulate hypothesis, design experiments, analyze data, and draw conclusions. Logical thinking ensures that the research process is coherent, consistent, and systematic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Moreover, it helps in avoiding errors in reasoning and in making valid reference from the data. At the same time research is a philosophy because it underpins the theoretical and ethical foundations of research. It helps researchers reflect on the nature of knowledge (epistemology), the nature of reality (ontology), and the ethical implications of their work (Crotty, 1998). Furthermore, philosophical perspectives guide researchers in choosing appropriate methodologies, understanding the limitations of their work, and considering the broader implication of their findings.

Types of Research Design

In order to discuss the different types of research design, it is essential to recognize that research methodologies are foundational to the systematic exploration of various phenomena. These methodologies provide the structure and strategy necessary to investigate research questions effectively. In the field of research, three primary approaches have emerged, each with its unique strengths and applications: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. These approaches represent distinct paradigms that

guide researchers in choosing how to collect, analyze, and interpret data. Understanding these three types of research design is crucial for selecting the most appropriate method for a given study, depending on the nature of the research question, the type of data being sought, and the goals of the inquiry. Among these three types of research design, qualitative research design along with its types is discussed in this paper.

Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research is a method of inquiry that seeks to understand and interpret the meanings and experiences of individuals in their natural settings. Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on measuring and analyzing numerical data, qualitative research emphasizes the richness of data collected through non-numerical means, such as interviews, observations, textual analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This approach is particularly valuable when the goal is to explore complex social phenomenon and gain insights into people's behaviors, emotions, and interactions within their specific contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

While talking about the qualitative research design, it is very essential to understand the concept of the central phenomenon. The term central phenomenon in qualitative research design refers to the primary focus or main issue that the researcher seeks to explore and understand in-depth (Creswell, 2015). Thus, the central phenomenon is the key concept or process that the study is built around and it is often expressed as a broad, open-ended question that guides the research. In qualitative research design identifying the central phenomenon is crucial because it shapes the direction of the study, including the types of data collected, the participants selected, and the methods used for analysis. By focusing on the central phenomenon, qualitative researchers aim to uncover the underlying meanings, patterns, and experiences related to the topic, providing a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the subject under investigation ((Cohen et al., 2018). Based on the description it is stated that in

qualitative research, the central phenomenon is the main focus of the study, guiding the exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences.

Qualitative research is deeply rooted in specific philosophical perspectives that guide how researchers approach the study of social phenomenon. These perspectives include ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (the nature of knowledge), and axiology (the role of values in research). Qualitative research often aligns with a constructivist or interpretivist paradigm, where reality is seen as multiple, subjective, changing, and constructed by individuals within their social contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). This ontological stance of qualitative research contrasts with the positivist view that assumes a single, objective reality. Epistemologically, qualitative researchers believe that knowledge is constructed by the researcher and participants. This perspective emphasizes the importance of understanding the context and meanings individual attribute to their experiences (Crotty, 1998). Rather than exploring generalizable truths, qualitative research aims to provide deep, contextualized understanding of specific phenomenon. Axiologically, qualitative research acknowledges that the researchers' values and biases influence the research process. Reflexivity, where researchers critically reflect on their role and impact on the research, is a fundamental practice in qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This awareness allows researchers to be transparent about their positionality and how it shapes their interpretation of data.

Types of Qualitative Research Design. Qualitative research design encompasses a range of approaches, each tailored to explore different aspects of human experience and social phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These designs are rooted in specific philosophical and methodological traditions, guiding how researchers collect, analyze, and interpret data. The choice of particular qualitative research design depends on the research question, the nature of phenomenon being studied, and the

desired depth of the understanding (Maxwell, 2013). In this paper, some of the most widely used qualitative research designs such as case study, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory and narrative inquiry were reviewed in brief.

Case Study. Case study is a type of qualitative research design, which focuses on an in-depth exploration of a single case or a small number of cases within their real-life context (Yin, 2018). This approach focuses on understanding the complexity and uniqueness of the case. In a case study, the term 'case' refers to a specific instance or unit of analysis that is studied in-depth. This could be an individual, a group, an organization, an event, or a phenomenon within its real-life context (Creswell, 2018). A case study allows researchers to explore phenomenon within a specific context, providing detailed insights that are not easily captured through other methods (Cohen et.al., 2018). Regarding the sampling method, purposeful sampling is used to select cases that offer rich, contextual information. Data is collected through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and documents, with interpretation focused on identifying key themes and patterns within the case (Yin, 2018). Case study is not free from the criticism. It is often criticized for its limited generalizability due to the focus on a single case or a small number of cases, which may not be representative of wider populations.

