Qualitative Research: A Decisive Element to Epistemological & Ontological Discourse

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Abstract: Qualitative research in social science is an invaluable way to understand social world. The qualitative research process of studying, knowing or learning about social world generates some philosophical debates. This article explores various critical concepts of qualitative research and how they are being perceived/defined in the research paradigm. In doing so, the article also examined the epistemological aspects of qualitative research; particularly, the article scrutinizes particular methods of conducting qualitative research and issues related to the appropriateness of verbal communication technique in qualitative research (e.g. 'capacity' of interview technique for 'knowledge construction', interviewers' role and its relation to data contamination, 'evaluation' of interpretations of qualitative data). Then, the article highlights issues that encompass fundamental (ontological and epistemological) aspects of qualitative research. Finally, the article concludes that irrespective of the inherent issues of qualitative research approach, it plays crucial roles in knowing social world around us.

Keywords –qualitative research, research methods, philosophy of research, epistemology

I.   INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research in social science is an invaluable way to understand social world. Core objective(s) of qualitative researchers are concerned with how to study or learn about the nature of the social world. The process of studying, knowing or learning about social world generates some philosophical debates. Before discussing about the issues involved in philosophy and methodology of qualitative research it is better to define qualitative research first. The generic definition offered by Denzin and Lincoln (2000) highlights that the observer in the world setting making the world visible through a set of interpretive, material practices. They also state that the researchers work in the natural setting and they interpret phenomena from peoples' perspective. According to Bryman qualitative research is:

'an approach to the study of the social world which seeks to describe
and analyse the cultural and behaviour of humans and their groups
from the point of view of those being studied' (Bryman A., 1992:46)

The above statement also focuses that the social reality should be constructed from the subjects' perspective. Berg (2001:3) defines the qualitative research as it 'refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things'. Some researchers emphasize that defining qualitative research is process dependent and it is difficult to define qualitative research precisely as the process of qualitative research is fairly diverse.

There are two ways to look at the applications of qualitative research in terms of theory; that is research for testing theories or developing theories. The focus of the process of qualitative research is shifting from its traditional view of deductive methodologies (deriving research questions and hypotheses from theoretical model and testing them against empirical evidence) towards inductive strategies; developing theories (grounded theory approach) from empirical studies (Flick, 1999). Glaser and Strauss first introduced the concept of grounded theory as

'discovery of theory from data' (Glaser and Strauss, 1968:1). They emphasize that the theory will emerge from data throughout the research process; it will also be tested and refined within the process and will be worked out well at the end of the phase. Often the two approaches, logical deduction and grounded theory, get intertwined. Sometimes checking existing theories (deduction) with different set of data can modify the former one to a more refined or complicated theory (induction). Thus 'it is important to realize that induction is not foolproof'[1] (Gilbert, 2002: 20). Development of a foolproof theory is very difficult in social research as some basic philosophical issues are inherent in every research.

The early considerations for empirical standpoints of the qualitative research process (epistemological stances) focus on theoretical approaches/positions because it is of importance to researcher 'what' comprises knowledge and 'how' rationally it can be extracted. The traditional theoretical approaches are symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and structuralist or psychoanalytic position [2] . Symbolic interactionism is to see the world from individuals' viewpoint and reconstruction of the subjective meanings individuals form in their regular activities. Ethnomethodology concerns about the methodologies--the interactive ways people used to construct social reality. Important assumptions in this approach are: interaction occurs in a systematic structured way and the context is being produced/reshaped through such process. The third traditional theoretical approach, structuralist approach, assumes that the 'surface' (subjective meaning related to action) accessible easily but the 'deep structures or latent structures', which generates activities, remain unconscious. Thus, this approach tries to unfold 'the unconscious' which caters the formation of social reality.

More recent developments in theoretical approaches are interpretivism (interpretive interactionism), hermeneutics, and social constructionism.

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[1]The example illustrated by Gilbert (2002:17-20) about the famous sociological theory of Durkheim's theory of suicide. The illustration shows that how an initially established theory is being modified in the later studies.

[2]As flick (1999) defines *Symbolic Interactionism* as studying subjective meanings and individual ascriptions of sense; *Ethnomethodology* as studying routines of everyday life; *Structuralist or Psychoanalytic* as processes of psychological or social unconsciousness.

