



THE CHANGING ROLE OF AN EXPLORATORY RESEARCH IN MODERN ORGANISATION

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ABSTRACT

During the last few decades, the use of exploratory and qualitative research has increased in many institutions. They have been used to explore several areas of human behavior for the development of organizations. The purpose of this study is to provide analysis for exploratory and qualitative research. Exploratory and qualitative research is conducted when enough is not known about a phenomenon and a problem that has not been clearly defined. Although, these research approaches generate ideas or hypothesis for later quantitative research, both qualitative and exploratory research are used to gain an in-depth understanding of human behaviour, experience, attitudes, intentions, and motivations, on the basis of observation and interpretation, to find out the way people think and feel. Scholars have critically opined that in some respects, both methodological and theoretical, in which these research approaches have frequently failed to live up to their appreciative commitment. They established that qualitative researchers have been less ready to seek to understand, and to represent in their own terms, the perspectives of those they regard as playing a more central or dominant social role, and/or those with whom they have little sympathy. In this way, a radical methodological principle of early qualitative research – the commitment to understanding or appreciation became compromised. However, exploratory and qualitative research have been justified through their proponents. They argued that exploratory and qualitative research provide a more realistic feel of the world that cannot be experienced in the numerical data and statistical analysis used in quantitative research; it provides flexible ways of collecting, analysing, and interpreting data and information and; the use of primary and unstructured data gives qualitative research a descriptive capability.



Introduction

The term 'research design' is used in variety of ways by researchers. It is referred as a masterplan, blueprint, and even as a sequence of research tasks and activities. Research design in simple terms is a plan of the methods and procedures that is used by researchers to collect and analyze the data needed by the manager. The research design provides a plan of how the researcher will go about answering the research question(s) defined by the manager and researcher together (clearly defining the problem into a researchable question is extremely important). The research design also contains clear objectives, derived from research question(s), specify the information sources from which data will be collected, the type of data, the design technique(s) (survey, observation, experimentation etc.), the sampling methodology and procedures, the schedule and the budget. There should be clear justification with regard to the research design based on the research question and objectives.

More plainly, a research design is the procedures for collecting, analyzing, interpreting and reporting data in research studies (Creswell & Plano, 2007). It is the overall plan for connecting the conceptual research problems with the pertinent (and achievable) empirical research. In other words, the research design sets the procedure on the required data, the methods to be applied to collect and analyze this data, and how all of this is going to answer the research question (Grey, 2014). As explained by Robson (2002), there are three possible forms of research design: exploratory, descriptive and explanatory. His base of classification relies on the purpose of the research area as each design serves a different end purpose. For instance, the purpose of a descriptive study is to provide a picture of a situation, person or event or show how things are related to each other and as it naturally occurs (Blumberg, Cooper & Schindler, 2005). However, descriptive studies cannot explain why an event has occurred and is much suitable for a relatively new or unexplored research area (Punch, 2005). Therefore, in situation of abundant descriptive information, alternative research designs such as explanatory or exploratory approach is advisable.

The purpose of any research design is to obtain evidence which addresses the research question and objectives. Usually, however, there are a number of ways in which it can be achieved. Although, every research question is unique, most research objectives can be met by using one of the three types of research designs: exploratory, descriptive and causal. In real-life situations, while addressing research question and objectives a researcher needs to make number of trade-offs with regard to various elements of research design. Research design holds all the parts and phases of the research project together. A poorly developed design fails to provide accurate answers to the research question under investigation and in turn does not assist the manager in the decision making process. The foundations of research design are firmly based on scientific rigour and objectivity. Any personal, procedural, or methodological bias involved in research design will have an impact on entire research process. Therefore, developing a sound research design is an extremely important aspect of any research project.

Researchers have mixed different styles of inquiries for many years. They have recognized that all methods have their inherent strengths and weaknesses. Most researchers broadly classify research designs into two types: exploratory and conclusive. Furthermore, some researchers classify conclusive research designs as descriptive or causal. Therefore, as already stated above, there are 3 major classifications of research designs namely, exploratory, descriptive and causal. However, this paper is focused on exploratory and qualitative research designs.