Ethnography. Ethnography, rooted in anthropology, emerged from early fieldwork by scholars like Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). This research design focuses on understanding cultural and social interactions through immersive research. This qualitative approach centers on the detailed exploration of a community's daily life and cultural context by employing purposive sampling to select key informants and participants who offer rich insights (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Regarding the data collection tools, it uses participant observation, key informant interviews, and the gathering of field notes and cultural

artifacts, which help researchers build a comprehensive understanding of the group's dynamics (Creswell and Poth, 2018). In order to interpret the collected raw data, the researcher first codes and analyzes them, after that make cultural themes to construct detailed account of the group's way of life. Despite its strengths, ethnography faces criticism for potential researcher bias and the challenges of achieving objectivity, along with the extensive time required for fieldwork, which can limit the generalizability of the study.

Phenomenology. Phenomenological study, a qualitative research design with origin in philosophy, focuses on exploring and describing individuals' lived experiences to uncover the essence of a phenomenon (Van Manen, 2016). The goal of phenomenological studies is to describe the meaning that experiences hold for each subject. This type of research is used to study areas in which there is little knowledge (Donalek, 2004). This research design is rooted in the work of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. The main aim of this research is to understand how people perceive and make sense of their experiences by employing purposive sampling to select participants who have directly encountered phenomenon in question (Creswell and Poth, 2018). While talking about the phenomenological study, it is necessary to understand the concept of bracketing. The term bracketing, in this study, refers to a methodological process used to set aside or suspend the researcher's preconceptions, biases, and assumptions about the phenomenon being studied (Cohen et.al., 2018). In this research the researchers use in-depth interviews and participant observation as the tools of data collection. These tools help the researchers to gather rich, descriptive accounts of experiences (Van Manen, 2016). Data interpretation involves analyzing significant statements and clustering them into themes to capture the essence of the experience and its meaning for the participants. Criticisms of phenomenology include concerns about the subjectivity of interpretation and the challenges of achieving a truly

objective understanding, as well as the potential difficulty in generalizing findings beyond the studied cases (Van Manen, 2016).

Grounded Theory. Grounded Theory, a qualitative research design introduced by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the 1960s, focuses on generating a theory that is grounded in empirical data rather than testing existing theories (Charmaz, 2014). This approach aims to develop new theories through a systematic process of data collection and analysis, allowing the theory to emerge from the data itself. Theoretical sampling is used to select participants based on their relevance to emerging categories, ensuring that the theory is grounded in the data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data collection tools include interviews and observations, and the process involves coding and constant comparison of data to identify patterns and develop categories (Charmaz, 2014). The interpretation of data focuses on constructing a theoretical framework that explains the processes and interactions observed in the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Criticisms of grounded theory include challenges related to the subjective nature of data interpretation and the difficulty in achieving theoretical saturation, as well as concerns about the potential for researcher bias influencing the emerging theory (Charmaz, 2014).

Narrative Inquiry. Narrative inquiryis a qualitative research design that focuses on understanding and interpreting the stories and personal narratives of individuals to gain insights into their experiences and identities. This approach has roots in literary theory and narrative psychology, and it emphasizes the importance of personal stories in shaping and understanding human experiences (Clandinin, 2016). Narrative sampling is used to select individuals who have significant and relevant stories to share. Data collection methods primarily include in-depth interviews, personal documents, and storytelling sessions, which provide rich, detailed accounts of the participants' lives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interpretation process involves analyzing the structure,

content, and meaning of the narratives to understand how individuals construct and convey their experiences (Clandinin, 2016). Criticisms of narrative inquiry include concerns about the subjectivity involved in interpreting personal stories and the potential for researcher bias to influence the findings, as well as challenges in generalizing the findings beyond the specific narratives studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Conclusion

In conclusion, qualitative research designs offer diverse and detailed approaches to understanding human experiences and social phenomenon. Each design discussed in this paper – case study, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and narrative inquiry – provides unique methods for exploring complex issues and generating rich, detailed insights. Case studies focus on in-depth analysis of specific instances within their real-life contexts, though they may face criticism for limited generalizability. Ethnography immerses researchers in cultural settings to understand social practices and interactions, with challenges related to researcher bias and time constraints. Phenomenology seeks to uncover the essence of lived experiences through bracketing and in-depth interviews, though it faces criticism for subjectivity and generalizability issues. Grounded theory aims to develop new theories from data, using systematic coding and theoretical sampling, but struggles with the subjectivity of interpretation and achieving theoretical saturation. Narrative inquiry explores personal stories to understand identity and experience, with criticisms related to interpretive subjectivity and generalizability. These designs contribute to a comprehensive understanding of qualitative research by providing various lenses through which researchers can explore and interpret complex human and social dynamics.

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