



Qualitative research in social sciences

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Abstract

This article explains the focus, accuracy, and application of qualitative research in economic issues, highlighting its role in exploring complex economic phenomena and providing in-depth, human-centric insights to analyse the economic behaviour and thought. The objectives of this article are to provide a basic understanding of qualitative research, including differences with quantitative research, and to equip readers with brief information to appreciate the three approaches of qualitative research. Covering a range of qualitative approaches, including grounded theory, phenomenology, and ethnography, it has shed light on diverse aspects of data collection and analysis. Concluding with a discussion on ethical considerations, this article is helpful to orient the researcher to understand the subjective domain of economic and social science issues.

Keywords

phenomenology,
grounded theory,
ethnography,
credibility,
transferability



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1. Introduction

Qualitative research methods have emerged as essential tools for gaining a deep understanding of and thoughtful insights into complex socio-economic and psychological phenomena. Engaging with qualitative research enables researchers to make connections with their personal experiences regarding their research issues. It is described as an effective model that happens in a natural setting. It 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 make the world visible. It is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). It is a type of social science research that helps us to understand social life through the study of targeted populations or places (Punch, 2013). It focuses on words rather than numbers.

Objective of the Study

This article is concerned with the focus on the qualitative research methodology for new researchers. This study has the following specific objectives:

- To provide a basic understanding of qualitative research, including differences with quantitative.
- To equip with brief information to appreciate the three approaches of qualitative research

2. Methodology of the Study

Research methodology specifies the process used to generate a theory that is a procedural framework within which the research is conducted (Remenyi et al., 1998). The methodology of this article is to discuss the various aspects of qualitative research applied in social sciences. The information was collected through the publication of various scholars. Basically, the researcher has applied the thematic analysis approach. Books of various authors, handbooks, technical and trade journals, and websites were searched to justify the set objectives.

3. Analysis

Conceptualizing Qualitative Research

Most economists' research issues are not directly related to their own life experience and learning from grassroots observation. Good research, either of any subject, in reality, requires some core understanding of the context that is not easily observed. The qualitative research method is a scientific inquiry using more logical connections rather than the excessive use of numerical facts. It focuses on the depth and fruitfulness of context and voices for understanding economic issues. This is a constructive or interpretive approach aiming to reveal the answer of various questions. "what," "why," "when," "where," "who," and "how" are core to be explored. The answers to various questions are explored on the foundation of actions and interactions (Lim, 2023). In the investigation of the subjective experiences, qualitative research holds openness and employs a variety of equivalent methods. The applicable methods may be open-ended questions, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, observation, content and context analysis, etc. Whatever may be, that should ensure a comprehensive exploration of the phenomena. Depending on the nature of the subject to be explored, the flexibility of qualitative research is acceptable. But its commitment should be in favour of arresting a wide range of human experience and outlook.

In the qualitative research method, there is a process of manipulation of things, concepts or symbols. There is sufficient room to correct or verify knowledge. Qualitative research stands for its incomparable ability to capture the richness of economic phenomena using human experiences and outlooks. Qualitative research plays an indispensable role in offering visions on economic phenomena, connecting with real-world issues. It is unique in its ability to release the sense of complex economic phenomena that are too complex for numerical or statistical analysis to reveal the reality of problems. On the contrary, qualitative methods provide strong tools to explore human behaviours (Lim et al., 2023).

The worth and strength of qualitative research lies in its capacity to generate contextualized insights. It is a human-centered understanding approach. Through various methods, qualitative research is devoted to investigating the subjective experiences. The in-depth understanding is decisive to develop

theories, to inform to policy maker and to formulate intervention or solution measures. Qualitative research is fundamentally associated with real-world issues and seeks to discover hidden phenomena within a natural context. In a world, rapid social change and complexity are developing over the years. Political, economic, social, technological, environmental, legal, and other unseen forces are continuously appealing to be investigated (Aguila, 1967). Qualitative research, and its flexibility on context and voice, uniquely responds to changes. The vast economic research today is passing through serious methodological discussions. Economics is human centre science, and various methodological issues of social sciences have a sizeable impact on its evolution (Horsewood 2011).

