

QUALITATIVE FIELD RESEARCH

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- ▣ **Science** - a method of enquiry – a way of learning and knowing things about the world around us
- ▣ It is a conscious, deliberate and rigorous understanding
- ▣ **Reality** – agreement reality; experiential reality
- ▣ A scientific assertion must have both **logical** and **empirical support**
- ▣ **Epistemology** – Science of Knowing
- ▣ **Methodology** (a sub-field of epistemology) might be called the science of finding out.

- ▣ Social Sciences: two aspects – continuity and change
- ▣ What is real - Nature of Reality is more complex than we tend to assume
 - Pre-modern view – Our early ancestors assumed that they saw things as ‘they really were’.
 - Modern View – accepts diversity as legitimate, a philosophical ‘different strokes for different folks’
 - As a modernist, one may say, “I regard the spirits in the tree as evil, but I know that others regard them as good. They are neither ‘good’ nor ‘evil’, but different people have different ideas about them.

- Post-modern View – All that is real are the ‘images’ we get through our point of view.
- Put differently, there is nothing ‘out there’. It is all ‘in here’.
- Post-modern view represents a critical dilemma for scientists.

Whereas the modern view acknowledges the inevitability of human subjectivity, the post-modern view suggests there is actually ‘no’ objective reality to be observed in the first place.

- ▣ Two pillars of science – **logic** and **observation**.
- ▣ Both elements are essential to science and relate to the three major aspects of social scientific enterprise: **theory**, **data collection**, and **data analysis**.
- ▣ **Scientific theory** deals with **logical aspect** of science, whereas **data collection** deals with the **observational aspect**.
- ▣ **Data analysis** looks for **patterns in observations** and, where appropriate, compares what is logically expected with what is actually observed.

- ▣ Three purposes of research – exploration, description and explanation
 - **Exploration:** to start to familiarize a researcher with that topic; when a researcher examines a new interest or when the subject of study itself is relatively new
 - **Description:** scientific descriptions are typically more accurate and precise than casual ones
 - **Explanation:** Descriptive studies answer questions of what, where, when and how; explanatory questions, of why.

- ▣ **Qualitative Field research:** Within social sciences, anthropologists are especially associated with this method.
- ▣ **Qualitative data:** observations not easily reduced to numbers
- ▣ **Field research:** Especially appropriate to the study of those attitudes and behaviours best understood within their natural setting, as opposed to somewhat artificial settings of experiments and surveys.
- ▣ It is well suited to the **study of social processes over time.**

- ▣ Elements of social life appropriate to field research:
 - **Practices** – behavior such as talking, reading a book etc.
 - **Episodes** – events, (divorce, crime and illness)
 - **Encounters** – two or more people meeting and interacting
 - **Roles** – analysis of positions people occupy and behavior associated those positions
 - **Relationships** – behaviour appropriate to pairs or sets of roles; (mother-son)

- **Groups** – small groups, athletic teams etc.
- **Organizations** – formal organizations (schools, hospitals)
- **Settlements** – small-scale ‘societies’, villages, neighbourhoods, as opposed to large scale societies such as nations
- **Social worlds** – ambiguous social entities with vague boundaries and populations, such as ‘sports world’
- **Lifestyles or subcultures** – how large numbers of people adjust to life in groups such as a ‘ruling class’

- ▣ Two important aspects of Qualitative research
 - A wide range of studies fall under the umbrella of 'qualitative field research'.
 - We should remember that the questions we want to answer in our research determine the types of methods we need to use.

In summary, field research offers the advantage of **probing social life in its natural habitat.**

▣ Various roles of the observer

- In qualitative field research, **observers** can play **any of several roles**, including participating in what they want to observe.

- As Catherine Marshall and Gretchen Rossman point out:

“The researcher may plan a role that entails varying degrees of ‘participantness’ – that is, the degree of actual participation in daily life. At one extreme is the full participant, who goes about ordinary life in a role or set of roles constructed in the setting. At the other extreme is the complete observer, who engages not at all in social interaction and may even shun involvement in the world being studied. And, of course, all possible complementary mixes along the continuum are available to the researcher. (1995:60).

- **Fred Davis (1973)** characterizes the extreme roles that observers might play as the '**Martian**' and the '**Convert**'.
- **Martian** – Imagine that you were sent to observe some newfound life on Mars. Probably you would feel yourself inescapably separate from the Martians. Some social scientists adopt this **degree of separation** when observing cultures or social classes different from their own.
- **Convert** – It involves delving more and more deeply into the phenomenon under study, running the risk of '**going native**'.

