

Understanding Qualitative Research: Relation and Implications to the Field

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Abstract

Qualitative research is about understanding different aspect of social life, and its methods generate words, rather than numbers for analysis. This becomes possible mainly through its relation and implications to the field. The purpose of this article is to discuss about qualitative research methods and its aspects in relation to the field work. Based on document analysis and personal reflection, this paper encapsulates the issues that many qualitative researchers have propounded in their own perspectives in relation to field activities. Field activities include preparing the field, entering the field, relationship among different stakeholders in the field, and leaving the field and impact of these issues in the study. Finally, this paper discuss about the role of qualitative researcher to impliment different tools in the field to achieve best possible result.

Key words: Field work, Gatekeeper, field relation, local leaders, and leaving the field

1. Introduction

Qualitative research is based upon different data collection methodologies including field activities, which provides in-depth knowledge of the issue. It is all about collecting, analyzing and proper use of qualitative data (Patton, 2002). Qualitative data is generally in the form of text collected from the experiences, practices and actions based upon direct interaction with the

research participants in the field and review of available documents and audiovisual materials. Qualitative research is concerned with developing explanations of social phenomena (Hancock, 2002) and values the subjectivity of the researchers (Frershwater, Cahill, Walsh, & Muncey, 2010) to understand some aspects of social life (Brikci & Green, 2007).

As qualitative research concerned with the social aspects of our world and seeks to understand the process of developing cultures in society and, how opinions and attitudes are formed (Hancock, 2002), it expects the enquirer to remain self-aware, reflexive and self-monitoring in order to maintain the rigor and credibility of findings (Frershwater et al, 2010). Qualitative research builds up an accurate, in-depth interpretation of what is being studied through different descriptive sources, which means spreading the study into limited geographical area (Wilson, n.d.). Qualitative research has a strong relationship with the field because the whole outcome of the research is based upon its field activities. Each step of its field work has a deeper implication on the whole activities of qualitative research. It helps qualitative researchers build close relationship with the people or the research participants.

Qualitative researcher should be able to separate stereotypes, and personal opinions and judgments from accurate observations and effective recording of wording, meanings, and opinions of research participants (De Clerck, Willems, Timmerman, & Carling, 2011, p.4). Hence, neutrality is the key determinant of the general standard of qualitative study (Diebel, 2008). Qualitative researchers may choose different methods of data collection but the relationship of the researcher and researched plays a vital role in generating quality information (Bourdeau, 2000). However, qualitative research provides maximum flexibility to the researchers and presents excellent opportunity to maintain strong connection and relationship among the researcher, the research participants, other stakeholders and the field (Bloor & Wood, 2006). As field work is closely associated with researchers, it is said that qualitative field researchers are those who build relationships easily, are sensitive to their surroundings, and have few reservations about asking questions that enable them to learn new things (De Clerck, et al, 2011, p.4). So, this paper discusses about the various dynamic role of qualitative researcher in relation to preparing, entering and leaving the field.

2. Preparing the Field

After fixing research objectives and developing research questions, comes the part of preparing the field. Field preparation covers site selection, and initial contact with research participants. Although, researcher will have prepared the data collection strategy before entering the field, the data collection process will depend upon available information technology and the field context. Technical development, especially in the field of information technology has made it easier for data collection. But doing face to face interview provides an opportunity to the researcher to study facial reaction, body language and cultural setting of the interview site which may provide different story than what the participants are saying.

The most important consideration for research site selection is to identify some kind of connection with the place/space. Geographical location of the study determines the tools to be used in the study and commands strong influence on the knowledge derived from the field. Insider feeling and cultural knowledge can be developed in due course of time, if the researcher has a feeling of connectivity with the research site. The researcher must always be very careful in selecting research sites with due consideration to different activities of the research. The researcher must have the confident that the geographical location s/he has selected will provide proper information for the study.

3. Entering the field

Entering the research site and gaining access to the field is one of the first phases of conducting fieldwork. Gaining access to the field and being able to have direct contact with research participants is a crucial part of qualitative research and often it continues on an ongoing basis as the researcher seeks to access new social groups during the research (Sharpe, 2004).