Table. Typical Characteristics of Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches

Characteristics	Qualitative Approach	Quantitative Approach
Typical data collection methods	Participant observation, semi-structured interviews, group discussion, report cards, etc.	Laboratory observations, questionnaire, schedule, or structured interviews.
Formulation of questions and answers	Open/loosely specified questions and possible answers. Questions and answers are exchanged in two-way communication between the researcher and the respondent	Closed questions (hypothesis) and answer categories to be prepared in advance.
Selection of respondents	Information maximization guides the selection of respondents. Every respondent may be unique (key person).	Representativeness as proportion of population N. Random sample selection, sample size according to assumptions about distribution in population N.
Timing of analysis	Parallel with data collection	After data collection
Application of methods	Descriptive methods of analysis are used. Mixed methods are also used.	Standard statistical methods are frequently used.
The role of theories in the analysis	Existing theories are typically used only as a point of departure for the analysis. Theories are further developed by forming new concepts and relations. The contents of the new concepts are studied and illustrated. Practical application of theory is illustrated by cases.	A-priori deducted theories are operationalized and tested on data. The process of analysis is basically deductive.
Analysis method	Categorization, logical	Mathematical, econometric
Language, interpretation	More quotations, more informal texts	Mathematical, more formal texts
Relationship between researcher and research object	Interactive	Independent
Nature of reality	Reality is subjective and multiple	Reality is objective and unique, independent from the observer
Role of values	Full of value judgments	Independence from the values

Note. The author's compilation from various publications

Approaches for Qualitative Research

In the complex world, various qualitative research approaches have been developed, and they provide base to researcher for capturing the economic and social phenomena using human thought experiences

and viewpoints. Grounded theory, phenomenology, and ethnography are widely applied in social sciences.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a systematic approach for theory development. The essence of grounded theory lies in its inductive nature (Corbin and Strauss, 1967). The grounded theory approach is systematic and iterative. The researcher begins research without preconceived fixed theories. Grounded theory centres on the notion that the validity of a theory depends upon the process of its derivation Glaser and Strauss (1967). Grounded approach develops theories directly from the data, refining them through data collection, coding, and comparison.

For effective application of grounded theory, it is important to conduct a preliminary review of the literature. This review helps in grounding a grounded theory study. This initial review is to find gaps and shortcomings in existing studies. The early engagement with the literature can provide a context for research and guide the researcher to specific theoretical outcomes.

Grounded theory is applicable and effective for examining economic behaviour and subjective experiences. Furthermore, grounded theory's flexibility has made it a principal across various economic fields, setting its status as a multidisciplinary approach (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). In this regard, grounded theory has a typical capacity for fostering the development of innovative concepts.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is based on the lived experience of individuals. Phenomenology seeks to reveal the essence of phenomena by exploring experiences from the first-person perspective (Edmund Husserl, 1913). It is interested in the appearance of things (or things as they appear in our experience. The experience of things can come in many forms, including emotion, thought, memory, imagination, desire, etc. Understanding of awareness through analysis or reflection is imperative in phenomenology. It is enhanced by various conditions like bodily gestures, cultural or historical contexts, embodiment, language, and social practices.

Phenomenology is characterized by a focus on unfolding the experience as well as consciousness, without pressure or external meaning. This approach aims to uncover the important experiences by examining the participants from a first-person view. In the investigation process, the researcher endeavours to get a level of description. It remains free from preferences and presuppositions as much as possible. The objective is to capture the lived experience in its most authentic and essential form.

The phenomenology approach involves a reflective engagement with the participant's view, understanding their experiences with personal significance. Researchers focus on the narrative aspects, exploring how individuals make sense of their experiences. In this regard, phenomenology often involves a reflexive dialogue between the researcher and participants on research issues. Researchers can use their own interpretative role in the research process.

Phenomenology aims to clarify the nature of experiences of economic events, which may differ in various individuals. In economics, this approach contributes a remarkable understanding of phenomena. This involves an exhaustive examination of participants' views to reveal the real meanings rooted in their experiences.

Ethnography

Ethnography is derived from the Greek words "ethnos" (meaning "people") and "grapho" (meaning "to write"). The theoretical foundations of ethnography are rooted in the early anthropological work of Margaret Mead (1928). For research, they emphasized the importance of cultural concern and participant observation for understanding inner perspective (White & Cooper, 2022).

In practice, ethnography is performed through the immersive meeting of researchers within a community. This immersion's duration entails several days, months, or even years. This approach allows the ethnographer to develop an in-depth understanding of the community's forces at work and inherently fixed cultural practices. Ethnographers conduct interviews, collect life stories, and engage in daily activities with the participants. It allows a profound comprehension of a community's way of economic life, beliefs, and interactions. This helps to uncover the fundamental patterns, rejecting merely the

superficial forms of inquiry. Immersing in different micro-environments, researchers can get rich visions, reflecting the diverse practices of culture and economic activities simultaneously.

Through this approach, researchers can reduce the weaknesses of superficial observations, digging into the experiences and viewpoints of individuals and communities' economic patterns and achievements. This deep visit helps in uncovering causal motivations, barriers of behaviour, and enable to develop more effective, culturally matching economic policies and support.

The strong point of ethnography is its ability to provide detailed insights and understanding of cultural and social processes for shaping the economy. Through a holistic view of a community's life, it captures multifaceted human behaviours in their natural environment. But its power depends on the ethnographer's emic standpoint. The flexibility asset of this approach makes it viable to reap the micro differential of the economy and its inherent changing soul. The application of this in research helps in new developments, and often leads to realizing beyond the scope of early intentions.