The Concept of Exploratory Research Design

Exploratory research, as the name implies, intends merely to explore the research questions and does not intend to offer final and conclusive solutions to existing problems. This type of research is usually conducted to study a problem that has not been clearly defined yet. Conducted in order to determine the nature of the problem, exploratory research is not intended to provide conclusive evidence, but helps us to have a better understanding of the problem. When conducting exploratory research, the researcher ought to be willing to change his/her direction as a result of revelation of new data and new insights (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhil, 2012). An exploratory research is conducted when enough is not known about a phenomenon and a problem that has not been clearly defined (Saunders et al., 2007). It does not aim to provide the final and conclusive answers to the research questions, but merely explores the research topic with varying levels of depth. Therefore, its theme is to tackle new problems on which little or no previous research has been done (Brown, 2006). Even in the extreme case, exploratory research forms the basis for more conclusive research and determines the initial research design, sampling methodology and data collection method (Singh, 2007).

An exploratory design is conducted about a research problem when there are few or no earlier studies to refer to or rely upon to predict an outcome. The focus is on gaining insights and familiarity for later investigation or undertaken when research problems are in a preliminary stage of investigation. Exploratory designs are often used to establish an understanding of how best to proceed in studying an issue or what methodology would effectively apply to gathering information about the issue. The goals of exploratory research are intended to produce the following possible insights: Familiarity with basic details, settings, and concerns; Well-grounded picture of the situation being developed; Generation of new ideas and assumptions; Development of tentative theories or hypotheses; Determination about whether a study is feasible in the future; Issues get refined for more systematic investigation and formulation of new research questions and Direction for future research and techniques get developed.

According to Stebbins (2001) "Social Science exploration is a broad-ranging, purposive, systematic prearranged undertaking designed to maximize the discovery of generalizations leading to description and understanding (Stebbins, 2001). His influential book argues that exploratory research should not use confirmatory mechanisms like hypotheses. It should be qualitative and rely on inductive research methods like grounded theory introduced by Glaser and Strauss (Stebbins, 2001; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) Qualitative exploratory research which use inductive approach do not use priori theorizing or build on previous research. Casula, Rangarajan and Shields (2020) argue that exploratory research should not be limited to inductive approaches. They propose the working hypothesis is a useful framework for deductive exploratory research that should be part of the social scientist's tool bag (Casula, Rangarajan & Shields, 2020).

Exploratory research can add quality and insightful information to a study, and is vital to a study. Exploratory research allows for the researcher to be creative in order to gain the most amount of insight on a subject. Next, an outside audience will be used for this research, so it is a good opportunity for the researcher to know what works or what not a productive method to use is. Third, it allows for a better understanding on what a research team's objectives should be throughout the duration of a project. Having this information in mind will be beneficial to anyone conducting research from outside sources.

The Concept of Qualitative Research

Every research must involve an explicit, disciplined, systematic (planned, ordered, and public) approach to find out most appropriate results. Qualitative research is inductive in nature, and the researcher generally explores meanings and insights in a given situation (Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

Also, Scholars seeking to answer questions about culture and meaning have found experimental and quantitative methods to be insufficient on their own in explaining the phenomenon they wish to study. As a result, qualitative research has gained momentum as a mode of inquiry. This trend has roots in the development of the New Leadership School, (Conger, 1999; Hunt, 1999), on the recent emergence of an approach to leadership that views it as a relational phenomenon (Fletcher, 2002), and on the increased recognition of the strengths of qualitative inquiry generally.

Shank (2002) defines qualitative research as “a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning” (p. 5). By systematic he means “planned, ordered and public”, following rules agreed upon by members of the qualitative research community. By empirical, he means that this type of inquiry is grounded in the world of experience. Inquiry into meaning says researchers try to understand how others make sense of their experience. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) claim that qualitative research involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach: “This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). It refers to a range of data collection and analysis techniques that use purposive sampling and semi-structured, open-ended interviews (Dudwick et al., 2006; Gopaldas, 2016). It is described as an effective model that occurs in a natural setting and enables the researcher to develop a level of detail from high involvement in the actual experiences (Creswell, 2009). It consists of a set of interpretive material practices that makes the world visible. It is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It is a type of social science research that collects and works with non-numerical data that seeks to interpret meaning from these data that help us to understand social life through the study of targeted populations or places (Punch, 2013). It is the observations and interpretations of people’s perception of different events, and it takes the snapshot of the people’s perception in a natural setting.