Interpretive interactionism focuses on 'what distinguishes human (social) action from the movement of physical objects is that the former is inherently meaningful' (Schwandt, 2000:191). Hence, understanding (achieving *Verstehen*) of a social action depends on understanding what (e.g. intention) trigger that action. The second recent approach, hermeneutics, rejects the concept of methodological approach of understanding social reality. As Schwandt explains, 'understanding is not … a procedure or rule-governed undertaking; rather, it is a very condition of being human' (2000:194). He supports the concept that tradition actively influences the understanding process. Thus he criticizes the assumption that the researcher deliberately (at will) can set aside tradition and associated prejudgments while understanding 'something' because inherited prejudice shapes our efforts to understand. Thus interpretation of something is always a negotiated meaning of the reality and thereby clarification of conditions is vital while interpreting something. The last approach, social constructionism, mainly rejects the view of naïve realist and empiricist epistemology that knowledge and empirical world can be understood 'as it is' without any mediation and it also rejects the naïve realist view of representation (Schwandt, 2000). Discovering knowledge or reality always takes place within a conceptual framework.

II.   THE WAY TO REACH "REALITY"

The methodology of qualitative research is becoming more dynamic as it is continuously changing due to rapid changes both in the life worlds and technologies. There are numerous ways of conducting qualitative research; applicability of each of which depends on many factors. It is difficult to clearly identify specific methods that will clearly fit to a certain qualitative research. As Snape and Spencer (2005:1) comment that 'there is no single, accepted way of doing qualitative research'. Thus, various interpretive practices or methods have been evolved in qualitative research and applicability of these methods depends mainly on the objective(s) of the research or on the research question itself; the selection of methods is not independent of the research question. To address the research question, the whole

'process' should be catered to a research framework. Qualitative research methods are embedded in the whole 'process' of the research and it can be best understood by looking at 'processual perspective' (Flick, 1999). Some highlighted key elements of the qualitative research process are aims of the research (research question), small number of samples, close contact between researcher and participants, detailed data, detailed descriptive analysis, and outputs focus on interpretation of social meanings (Snape and Spencer, 2005). The first and most crucial step of the qualitative research is to clearly identify the research question. Flawed research question will lead the whole research to vain. Well-defined research question will guide properly to develop the subsequent steps. But some argue that it is not necessary to develop or define the research question at the beginning rather researcher can have clear idea about the research question and the nature of the research, 'but remains open to new and perhaps surprising results' (Flick, 1999:47). Subsequently other areas or techniques will be developed; such as techniques for sample selection, data collection, data interpretation etc. All these steps are closely interlinked with each other and obviously the research question will be at the background throughout the whole process. In addition to that, selections of these techniques are not static; depending on the progress of the research any of these steps might need to be altered or adjusted. The widely applied data collection techniques are interviews (individual or group) and observation. In this paper, interview (individual or group), its applications, uses and issues are discussed in detail in the following sections.

III.   EXTRACTING MEANINGS TO UNDERSTAND "REALITY"

It is widely accepted that the 'meanings' human being posses to their individual or social life can be extracted through 'verbal communication' or, in technical sense, interview. People also assume that 'interviewing results in true and accurate pictures of respondents' selves and lives' (Fontana and Frey, 2000:646). The forms, applications and uses of interview technique vary depending on the nature and objective of the research. This technique is frequently used both in

qualitative and quantitative research. In qualitative research, the widely applied interview technique takes the form of verbal interchange or face-to-face interview both for individual or group. Less applied forms are telephone interview or non-verbal mailed (by post or through internet) self-administered questionnaire; though uses of these approaches are very common in quantitative research. The structure of interview also varies to fit with the research aim. In qualitative research, semi-structured or unstructured interviews are used and structured interview is mostly used in quantitative research. Due to the nature of these techniques, the semi-structured or unstructured interviews are known as 'in-depth' interview in qualitative research. The aim of this technique is to go in-depth of the subject matter or research question. Because of this similar aim and the nature of unstructuredness, open-ended and ethnographic interviews are also considered as in-depth interviews. Fontana and Frey (2000) points out the importance of unstructured interview as its superior capacity to generate greater breadth of data comparing to other types. They looked at the field experience of classic ethnographer Malinowski and point out the aim of unstructured interview as:

'…the latter [unstructured interview] attempts to understand the complex behavior of members of society without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry' (Fontana and Frey, 2000:653).

The latter part of the statement focuses on the importance of being open in unstructured interview. The importance of in-depth interview is further captured by its 'generative' feature; in-depth 'interview is generative in the sense that new knowledge or thoughts are likely, at some stage, to be created' (Legard et al. 2005:142). Through this process unexplored avenues of thoughts will be unfolded and this may add significant value to the research.