- ▣ Different situations ultimately require different roles for the researcher. Unfortunately, there is **no clear guideline for making this choice.**

- ▣ **Emic and etic perspectives –**
 - **Emic** – taking note on the point of view of those being studied

 - **Etic** – maintains a distance from the native point of view in the interest of achieving more objectivity

Some Qualitative Field Research Paradigms:

- **Naturalism** – an old tradition in qualitative research. The earliest field researchers operated on the positivist assumption that social reality was ‘out there’. William Foote Whyte’s ethnography of Cornerville, an Italian-American neighbourhood, *Street Corner Society* (1943)
- **Ethnomethodology** - is a **unique approach** to qualitative field research.
 - **Rooted in phenomenological tradition.**
 - Whereas traditional anthropologists believed in **immersing themselves in a particular culture** and reporting their informants’ stories as if they represented reality, phenomenologists see a need to ‘**make sense**’ out of the **informants’ perception** of the world.

- In ethnomethodology, the focus centres on 'the underlying patterns' of interactions that regulate our everyday lives.
- Whereas naturalistic field researchers aim to understand social life as the participants understand it, ethnomethodologists are more intent on identifying the methods through which understanding occurs. Harold Garfinkel (1967) 'break the rules'; 'conversation clarification experiments'
- **Grounded Theory** – an attempt to derive theories from an analysis of **patterns, themes, and common categories** discovered in observational data.; an approach that **attempts to combine a naturalistic approach with a positivistic concern** for a 'systematic set of procedures' in doing qualitative research.

Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*

Grounded theory allows the researcher to be **scientific and creative** at the same time, as long as the researcher follows these guidelines:

- **Think comparatively** – to compare numerous incidents as a way of avoiding biases arising from initial observations
- **Obtain multiple viewpoints** – in part this refers to different points of view of participants in the events under study, but Strauss and Corbin suggest that different observational techniques may also provide a variety of viewpoints.
- **Periodically step back** – as data accumulate, keep checking data against interpretations you are making. Strauss and Corbin “The data themselves do not lie”.

- **Maintain an attitude of skepticism** – as you begin to interpret the data, regard all those interpretations as provisional, using new observations to test those interpretations, not just confirm them.
- **Follow the research procedures** – Grounded theory allows for flexibility in data collection as theories evolve, but Strauss and Corbin (1998:46) stress that three techniques are essential – ‘making comparisons, asking questions, and sampling.’

Clifton Conrad’s (1978) study of academic change in universities is an early example of the grounded theory approach

Case Studies and the Extended Case Method

- Case studies **focus attention** on one or a few instances of **some social phenomenon**, such as a village, a family, or a juvenile gang;
- **Little consensus** on what may constitute a **case**; the term is used broadly
- The limitation of attention to a particular instance of something is the **essential characteristic** of the case study.
- The chief purpose of case studies may be **descriptive** (idiographic) or in-depth study of a particular case can yield **explanatory** insights (nomothetic).

- According to Michael Burawoy and his colleagues (1991), the extended case method has the purpose of discovering flaws in, and then modifying existing social theories.
- Burawoy sees the extended case method as a **way to rebuild or improve theory instead of approving or rejecting it**. Thus he looks for all the ways in which observations conflict with existing theories and what he calls 'theoretical gaps and silences'.
- This orientation to field research implies that **knowing the literature beforehand is actually a must for Burawoy**, whereas grounded theorists would worry that knowing what others have concluded might bias their observations.

Institutional Ethnography

- developed by Dorothy Smith (1978) to better understand women's everyday experiences by discovering the power relations that shape those experiences.
- This methodology has been extended to the ideologies that shape the experiences by discovering the power relations that shape those experiences. The goal of such inquiry is to uncover forms of oppression that more traditional research often overlook.

- Dorothy Smith's methodology is similar to ethnomethodology in the sense that the subjects themselves are not the focus of the inquiry. The institutional ethnographer starts with the personal experiences of individuals but proceeds to uncover the institutional power relations that structure and govern those experiences. In this process, the researcher can reveal aspects of society that would have been missed by an inquiry that began with the official purposes of institutions.
- This approach links the 'microlevel' of everyday personal experiences with the 'macrolevel' of institutions.

Participatory Action Research

- In this paradigm, the **researcher's function is to serve as a resource to those being studied** – as an opportunity for them to act effectively in their own interest. The disadvantaged subjects **define their problems, define the remedies desired, and take the lead in designing the research** that will help them realize their aims.
- This approach began in Third world research development, but it spread quickly to Europe and North America. It comes from a **vivid critique of classical social science research**.
- According to PAR paradigm, traditional research is perceived as an 'elitist model' that reduces the 'subjects' of research to 'objects' of research.