It investigates local knowledge and understanding of a given program, people’s experiences, meanings and relationships, and social processes and contextual factors that marginalize a group of people. It is less structured in description, because it formulates and builds new theories (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). It focuses on words rather than numbers, this type of research observes the world in its natural setting, interpreting situations to understand the meanings that people make from day to day life (Walia, 2015). Qualitative research comprises of the following methods: logic, ethnography, discourse analysis, case study, open-ended interview, participant observation, counseling, therapy, grounded theory, biography, comparative method, introspection, casuistry, focus group, literary criticism, meditation practice, historical research, etc. (Cibangu, 2012). Qualitative research is a form of social action that stresses on the way of people interpret, and make sense of their experiences to understand the social reality of individuals. It makes the use of interviews, diaries, journals, classroom observations and immersions; and open-ended questionnaires to obtain, analyze, and interpret the data content analysis of visual and textual materials, and oral history (Zohrabi, 2013). It is exploratory, and seeks to explain ‘how’ and ‘why’ a particular social phenomenon, or program, operates as it does in a particular context. It tries to help us to understand the social world in which we live, and why things are the way they are (Polkinghorne, 2005). It has gained more and more area

in the social domain. It aims to provide a detail understanding into human behavior, emotion, attitudes, and experiences (Tong et al., 2012). The main paradigms within the qualitative research are positivist, interpretivist, and critical paradigms (Punch, 2013). It is used to explore the behavior, perspectives, feelings, and experiences of people, and what lies at the core of their lives. The basis of it lies in the interpretive approach to social reality, and in the description of the lived experience of human beings (Atkinson et al., 2001). It has a profound impact on the research area of education, health care, nursing, sociology, anthropology, psychology, management, information systems, etc. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005]

Qualitative researchers are interested in people's belief, experience, and meaning systems from the perspective of the people. Qualitative research does not include statistical analysis and empirical calculation (Brink, 1993). The roots of qualitative research lie in social and cultural anthropology, philosophy, psychology, history, and sociology. The goal of the qualitative tradition is a 'deep understanding of the particular' (Domholdt, 1993). The purpose of qualitative research is to describe and interpret issues or phenomena systematically from the point of view of the individual or population being studied, and to generate new concepts and theories. The choice of methodology is directed by the questions being raised (Viswambharan & Priya, 2016).

Svend Brinkmann, Michael Hviid Jacobsen, and Søren Kristiansen have discussed six histories of qualitative research as: i) the conceptual, ii) the internal, iii) the marginalizing, iv) the repressed, v) the social, and vi) the technological histories of qualitative research (Brinkmann et al., 2014). Md Shidur Rahman has discussed the advantages and disadvantages of using qualitative and quantitative approaches and methods in language (Rahman, 2017). Looi Theam Choy has compared strengths and weaknesses of both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies in social sciences (Choy, 2014).

The advantages of doing qualitative research on leadership include (Conger, 1998; Bryman et al, 1996; Alvesson, 1996):

- i. flexibility to follow unexpected ideas during research and explore processes effectively;
- ii. sensitivity to contextual factors;
- iii. ability to study symbolic dimensions and social meaning;
- iv. increased opportunities
 - a. to develop empirically supported new ideas and theories;
 - b. for in-depth and longitudinal explorations of leadership phenomena; and
 - c. For more relevance and interest for practitioners.

Qualitative Research Procedures

Qualitative research is difficult to define clearly. It has no theory or paradigm that is distinctively its own. Nor does qualitative research have a distinct set of methods or practices that are entirely its own (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As like all kinds of research, qualitative research needs some research questions. Research questions encompass a range of topics, but most focus on participants' understanding of meanings and social life in a particular context. In qualitative research there is a close relation between the researcher's goals and the researcher's theoretical frames. The theoretical frames consist of all the previous researches, findings or theories; existing on the topics to be studied that are mobilized by the researcher. Methodological choices are another point to prepare a qualitative research paper. These depend on which cases are selected, how the information is

collected, and how the data analysis is chosen (Crescentini & Mainardi, 2009). The qualitative research data are descriptive, in the form of interview notes, observation records, and documents; and data are analyzed inductively. The study emphasizes on a holistic approach, and final outcomes. The sources of data are real-world situations, natural, non-manipulated settings. The researcher is immersed in the details specifics of settings.

Qualitative researchers have to use key principles of research design, such as, linking the research questions to the methodological approaches, considering issues of analysis and data collection as integrated, and being clear about the purposes of the research (Mason, 1996).