Thereby, in-depth interview means the interview does not follow any structured question, it does not follow a directive process, and the interviewer will

have no significant involvement. But, 'even in the most unstructured interviews the researcher will have some sense of the themes they wish to explore' (Legard et al., 2005:141). Fonata and Frey also mentioned this aspect while mentioning Malinowski's fieldwork--'Malinowski's interviewing is still structured to some degree' (2000: 653). Hence, it is difficult to draw a definitive line between semi-structured and unstructured interview. Here both unstructured and semi-structured interviews will be considered as in-depth interview technique. Legard et al. (2005) identified few key features of in-depth interview as flexibility, interactivity, and comprehensibility (achieving depth) through necessary probing or other techniques. The first feature, flexibility, means there are no such strict rules (e.g. structured questions, sequence of the questions etc.) rather the interviewer will cover the topics in an open order by following topic guide (e.g. interview schedule). Here the interviewees are given space to explain their views freely though necessary probing used by the interviewer to keep the interview in the relevant track. Second key feature, interactivity, assumes that the interview is an interactive or effective two-way communication process where initial conversation is triggered by the interviewer and following questions occur in relation with the interviewee's responses. The form and degree of interventions (questions or probing) vary according to case basis. The third feature is the comprehensibility where researcher probes or uses other techniques to get the full understanding of participant's view or meaning. The last, but not least, feature is that the in-depth interview must be conducted face-to-face. Other modes of communication are not suitable to achieve such intense experience.

Ethical consideration is a vital aspect of the interview process. The researcher is accountable for all his acts from ethical point of view in the interview process. Researchers must keep in mind that no way they can violate subjects' right as human being, even if it is for greater benefit of the society. Though the prime objective of social science is craving for truth or knowledge but preservations of subjects' moral rights as human beings dominant over social benefits of the research. 'Ethics say that while truth is good, respect for human dignity is better' (Gilbert,

2002:45). The basic ethical rules of interview are to get 'informed consent' and to keep anonymity and confidentiality of the subjects. Subject must know the nature and the objective of the study and whether their contributions will be published or not etc. Sometimes it happens that the subject may have mental or emotional anxiety after the interview is over; this factor should be considered beforehand as well. Further, subjects must be given freedom to withdraw their participation at any time during the interview session or even they have the right to withdraw their contributions before any publications take place out of that research. It is true that ethical considerations may sometimes limit the choices to reach to the objective of the research; then again morality of the subjects overrules pursuing knowledge.

IV.   EXTRACTING MEANINGS THOUGH GROUP COMMUNICATION

Group communication (or technical sense, group interview) is the data generating method of communicating several individuals simultaneously. Krueger defined focus group as 'a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest is a permissive, nonthreatening environment' (Krueger, 1994:6). Group interview also popularly known as 'focus group' in marketing research where it is used to measure peoples' opinion about product characteristics or advertising themes etc. But its application can be traced in sociological research since early 19th century (see Fontana, 2000 pp. 651). Conducting group interview is relatively cheaper than individual interview but that does not mean that it is a replacement technique of individual interview due to cost benefit purpose; rather 'data generated through focus group is very different from that generated through individual interviews' (Cronin, 2002:166). Barbour and Kitzinger (2001) point out key distinguishing aspects between focus group and ethnographic interview (individual interview); focus group basically helps to examine various perspectives people hold on a social network whereas interviews are appropriate for biographical studies or to understand broad cultural issues from individuals' perspectives. Focus group is suited to explore people's experiences and attitudes towards specific issues or events; moreover it is the technique to examine

'how knowledge, ideas, story-telling, self-presentation and linguistic exchanges operate within a given cultural context' (Barbour and Kitzinger, 2001:5).

Similar to individual interview, group interview can be conducted in a formal or informal setting and also in unstructured, structured or semi-structured manner. Form of the group interview depends on the aim of the research. If the objective of the research is explanatory then it is better to have free interaction among the members of the group and the researcher may play non-directive role. In contrast, focus groups in marketing (Delphi or nominal) are conducted in a formal structured environment. The role of the researcher in group interview is very crucial because managing group is far difficult than conducting one-to-one interview. Researcher must have necessary skills and quality to create 'a permissive environment in the focus group that nurtures different perceptions and points of view' (Krueger, 1994:6) of the participants and participants should not be under any pressure to compromise with others. Generally, researcher must be good listener, be empathic, have clear objective mind, and have adaptability to cater the session to the right direction showing good respect for the members. Typically 7-10 participants form a focus group (Krueger, 1994) though different opinions are there about the optimum number of a focus group. Generally, members are selected based on some common characteristics; though heterogeneous groups are also created in relation to research objectives.