Data Sources and Collection Techniques in Qualitative Research

Qualitative researchers try to draw comprehensive and in-depth information. For the above-discussed approach, archival, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and observation have proven to be more efficient sources and methods of data collection.

Archival

Archives include a broad range of pre-existing documents and records. Within this area, there are two categories: traditional documents and online materials. *Traditional documents*, such as journals, magazines, and newspapers, are crucial for showing historical and contextual analyses. The review of such materials allows researchers to trace the development of ideas, opinions, and events. *Online materials* are equally rich in sources of data. Purchaser reviews, online forums, and social media can provide insights into opinions and behaviours over the years and of the current situation regarding economic activities. Such materials are more important for a phenomenological and ethnographic approach of research to triangulate the appropriateness of methodology and consistency, and deviations of findings.

In-depth Interview

The in-depth interview method is characterized by interactions between the researcher and the participant. The researcher participates with individuals to gain a deep understanding of their knowledge and views regarding a specific subject matter of economics.

It is assumed that the semi-structured and unstructured in-depth interviews have a high level of flexibility. In depth interview interviews require a high level of skill to continue a long discussion. This approach permits the search of issues in depth. Both types of interviews serve different research purposes, and researchers have to maintain the degree of flexibility considering the time, issues, and their applicability in the required context. The surveys run orally should be deterministic, with in-depth interviews to explore complex issues in greater detail.

Focus Group

A focus group is a qualitative data collection technique and helps to capture the experiences and views of participants through discussions within a small group. This method is strong in exploring people's attitudes, ideas, and reactions to certain subjects in a social context. The interactive conversation in focus groups can explore the visions of individuals. The group setting can encourage participants to explore and articulate thoughts that are not possible to do individually.

Generally, the recommended size for a focus group ranges from 5 to 10 participants. An ideally small group is manageable and can be set as representative of different viewpoints. There may be a sufficient chance for each person to speak and contribute to sharing ideas. The dynamic interaction can lead to the natural generation of ideas and the living flow of conversation, making the effectiveness of focus groups. The small group is easier for the moderator to control, keeping the discussion on track; less expensive and possible in a small space with fewer resources.

To run the focus group discussion, reducing its potential drawbacks, skilled moderation is essential. A skill facilitator can ensure equitable participation. A well-composed group reflects a diverse range of perspectives that enhances the richness of the discussion. The carefully designed discussion can keep

conversations more productive and objective-oriented. The continuous triangulation of ideas can confirm the validity of findings, and a sound understanding would be possible.

Data Analysis Techniques in Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is characterized by its ability to provide a deep understanding of complex phenomena, largely made possible through careful data analysis. Basically, the coding, content analysis, and thematic development are inherent processes for drawing a conclusion. The coding process in qualitative analysis is a foundational element. Three interconnected techniques: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding are applied (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The open coding is the initial phase of coding, and information is broken into different categories. They are closely scrutinised and compared for similarities and differences. This phase is concerned with the generation of many codes and fixing their properties. Axial coding helps to organize these codes into groups based on their similarities and relationships. Axial coding helps in identifying the central phenomenon. The final stage is selective coding, and its focus is on integrating and refining information to articulate a theme. Selective coding involves identifying the core category or theme that holds the analysis together.

Thematic Development in a Content Analysis for Qualitative Research

Thematic analysis involves different stages, ranging from initial adjustment with the data to the generation of codes, searching for principal themes, reviewing and sanitizing these themes, and finally reporting the narrative. This process stresses the transformation of raw information into coherent writing. The first stage involves deeply immersing oneself in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Researchers accurately read and re-read the data to capture initial patterns. This repeated engagement helps to develop an intimate familiarity with the content. In the second stage, data are systematically examined, compared, and contrasted to identify significant and recurrent items (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes are inclusively created on the entire dataset. Here, it is important to remain flexible and open to new categories as the data reveals itself.

In the third stage, the researchers begin to piece together codes to form principal themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Abstraction and comparison are particularly relevant here (Spiggle, 1994). Abstraction comprises elevating codes into wider conceptual themes. Comparison includes the investigation of similarities and differences to recognise their relationships. In the fourth stage, themes are reviewed and refined. During this stage, themes may be fragmented, combined, or rejected until they precisely replicate the data's complexities and tones. Integration and rejection are key principles to apply at this stage (Spiggle, 1994). Integration involves synthesizing themes, i.e., reorganising, assimilation, or splitting themes to capture the complexities. Rejection includes critically examining each theme for disconfirming evidence. The fifth stage involves determining categories of data, their relationship with the overall story, and a detailed analysis of each theme's essence. The sixth or final stage involves knitting the description, contextualizing themes in relation to the research objectives and existing related literature.

Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

Understanding the concept of dependability in qualitative research is essential. The qualitative research's validity and reliability cannot be established using statistical testing. So, trustworthiness in qualitative research is possible by providing a logical framework and generating a unique nature of qualitative data (Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The foundations of trustworthiness are credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Credibility in qualitative research is similar to the concept of internal validity in quantitative research, but it is adapted to the context of qualitative methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Fundamentally, credibility refers to the degree to which the findings of research are true. This comprises a profound and empathetic understanding of the context and the subjective realisms. It is about believability and trust in the data and the researcher's interpretation. The profound involvement helps in identifying and understanding patterns and behaviours, and adds richness and depth to the research findings. In the same manner, the persistent observation adds to credibility. The observation in qualitative research is about actively observing, examining, and authenticating ongoing activities, interactions, and changes. The rigorous and careful observation helps to uncover hidden aspects, providing a more comprehensive view. The triangulation of information enhances credibility by combining multiple data sources, methods, theories, or investigators.

Dependability in qualitative research denotes consistency and stability of the research findings under similar conditions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This aspect of trustworthiness considers the changing contexts and realities of qualitative research, ensuring that such changes do not excessively influence the research outcomes. Audit inquiry can enhance dependability by taking an external evaluator review. The comprehensive evaluation typically includes examining the research question, design, data collection, analysis methods, and conclusions. The evaluator judges the uniformity and rational progression of the research steps, ensuring that each decision is well-founded and transparent. Triangulation is another method for enhancing dependability. This includes using multiple approaches to gather and interpret data. The rationale behind triangulation is use of varied methods or perspectives can verify findings, minimizing the prejudices or subjective interpretations.

Confirmability in qualitative research refers to the degree of arrangement kept in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability emphasizes the importance of ensuring the outcomes of the research, which is crucial for establishing the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Audit trail for confirmability encompasses a detailed documentation of the research process. This documentation should contain the initial data, analysis notes, decision-making processes, and changes made during the study, and others. Member checking for confirmability involves presenting the findings or interpretations back to the participants for their endorsement. Peer probing for confirmability contains fetching to colleagues for review of the research. Reflexivity for confirmability relates to the researcher actively reflecting on and documenting their own biases, perspectives, and methodological decisions throughout the research process.

Transferability in qualitative research is the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied to other contexts or settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability is about providing enough descriptive detail for readers to evaluate the findings regarding the application to other situations or groups. The transferability does not imply that findings are generally applicable, but provides valuable insights or education that could be relevant in similar situations.

Thick description is the primary strategy for creating transferability in qualitative research. It involves providing a detailed account of the findings. It includes documenting and describing the dynamics and interactions between participants. Providing narrative richness is rich enough for readers to feel present in the research setting. This level helps readers to understand the complexities.

Ethical Considerations in Qualitative Research

Ethical considerations are supreme in qualitative research. Ethical recruitment contains transparent communication about the purpose of the research. Clear protocols should be established for recruitment to ensure that potential participants are approached respectfully and informed fully. In qualitative research, obtaining informed agreement from participants is necessary. Consent considerations encompass ensuring that participants are fully aware of the nature and scope of the research. This involves communicating all relevant aspects of the research and gaining explicit or implicit consent, depending on the research context.

Guaranteeing the safety of participants and researchers is a key ethical concern. Risk calculations should be conducted before beginning the research, and precautions should be taken to lessen any identified risks. Offering motivations for participation is common but should be handled carefully to avoid unjustified influence. Researchers should carefully consider the possible benefits of the research and any risks to participants, such as emotional suffering or confidentiality breaches. A thorough ethical review process should be in place to identify possible benefits and risks. Protecting participants' secrecy and confidentiality is essential, particularly when dealing with sensitive information.

In summary, ethical aspects in research require constant attention and responsiveness as the research progresses. Ethical conventions should be reviewed frequently, and researchers should remain attentive to emerging ethical issues.

4. Conclusion

The qualitative research method is a scientific inquiry using more logical connections rather than the excessive use of numerical facts. In the investigation of the subjective experiences, qualitative research

holds openness and employs a variety of equivalent methods. In the complex world, various qualitative research approaches have been developed, and they provide a basis for researchers to research for capturing the economic and social phenomena using the human thought experiences and viewpoints. Grounded theory, phenomenology, and ethnography are widely applied. Qualitative researchers try to draw comprehensive and in-depth information using information from archival, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions as major tools. Ethical considerations are supreme in qualitative research. Ethical recruitment, clear protocols, obtaining informed agreement from participants, guaranteeing the safety of participants and researchers, and offering motivations for participation are essential.

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