Exploratory Research and Qualitative Research

Research following a qualitative approach is exploratory and seeks to explain 'how' and 'why' a particular phenomenon, or behavior, operates as it does in a particular context. It can be used to generate hypotheses and theory from the data. Qualitative and exploratory research is an unstructured exploratory research method that studies highly complex phenomena that are impossible to elucidate with the quantitative research. Although, it generates ideas or hypothesis for later quantitative research. Both qualitative and exploratory research are used to gain an in-depth understanding of human behaviour, experience, attitudes, intentions, and motivations, on the basis of observation and interpretation, to find out the way people think and feel. It is a form of research in which the researcher gives more weight to the views of the participants.

Also, an exploratory research allows the researcher to use tools which are more qualitative in nature instead descriptive. Both exploratory research and qualitative research are observations and interpretations of people's perception of different events, and they take the snapshot of the people's perception in a natural setting. Qualitative research is primarily exploratory research. They are used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. They provide insights into the problem or help to develop ideas or hypotheses for potential quantitative research. Qualitative Research as well as exploratory research is also used to uncover trends in thought and opinions, and dive deeper into the problem. Their data collection methods vary using unstructured or semi-structured techniques. Some common methods include focus groups (group discussions), individual interviews, and participation/observations. The sample size is typically small, and respondents are selected to fulfil a given quota.

These research approaches help to define what needs to be studied when there is no theory on the topic and variables are not known (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014), as opposed to quantitative approaches that use theory to generate data. These research approaches have no structured procedure and relies heavily on the researchers' interpretation and ingenuity who collects, interprets and analyses the data. It is argued that it will be not possible to conduct the same research and get the same result at any other time and place. In other words, qualitative research is not replicable as opposed to quantitative research (Bryman, 2003).

Critical Analysis of Exploratory Research and Qualitative Research

There are some respects, both methodological and theoretical, in which these research approaches have frequently failed to live up to their appreciative commitment. One is that these researchers have often been selective in seeking to understand the perspectives of the people they study. It is true that they have often attempted to understand the views of people with whom they sympathized, for political or ethical reasons; and, laudably, these have often been those subordinated, devalued,

discriminated against or oppressed by the wider society. However, qualitative researchers have been less ready to seek to understand, and to represent in their own terms, the perspectives of those they regard as playing a more central or dominant social role, and/or those with whom they have little sympathy. In this way, a radical methodological principle of early qualitative research – the commitment to understanding or appreciation became compromised. In fact, what has resulted here is a process of distortion not unlike that which qualitative researchers claimed to detect in quantitative work; in this case the attitudes of people ‘in power’, or those judged to support the status quo or to be politically correct, came to be treated as pathological.

From this ‘critical’ point of view, older forms of qualitative research came to be judged as insufficiently radical in political terms, on the alleged grounds that they neglected power differences and failed to recognize the researcher’s responsibility to challenge dominant groups. Yet, to repeat the point, what is involved here is a relapse from an early methodological radicalism centred on a commitment to appreciation back to a form of correctionalism; a reversion to the old evaluative orientation, albeit with changed political criteria. It is worth noting that another important influence on qualitative inquiry in recent years, what has come to be put under the heading of ‘postmodernism’, challenges the ethnographic commitment to understanding in an even more fundamental way. Exploratory research entails a wide range of methods, and there are debates over which are best and most appropriate. Methods are messy, results are tentative, but there is general agreement that exploratory research is an important component of scientific endeavour especially when it comes to understanding society.

Justification for Exploratory and Qualitative Research

On the other hand, often, results from qualitative research have a caveat of being ‘only preliminary’ and implies research should contain “random samples, standardised instruments, statistical tests and precisely calculated levels of significance” (Kirkman, 2002: 34). However, Polkinghorne, (1988, as cited in Kirkman, 2002:34) argues that “narrative research, by retaining an emphasis on the linguistic reality of human existence, operates in an area that is not limited by formal systems” and therefore has more rigour. The hermeneutic approach is holistic which allows complex situations to be easily explored through the ability to be applied across the context of the study as well as all propositions under investigation, all of which achieves similar results to those that come from positivistic research. There are many other reasons or advantages of using qualitative research in organisations and the main ones are: qualitative research provides a more realistic feel of the world that cannot be experienced in the numerical data and statistical analysis used in quantitative research; it provides flexible ways of collecting, analysing, and interpreting data and information and; the use of primary and unstructured data gives qualitative research a descriptive capability.

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