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A Saga of Qualitative Research

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Abstract

This paper aims at presenting history of social research. The thematic focus of the paper is on emergence of social research (especially qualitative research) and it also presents common approaches in collecting qualitative research. The first part of the paper deals with emergence of social research in the light of enlightenment thought. It also discusses the epistemological perspectives i.e. two most commonly approaches-interpretive and positivism. The second part of the paper briefly describes common approaches in collecting and using qualitative data. The last part of the paper will describe how one carry out the data analysis process in qualitative research.

The Historical Development of Social Research in Light of Enlightenment Thought

Inorder to understand social research it is pertinent to know the brief history of research, its traditions and philosophical foundation. To understand this one has to understand the enlightenment thought. The Enlightenment refers to a period of European intellectual history that has its beginnings in the eighteenth century. Modern scientific thought emerged during the Scientific Revolution by Newton and Galileo changed how scientists and thinkers in other fields approached the world. Before enlightenment thought everything was attributed to god. Enlightenment thinkers believed that knowledge gained through scientific means would be more accurate than knowledge gained through non-scientific observation and assumption. Reason and rationality developed at this time. Social thinkers thought that similar laws could be made in social sciences so in order to make universal laws they re read institutions. In this period a new framework of ideas about human beings and their societies was emerged. The writings of the Enlightenment strongly affected the growth of sociology. Sociology took shape in the nineteenth century as an offshoot of Enlightenment thought, which critiqued religion, tradition, and belief as sources of ignorance and tutelage, conceiving of science, reason, and technology as their superior successors [1]. Before enlightenment knowledge was recognized in terms of faith in super natural powers. This was challenged by philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, who suggested that real knowledge can be gained through a process of logical reasoning called rationalism. The next major changes in scientific thought emerged, when British philosopher Bacon suggested that knowledge can only be gained from observations and developed empiricism as a significant branch of philosophy. At about the same time, French philosopher August Comte founder of sociology merged rationalism and empiricism in a new dogma called positivism.

Two Major Epistemological Perspectives

Positivism

Traditional positivism as envisioned by Comte (i.e., "logical" or "rigid" positivism) assumes that there is an objective reality independent of the observer and that, given the right methods and research design, one can accurately capture that reality. Nowadays, there are few supporters of rigid or logical positivism in the social sciences. Rather, as Patton asserts, most contemporary social scientists that adhere to the scientific method are really post-positivists [2] and are prepared to admit and deal with imperfections in a phenomenologically messy and methodologically imperfect world, but [sic] still believe that objectivity is worth striving for [2] Any methodology that tries to understand social world on the model of natural sciences is called positivist methodology. Positivistic thinkers had a view that there is no fundamental difference between social sciences and natural sciences.

Interpretative

Against this backdrop, the early development of ideas now associated particularly with qualitative research can be linked to the writing of Immanuel Kant who in published his Critique of Pure Reason. Kant argued that there are ways of knowing about the world other than direct observation and that people use these all the time. Another key contributor to the development of interpretivist thought and the qualitative research tradition was Wilhelm Dilthey. His writing emphasised the importance of 'understanding' (or 'verstehen' in his native German) and of studying people's 'lived experiences' which occur within a particular historical and social context. Was very influenced by Dilthey's ideas and particularly his views on the importance of 'understanding' (or verstehen). However, rather than taking a strictly interpretivist stance, Weber tried to build a bridge between interpretivist and positivist approaches. Interpretative school of thought says that there is a fundamental difference between social sciences and natural sciences. The subject matter of social science is entirely different from natural sciences. As natural sc deals with things which are lying out there while social science deals with individual. They have capacity to think and comprehend their actions. In social sciences it is inter subjectivity that is the object of study. So the interpretative school of thought talks about understanding (empathy) as human actions are meaningful and said that reality consists of people's subjective experiences; thus, they may adopt an inter-subjective epistemology and the ontological belief that reality is socially constructed. So they use qualitative methods as they give more importance to words than numbers.

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Qualitative Research

Qualitative research, broadly defined, means "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" [3]. Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. 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 [4].

Common Approaches in Collecting Qualitative Research

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is an approach introduced by Husserl. Various thinkers define phenomenology as below: According to [5] the term phenomenology refers to a set of philosophical doctrines loosely sharing; a) assumptions as to what the world is like (ontological) and how it can be known (epistemological) and b) strategies for the descriptive management of the mental entities relating to such a world. They all strive to capture experiential essences which are but higher forms of knowledge with which the phenomenologist's expects to reconstruct reality on a firmer footing. A more simplistic definition about phenomenology is offered by [6] who states phenomenology as an approach to understand the hidden meanings and the essences of an experience together. Thus one can say it is an attempt to understand how people make sense of their everyday world. These definitions of phenomenology given by different scholars' focus that this approach has the capacity to study human experience and meaning attached to it by individuals.