Though group interview or focus group generates invaluable inputs in qualitative research; then again implementation of group interview should be carefully judged. Michell (2001) warned against sole use of focus group in all circumstances. From her research experience she urged researchers to be aware of the fact that while researching 'captive populations' some participants may compromise their viewpoint due to public disclosure. In such situation, individual interview is more applicable for those participants. Then again she used both the techniques in her research as it increases breadth and depth of enquiry. Because of this comprehensiveness feature, uses of both the techniques are becoming common

method in qualitative research. Thus, individual interview and group interview are not supplement of each other rather they are complements.

V.   ISSUES RELATED TO EXPRESSIVE VERBAL COMMUNICATION

There are some issues related to the appropriateness of verbal communication technique in qualitative research. The debates go on regarding the 'capacity' of interview technique for 'knowledge construction'. As interview is an interactive process in qualitative research, the reality created through this process is not the actual reality; it's the mediated reality. Fontana emphasized this issue

'qualitative researchers are realizing that interviews are not neutral tools of data gathering but active interactions between two (or more) people leading to negotiated, contextually based results' (Fontana and Frey, 2000:646)

This interactive issue further triggers to another concern that is the interviewers' role--whether interviewer should take active or passive role, whether interviewer remains 'invisible' throughout the interview process or makes relationship with the respondent; because various roles may lead to different outcomes of the interview. Often it is assumed that minimal involvement of the interviewer is desired to get authentic data, as interviewer can manipulate the interview session or the interaction can influence the respondent. In contrast, some argue that rapport built up is essential in in-depth interview as it helps to get the trust of the respondent, it gives comfort to respondents to open up themselves to the interviewer, and it shows respect towards the respondent. But over rapport can have negative impact on the process as well; sometimes it can contaminate respondent's answer. Thus '[interview behavior] should be friendly but not over-sociable in order to overcome problems associated with bias' (Burgess, 1995:101). Another issue is that, absolute unstructured or open interview may generate volume of data that may not be related to the issue in hand and thus it would be

meaningless to interpret these data. Hence, certain techniques may cater the unstructured interview to achieve its desired outcome; that is the technique will be such that will 'encourage respondents to communicate their underlying attitudes, beliefs and values' (Fielding and Thomas, 2002:126) towards relevant direction. It is sometimes suggested that usage of an interview guide is helpful because it steers the interview in the right direction and if the interview deviates too much from the subject matter it will bring it back to the track. Though 'Hopf (1978) warns against applying the interview guide too bureaucratically' (Flick, 1999:94) as it limits the benefits of open conversation and may distort the actual reality. Thus, there should be a proper balance between the degree of being open and structuredness in in-depth interview. Problems can also arise from participants' side such as what is the credibility of the interviewees that they are telling the truth? 'The informant may deliberately modify the facts to create a distorted impression' (Atkinson et al, 2003:121). Triangulation techniques sometimes helpful in such situations where verification of authenticity of data is required. Gender is another issue in interview. 'Feminist social scientists have focused a critical eye on the methodological and epistemological questions of doing research' (Bergen, 1993:200). They argue that the applicability of interview techniques vary on gender basis. Interviewing women must require rapport built up, building up a nonhierarchical relationship, with women and also self-disclosure of the interviewer is important as it helps to open up the interviewees' selves to the interviewer. As Edwards mentioned:

'This sharing [sharing of the interviewer's self] is recommended to reduce the exploitive power balance between researcher and subject (Graham, 1984), to show solidarity between women (Oakley, 1981).' (Edwards, 1993:186).

She also mentioned 'self-disclosure on the part of the researcher helps elicit more information from the subject' (Edwards, 1993:186). Researchers' gender is another factor while interviewing women because 'women are almost always

enthusiastic about talking to a women researcher' (Finch, 1994:167).

There are some unique problems associated in group interview. Such as, groupthink may arise if the members possess too homogeneous characteristics. Too diverse or heterogeneous group can be dysfunctional as well; these are extreme cases. So, member selection is very crucial in group formation. Sometimes a single person can dominate the session or there can be recalcitrant participant in the group. In such circumstances the moderator has to manage the situation tactfully without violating anyone's self-respect.