Negotiation starts from day one of the entry into the field. New issue might crop up which might demand renegotiation and it might continue till the end of the project. The participants and even gatekeepers may come up with some new requirements. They don't have time for unproductive work so whenever something comes where they have to devote some time they will be looking for some incentives. The researcher should not be surprised if the participants expect some personal gain or financial assistance to cooperate in research work. In practice, the INGOs/NGOs or even some government offices do not hesitate to provide incentive for their time in the study. The researcher must always be ready for renegotiation as time and situation demands.

Qualitative research involves social contract with all the participants involved in the study, and informed consent is negotiated at each phase of the research when new information is needed or new areas of study are undertaken (Bourg 2002). The lack of informed consent may lead the researcher to the controversial findings as the participant will not have proper idea about the objectives of the study. Other issue in recruitment is recruiting children and young people. Minors can be recruited but informed consent must be obtained from the parents or the guardians in case of children.

Only gaining access to the field is not the end of the story as the access has to be continued till the end of the study and a good strategic plan must be developed for the exit from the field. Gaining access to the site is ongoing and negotiated with the participants throughout the study. As new questions arise, the researcher has to renegotiate access (Bourg, 2002), continuous negotiation among the researchers, participants and other stakeholders from the field is very important.

In the field, personal relationship with the gatekeeper and the research participants is an important factor which leads to a successful completion of the project. If the researcher knows someone who knows the gatekeeper may also help to open the door. “Friend’s friend” or “relative’s relative” approach may work as magic in some settings. Hence, it is to be focused that personal relationship should be maintained throughout the whole process of research work. But Wanat (2008) noted that working with fewer gatekeepers is easier as it presents fewer obstacles as more gatekeepers and organizational levels presented greater challenges (pp. 197-198). Researchers must always get approval from the concerned party to conduct field study. Explaining the goals of research to gatekeeper and getting their consent helps to build and maintain good relationship.

The role of local leaders is vital as they also can play the role of gatekeeper to connect to the concerned people of the study. Access to a group is often easy through a gatekeeper or the local leader especially in the rural settings where the leader may have strong voice and may have the control over the villagers (Shenton & Hayter, 2004) and may have good command over the research issue or area of the study. Additionally, prolonged engagement, the chameleon approach, use of incentives, and emphasizes on the value of personal contributions are equally important to gain access to individual informants (ibid).

If the researcher is from inside the group, s/he may have good relationship with the participants whereas if the person is an outsider, s/he may need more time to build up relationship (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). The participants may not discuss issues openly with the outsider. People from our culture tend to be introvert with new people. This is the trend of oriental culture and the researcher may have to spend more time familiarizing with the

environment. Some may hesitate to open up about their activities with someone they have never seen before.

Power structure is another point that needs to be considered in qualitative research (Bourdeau, 2000). Structure of power sharing may make it uncomfortable to collect data in certain circumstances. There are many issues that create conflict between researcher and the researched. The power sharing is one of them (Meara & Schmidt, 1991 as cited in Bourdeau, 2000). The power hierarchies rooted in gender, race, class, ethnicity, and other dimensions of social differentiation (Elwood & Martin, 2000) make it pertinent to consider power structure as one of the important issues to keep in mind while doing qualitative research.

4. Working in the Field

Recruiting participants involves providing needed information about the study to the potential participants and generating their interest. As they are going to be volunteer participants, generating their interest in the study is very crucial (Patel, Doku & Tennakoon, 2003). Poor recruitment and retention can undermine the success of even the strongest program. It is very unlikely to get needed information from uncooperative participants (Cooney, Small & O'Connor, 2007). Patel et. al. (2003) emphasize on recruit sufficient participants to acquire needed information for the research. After the selection of the participants, retaining them is another important point. Poor retention is costly both financially and in terms of time (ibid). Time constraint, differences in cultural background, racial discrimination and ethnic problem may develop low interest towards the program (Cooney, Small & O'Connor, 2007). Therefore, the researcher must give due consideration to the above factors while recruiting and retaining the participants.