Ethnography

Ethnography is a qualitative approaches in which researcher use multiple techniques (by applying triangulation) of data collection. It is a holistic approach to understand people culture, actions, perceptions and so on. This style of research can be defined as: the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally [7]. The main objective of ethnography is to describe the community/group behaviour. In order to understand it completely the researcher involves in their daily activities for a long period of time. The researcher must both become participant in their day to day life while it is important to keep the stance of an observer.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is an approach which was developed in the 1960s by Glaser and Strauss in order to generate theory from real life observations. The assumption underpinning grounded theory come originally from symbolic interaction and presume that reality is a constructed and shifting entity and social process can be changed by interaction among people [7]. They took the idea from symbolic internationalist that meaning is constructed through the use of sign, languages and symbols. Therefore aim of grounded theory is to capture things as it is actually happen. The main aim of grounded theory is to generate theory from field by using observations. The main focus of the researcher is to capture things as they occur and to constructed reality which was further reconstructed by researcher frame of mind. Although Glaser and Strauss jointly evolved this approach but they parted away and gave different explanation on data analysis.

Glaserian Approach

Glaser [8] had extended grounded theory beyond the original text. Glaser and Strauss [9] explain that through theoretical sampling, theoretical coding and use of theoretical memos, answer will emerge but it was Strauss and Corbin who focused on developing the analytic techniques and providing guidance to novice researchers. Glaser avoids reviewing the literature until the first core variables or categories have been identified. According to Glaser by reviewing literature researcher get prejudice about what to find and the researcher gets desensitized by borrowed concepts. The literature should instead be read at the sorting stage after identifying concepts/categories.

The Straussian Approach

Strauss indicates that in order to develop concepts and to explore their relationship it is important to raise questions from your insights. In order to identify concepts and categories word by word, line by line analysis of data is done in open coding. Through the process of open axial and selective coding researcher would reach at final stage of theory building. The part of the paper describes how one carry out the data analysis process in qualitative research. Qualitative analysis is the analysis of qualitative data which is collected from interviews, field notes, memos and so on. The importance in qualitative analysis is to understand a phenomenon, rather explaining. Coding is the process of examining the raw qualitative data which will in the form of words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs) and assigning CODES or labels. Strauss and describe three coding techniques for analyzing text data: open, axial, and selective.

Open Coding

In order to identify concepts and categories word by word, line by line analysis of data is done. The researcher observes the written data to identify actions, ideas, perceptions that are coded as concepts. Initial or open coding is the first step of data analysis. It is a way of identifying important words, or groups of words, in the data and then labelling them accordingly. In vivo codes are when the important words or groups of words (usually verbatim quotes from participants) are themselves used as the label, while categories are groups of related codes Following is a text of an interview with women regarding discrimination with girl child.

Q. Interviewer: Why girl discrimination is prevalent in India?

A. Respondent: Yes it is prevalent because son is considered as important in family. Girls are considered as a burden because she takes dowry at the time of marriage. However son takes care of their parents when they get old. From above text (burden, takes dowry, take care of parents) it is seen that girls are discriminated. So a concept can be made as discrimination. Similarly concepts are grouped into categories. While concepts could be specific, categories tend to be broad. A sample set of codes generated from a qualitative analysis. From the above set of codes, we can group the concepts Care of their parents, owner of property, generation' into a category and name it 'preference for son'. As you can see in the above interview text, similar information using abstract labels (i.e. son preference) can be grouped. Some of the names

for the labels can be selected directly from the text. However sometime a name with few words is not enough to describe an entire concept in that scenario, one can write notes against a concept that which is called "Memo".

Axial Coding

Axial coding takes place during the latter portions of open coding as major categories emerge from the data. By focusing on one category in terms of its conditions, consequences, and other features, the researcher develops cumulative knowledge about the category as well as its subcategories and related categories [10] In Axial coding codes are assembled to build connection between different categories. In axial coding researcher can start explaining why phenomenon's occur and under what conditions as actions and consequences are identified.

Selective Coding

In selective coding researcher find out a core category and relate it with the other major categories for generating a theory.

Content Analysis

Content analysis is a method of analysing written, verbal or visual communication messages [11]. It was first used as a method for analysing hymns, newspaper and magazine, articles, advertisements and political speeches in the 19th century [12]. Today, content analysis has a long history of use in communication, journalism, sociology, psychology and business, and during the last few decades its use has shown steady growth [13,14] identified three approaches to content analysis. In what they called a conventional content analysis, coding categories were derived directly from text. In a direct approach to content analysis, a theory or prior research is used to guide the analysis in the initial coding. A third type is summative analysis; in this latter approach, counting categories precedes the interpretation. It seems to me that these three approaches are a continuum, from less to more conservative.

Narratives Analysis

Narrative analysis focuses on stories told by participants. The story aspect is seen as a complete entity in itself with a beginning, middle and an end [6].

Challenges Faced in Qualitative Research

Qualitative research 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. The qualitative research is more complex than the quantitative research, as it deals with human mind/actions and we have capacity to comprehend his mind/actions. Moreover the researcher gets biased by the presumptions which he/she has in his/her mind when collects data also hinder the qualitative work noted common pitfalls in analysing data which includes data shuffling, premature closure, and overly delayed closure. Typical pitfalls she noted were related to closure, such as when the researcher stops collecting data before all categories are saturated or before enough data are collected or" a solid conceptual outcome is created."

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