To overcome problems of unstructured or semi-structured interviews, 'pilot interviews' can be implemented initially. Researcher must have good grasp on the subject matter and must have comprehensive knowledge on the issue. If external interviewers are being used in the research then proper training is required. Sometimes researchers may have to discard particular interview (or part) or even a focus group session due to non-objective outcome in relation with the research question. Then researcher has to mention clearly the reasons behind the removal of interview in the research for transparency purpose.

VI.   INHERENT ISSUES IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

There are several issues associated with the qualitative research; some crucial issues are raised here. There are problems associated with interpretation in qualitative research. Most of the philosophical approaches underpin that the social reality should be formed from participants' perspective. But to what degree the researchers can really interpret their subjects' viewpoint? 'How adequately the ethnographer has interpreted people's behaviour in the light of the explication of their system of meaning' (Bryman, 1992:77). Then researchers' style of interpretation is questionable sometimes; whether the interviewers mere transcript the interview in a readable form or interpret in relation with the research question based on his or her understanding. Interpretation is also subject to 'contamination' as researchers' own state of mind, which might be different from the interviewees' perspective, or researchers' unconscious biasness may influence the actual meaning

of the reality. Thereby the issue of 'evaluation' of interpretations arises. Then, there are some issues related to grounded theory approach. Some doubt that researcher can be 'theory-neutral' in the research process because 'all observation is theory laden or that there is no possibility of theory-free observation or knowledge' (Smith, 2000:877) hence they raised the question 'now what are we going to do with us?' (Smith, 2000:878). Hammersley suggested that practically it is impossible to follow grounded theory framework (see Bryman, 1992:85). There are also dilemmas in traditional deductive process; because application of theory at initial stage may blind or prejudiced the researcher to see from the subjects' perspective or it may also restrict the researcher to see the odd and unanticipated stances of reality.

Snape and Spencer (2005) focus on philosophical issues from ontological and epistemological perspectives. They have raised some ontological issues about the existence of social reality, existence of context-specific realities, and generalisability of human behavior[3]. If social realities are captive then it definitely challenges qualitative researchers whether they can construct it or not in exact form. By way of doing this it may occur that the outcome will be context specific and subsequently multiple reality may arise. This issue puts more pressure in developing 'proper' methodology in qualitative research. Last but not least is the generalisability or 'law' of human behavior. Does human behavior follow some general laws? If yes, then to what degree? These philosophical issues are the impediments in the ways of developing theories in social research. Epistemological issues focus on the process (methodology) of learning reality such as it argues that in the process of qualitative research the people who are being studied are affected and thus the outcome cannot be objective and it is always a mediated reality by the researcher.

Finally, there is severe crisis of rigor in qualitative research compare to quantitative research, such as quantitative research has hard number as p value which qualitative research lacks (Morse et al, 2002). Hence, a great deal of focus is given on evaluative criteria. The traditional criteria are reliability, validity and

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[3]Snape and Spencer (2005) raised questions whether or not social reality exists independently of human conceptions and interpretations; whether there is a common, shared, social reality or just multiple context-specific realities; and whether or not social behavior is governed by 'laws' that can be seen as immutable or generalisable.

credibility and there are newly developed criteria (e.g. objectivity, transferability, dependability, authenticity, fittingness etc.) available as well, though they serve the same purpose at the end (see Flick. 1999, p. 238).

VII.   CONCLUDING REMARKS

From the above discussion it is apparent that a great deal of issues inherent in qualitative research process but that does not demean the importance of qualitative research in social science. Some of the issues may not be such issues if we can look into the matter from a broader perspective. Such as, one of the issues, as mentioned earlier, is contextual influence in methodological approaches. All research developments are restricted to their own context. But this is not a problem rather specific context is the condition of a particular reality and from generalisability perspective it can be stated as 'contextual generalisability'. Subsequently, broader contextual considerations or multiple approaches with specific context may enhance breadth and depth of reality and it can be stated as 'general generalisability'. As different approaches or practices construct reality in different way and hence 'there is frequently a commitment to using more than one interpretive practice in any study' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:4). Then again the consideration depends on the research question in hand; appropriateness is more important than mere comprehensiveness in qualitative research. There are also debates go on about the superiority between quantitative and qualitative research. But they are not substitutes, rather complements to each other; both can facilitate each other (Bryman, 1992). Sometimes combining two methods can generate broader picture of the reality. The structured guideline to conduct quantitative research and hardcore evaluative criteria incline researchers to follow quantitative methods but this approach is not exhaustive within itself to construct social reality whereas qualitative research may be a difficult path to get close to the social reality; but this may be the true way to learn about 'intrinsic nature' of human behavior and thus construct reality about social world.

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