Qualitative research prefers to take small sample size to produce in-depth study. The sample should correspond to the interest of the researcher and the participants (Herek, 1997) and the participants should be knowledgeable about research phenomena. Qualitative principle requires good informant who is articulate, reflective and willing to share (Coyne, 1997). Researchers should be adaptable and creative in designing sampling strategies that are aimed at being responsive to real-world conditions and that meet the informational needs of the study (Coyne, 1997). Purpose sampling is commonly used in qualitative research. Purposive sampling groups participants according to the pre-selected criteria relevant to the particular research questions. Purposive sample sizes are often determined on the basis of data saturation (Mack, Woodsong, MaCQueen, Guest & Namey, 2005).

In-depth interviews and focus group discussions are commonly used strategies to collect data in qualitative research. Interviews explore the views, experiences, beliefs and motivations of individual participants and focus group use group dynamics to generate qualitative data (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick 2008). The other source of data collection in qualitative research is observation, review of documents and audiovisual materials (Creswell 2009).

Likewise, qualitative researcher prefers unstructured interview. Unstructured interview gives the freedom to the researcher to maneuver the interview according to his/her desire or need. Unstructured interview needs detail knowledge about the study subject and it also needs good preparation to obtain desired result. (Zhang & Wildemuth, n.d.). The researcher has to be prepared with the theme and the scope of the study. Zhang and Wildemuth, further say that the structure of the interview can be loosely guided by a list of possible questions which is called an aide memoire or agenda. The aide memoire is a broad guide to issues that might be covered in

the interview (Burgess, 1984, Minichiello et al., 1990; Briggs, 2000; McCann & Clark, 2005 as cited in Zhang & Wildemuth, n.d.). It is not a list of actual questions but it is a kind of check list which helps the researcher to remember the focal points of the research.

In some cases, the participants may not be very open, the researcher has to be very careful to read their minds and understand what they are not voicing vocally but understand their feeling not voiced in the interview (Silverman 1993 as cited in Mulhall, 2002). The researcher should also be able to read their body language to understand their reaction to the questions. Silverman 1993 further explains the use of eyes and ears in field observation while talking about structured and unstructured observation. The researchers should use their mental camera to capture what happened in and around the area of interview and the influences of the physical environment (Mulhall (2002). Repeating and changing the questions may be required to draw needed information from the participants.

There are certain factors that require attention in implementing the tools in the field and language is one of them. Working in rural areas and with indigenous people, language could be a problem as most of them may not be familiar with researcher's language and the researcher may not be familiar with participant's language. Research participants may communicate in their own dialect which the researcher may have problem to understand. Problems may crop up in obtaining sufficient depth and detail in qualitative data; managing data collected in different language; and also the influence of language on interpreting meaning (Smith, Jing Chen, & Ziaoyun Liu, 2008). The essence of conversation may get lost in interpretation and also the interpreter may understand the situation differently than the researcher might have.

Misinterpretation may create problem in qualitative research, because it works with words and language as the agent of meaning making in all phases ranging from data collection to

analysis and representation of the textual data (Van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, & Deeg, 2010). Language differences may have consequences, because concepts in one language may be understood differently in another language.

Qualitative researchers must be very serious about selecting the site for interviews or group work (Elwood & Martin, 2000, p.600). Spending more time with the research participant at the place where s/he feels comfortable is number one choice to conduct interviews. The uncomfortable situation may divert participant's mind to other issues and the interview may not turn out to be as productive as desired. For qualitative researchers, selecting appropriate sites in which to conduct interviews may seem to be a relatively simple research design issue. In fact it is a complicated decision with wide-reaching implications. It is the responsibility of the researchers to make the participant comfortable for the interview.

The issue of qualitative researcher being insider or outsider in the group is a topic of discussion among the researchers. Insider or outsider status of a researcher might improve or impede the ability to carry out neutral study. Being familiar with the culture and environment may have positive impact whereas that positive impact may create unrealistic influence on the report (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). The insider of the group may know the history of the issue and may influence the research, whereas the outsider may have difficulty to draw information from the participant if the issue is a touchy one (ibid).