- ❑ In this paradigm, the distinction between the researcher and the researched should disappear. The subjects who will be affected by research should also be responsible for its design.
- ❑ Implicit in this approach is the belief that research functions not only as a means of knowledge production but also as a 'tool for education and development of consciousness as well as mobilization for action.'
- ❑ Advocates of PAR equate access to information with power and argue that this power has been kept in the hands of the dominant class, sex, ethnicity, or nation. Once people see themselves as researchers, they automatically regain power over knowledge.
- ❑ Examples – research on community power structures, corporate research, and 'right-to-know' movements.

Conducting Qualitative Field Research

- Preparing for the field
 - To establish contact
 - Your appearance as a researcher, regardless of your stated purpose, may result in warm welcome from people who are flattered that a scientist finds them important enough to study. Or, it may result in your being totally ostracized or worse.

- Qualitative Interviewing

- It is flexible, iterative, and continuous, rather than 'prepared in advance and locked in stone'.
- It is essentially a conversation in which the interviewer establishes a general direction for the conversation and pursues specific topics raised by the respondent. Ideally, the respondent does most of the talking.
- Steiner Kvale (1996:3-5) offers two metaphors for interviewing: the interviewer as a 'miner' or as a 'traveler'.
- Miner – This model assumes that the subject possesses specific information and the interviewer's job is to dig it out.

□ By contrast, in the second model, the interviewer

‘wanders through the landscape and enters into conversations with the people encountered. The traveler explores the many domains of the country, as unknown territory or with maps, roaming freely around the territory.....The interviewer wanders along with the local inhabitants, asks questions that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world.’

Steiner Kvale (1996:88) details **seven stages** in the complete interviewing process:

- **Thematizing** – clarifying the purpose of interviews and concepts to be explored
- **Designing** – laying out the process, including a considering of ethical dimension
- **Interviewing** – doing the actual interviewing
- **Transcribing**- creating a written text of the interviews
- **Analyzing** – determining the meaning of gathered materials in relation to the purpose of study
- **Verifying** – checking the reliability and validity of the materials
- **Reporting** – telling others what you have learnt

Focus Groups

- The focus group method, also called as group interviewing, is **essentially a qualitative method.**
- It is based on **structured, semistructured, or unstructured interviews.**
- It allows the researcher/interviewer to **question the several individuals systematically, and simultaneously.**
- Richard Krueger (1988:47) points to **five advantages** of focus groups:
 - The technique is a **socially oriented research method capturing real-life data in a social environment.**
 - It has **flexibility.**
 - It has **high face validity.**
 - It has **speedy results**
 - It is **low cost.**

Krueger also mentions the disadvantages:

- Focus groups afford the researcher less control than individual interviews.
- Data are difficult to analyze.
- Moderators require special skills.
- Difference between groups can be troublesome.
- Groups are difficult to assemble.
- The discussion must be conducted in a conducive environment.

Recording Observations

- ❑ The **greatest advantage** of the qualitative field research method is the **presence of an observing, thinking researcher** on the scene of action. It is vital to make full and accurate notes of what goes on.
- ❑ Include both your empirical observations and your interpretations of them. In other words, record **what you 'know'** has happened and **what you 'think'** has happened.
- ❑ **Don't trust your memory** more than you have to.
- ❑ It is usually a good idea to **take notes in stages**.
- ❑ How much you should record - It is worth the effort to write out **all the details one could**. Because one can't be really sure of what is unimportant until one has a chance to review and analyze a great volume of information

Research Ethics in Qualitative Field research

- ❑ Some of the ethical issues mentioned by Lyn Lofland (1995:63) –

Is it ethical

- to talk to people when they do not know you will be recording their words?
- to get information for your own purposes from people you hate?
- to see a severe need for help and not respond to it directly?
- to be in a setting or situation but not commit yourself wholeheartedly?
- to develop a calculated stance toward other humans, that is, to be strategic in your relations?
- to take sides or to avoid taking sides in a factionalized situation?
- to 'pay' people with trade-offs for access to their lives and minds?
- to 'use' people as allies or informants in order to gain entry to other people or to elusive understandings?

Strengths of Qualitative Field Research

- Whereas other research methods may be challenged as 'superficial', this charge is seldom lodged against qualitative field research.
- Flexibility – One can modify one's field research design at any time.
- It is relatively inexpensive whereas other social scientific research methods may require costly equipment or expensive research staff. But field research can be undertaken by one researcher with a notebook and pencil, to say the least.

Weaknesses

- ▣ Being qualitative rather than quantitative, it is not an appropriate means for arriving at statistical description of a large population.
- ▣ The question of validity and reliability: Field research seems to provide measures with greater validity than do survey and experimental measurements, which are often criticized as superficial and not really valid. But field research can pose problems of reliability. Because, although they are in-depth, qualitative field research measurements are also often very personal.

To conclude, one could say that qualitative field research is a potentially powerful tool for social scientists, one that provides a useful balance to the strengths and weaknesses of experiments and surveys.

Thank you