If the researcher is a local person and s/he is familiar with the culture of the geographical area, entering the field may not be a problem. S/he will have known the local people which will make it easier to open the gate. If the researcher is already a member of the group s/he is interested in studying, then gaining access is not a problem (Baker, 2006). With due respect to

the above factors, the researcher rapport with the community and the participants plays a vital role in qualitative research.

5. The relationship

Valid and reliable data can be obtained through good relationship between researcher and the research. The relationship should be good and strong which requires much more time. Fieldwork relationship is the nature of the interaction that a researcher has with his or her research subject. Good field work relations are very often crucial for the conduct of valid research as the relationship with respondents inevitably affects what the researcher is allowed to observe or be told (Bloor & Wood, 2006). Bloor and Wood further emphasize three characteristics of good field work relationship; trust, openness and commitment. So the good relationship between the researcher and the research participants plays an important role to open the door for the study (Bourdeau, 2000). Questionable relationship between the researcher and the participant emerges from the power struggle. The level of power conflict could create uneasiness to the researcher to draw needed information from the participants.

Ethical relationship between researcher and the participants is a serious issue in qualitative research. Meara and Schmidt, 1991 mentioned the four principles for guiding the treatment of qualitative research participants (Bourdeau, 2000). The participant must have the autonomy and freedom to work independently. Second is non-maleficence or the research should not cause distress or harm to those who have chosen to participate. The third is beneficence that is the researcher should strive to work for the benefit of those involved. The fourth is justice, refers to a commitment to equitably distributing responsibilities and rewards between researcher and participant.

Privacy is a very important issue in qualitative research. People try to avoid other people's conversation. People just walking into the room where the researcher might be conducting an interview may create some uneasiness in the part of participant and may hesitate to discuss his/her points further. So, the researcher has to be very careful to find a place for interview where there will be no disturbances during the interview period.

Privacy is also a part of ethical issue that binds the researcher not to disclose the informant without his/her consent. Many researchers talk about privacy in qualitative research but their privacy issue is focused mainly on keeping the participants anonymous to protect them from possible physical, financial, psychological and other kinds of harm. As invasion of privacy may cause harm, only those behaviors and expressions that occur in the public sphere should be studied. To ensure participants confidentiality, private data that identifies the participants should not be disclosed or the participant's name should not be mentioned in the report (Toit, 2013).

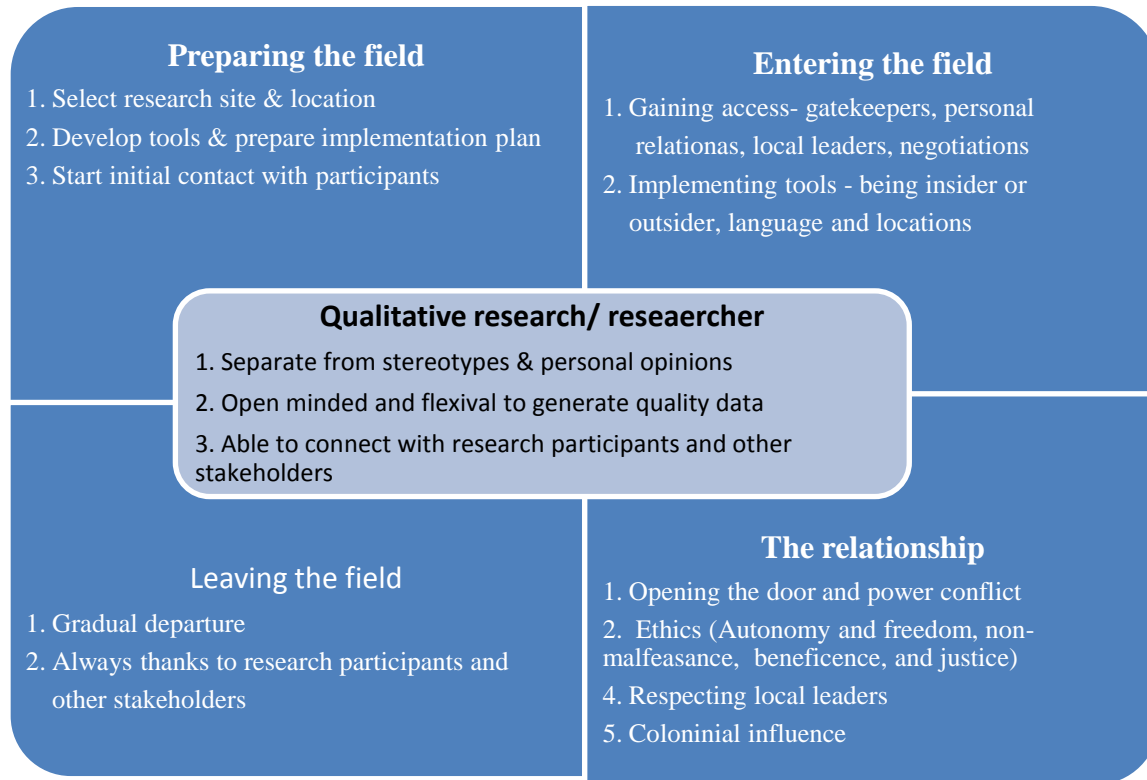
The researcher should always keep in mind that the community will hold the community leaders responsible for any misunderstanding or problems resulting from the study. Therefore, the researcher has to be careful not to say anything that could be coercive and also not to tarnish the image of the local leader in the society (Mack, et.al. (2005). Anthropological study connotes the feeling of "civilized people" studying the indigenous people. This kind of feeling may prevent the participants to open up in front of the researcher (Smith, 2012). The other part of the colonial influence in our society, for instance, is looking at the white Caucasian people as super human beings due to "British Raj" influence in South East Asia. This hangover still effects the people from remote areas. We still have the effect of the oppressed and the oppressor. These people may hesitate to open up in front of highly educated researchers and his/her associates.

Because of such influence, most of our people hesitate to have two way conversations with their supervisor or the researcher. Group discussion may be affected with this social taboo. In Focus Group Discussion, the high ranking officials may lead the discussion where as other people may just keep mum. The researcher may lose to hear from the junior and minority group. This is an issue of pertinent value that the researcher has to keep in mind depending upon the research topic, location, and culture of the group under study.

6. Leaving the field

The researcher has to apply certain diplomatic process to leave the field. The researcher can't just say I have finished my work and I am leaving. Even after being satisfied with data collection work, the researcher may have to go back to the field for more data and for member check or member reflection. The researcher has to be very diplomatic in saying that s/he will be coming back again for more information if needed for the study. Abruptly leaving the field may spoil relationship between the researcher and the research participants. After the research questions have been addressed or when data saturation becomes evident, researcher know that it is time to leave the field. The major question is how s/he leaves- abruptly or gradually? Researcher may have to return periodically to get questions answered or to complete unfinished business. Gradual departure may help the researcher to remain in contact with the field in case s/he needed more information for the study (Baker, 2006). Utmost care must be observed while making decision to leave the field. Abrupt departure may cause problem which may haunt the researcher even after the completion of the study.

The following chart explains the various aspects of qualitative research;



7. Conclusion

In social science or especially in educational research, qualitative research has been a method of first choice among the most of the researcher in recent days. Qualitative research is flesh and blood of modern day research world and products or the findings depends on the relationship of researcher and the field. Because of its' nature of deep study with less samples for data collection, it provides the flexibility to the researcher (Mack et. al., 2005). Researcher gets to choose his/her own tools in collecting data. There are several issues like privacy, colonial influences, personal relationship, language, and poverty that cause to think seriously for the researcher. Qualitative researcher should be able to separate stereotypes, and use judgments from accurate observations. It has been gaining broader acceptance among the researchers of social sciences because of its relation and implication to the field. The researchers should consider culture, environment, language and many other issues to produce reliable and unbiased study

report. The researchers need to pay sensitive attention to the culture of geographical area of the research project. The qualitative researcher should pay utmost care while entering the field. Selecting the research site, continuous negotiation with the gatekeeper, research participants, and local leaders, and maintaining good relationship with the community are some pertinent issues. After the completion of the research work, the researcher should be serious about how s/he is going to exit from the field. Gradual exit provides the option for the researcher to come back in the field if and when needed.

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