

RUNNING HEAD: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

Strengths and Weaknesses of Qualitative Research Methods.

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Psychological science has been dominated by quantitative research, which focused on measuring the data and trying to explain the causal effect of measured variables. However, in this decade, many psychological articles proposed the qualitative method, which focused on interpreting the communication, actions, and interactions, to blend in the way of seeking knowledge in psychology (Hanson, Creswell, Clark, Petska, & Creswell, 2005; Yoshikawa, Kalil, Weisner, & Way, 2008). In blending qualitative research methods with quantitative research methods, which I will refer to as a mixed method, researchers have to realize the nature of the qualitative approach, which is different from the quantitative approach. In addition, researchers have to understand the advantages and disadvantages of the qualitative approach, as well as the research questions that are suitable for both approaches.

Comparing to quantitative researchers, qualitative researchers have a different research paradigm. As a result, there are disadvantages of the qualitative approach, from a quantitative or positivism point of view: lack of generalizability, contamination by researcher values, lack of rigid causality, and lack of precision in comparing among groups. These qualitative researchers do not always see these disadvantages as the problems. First of all, because quantitative research methods are based on a realism assumption, qualitative research methods are seen as lacking generalizability (Ponterotto, 2005). When conducting qualitative research, different researchers can interpret the same interviews with different results. In addition, when replicating the same methodology, the result might be changed. So, the knowledge from qualitative research is not one true reality. However, qualitative researchers see that lack of generalizability as not problematic, because they believe in multiple, constructed realities. Thus, qualitative researchers do not try to find one absolute truth but try to find out the nature of the phenomenon in each

study instead. Second, because of the objectivism belief from a quantitative viewpoint, the results from qualitative research methods are seen as contaminated by researchers' beliefs, which would affect the research result. In qualitative research, researcher backgrounds affect the process of data collection and data interpretation. Nevertheless, qualitative researchers view that this bias is not problematic, because they believe that researchers' knowledge and background, in reality, affects how they interpret research findings, from the postmodernism perspective (Stead & Young, 2007). That is, people cannot learn without this cumulative knowledge. Third, the qualitative approach cannot answer questions about casual relationships of variables, as the quantitative approach can. Qualitative researches do not rule out other possible explanations for conclusions about causality. Rather than explaining causality, qualitative researchers view people interacting with their environment and argued that human behaviors are too complex to be explained with a single cause (Stead & Young, 2007). Last but not least, qualitative researchers use words (such as more, less, or larger) to compare different things; therefore, the ordinal aspect of the words is less useful than the interval or ratio aspect of number in quantitative studies. In evaluation research, such as comparing the effectiveness of different psychotherapy approaches, the quantitative approach is more useful because the results from quantitative research would characterize the degree of difference.

On the contrary, there are many advantages of the qualitative approach, although the quantitative researchers may view that these benefits may not be tenable because of the disadvantages that were described above. I summarize the advantages of qualitative research in three aspects: reflective process, new knowledge emergence, and applicability in cross-cultural research. First, the qualitative approach involves a process of understanding people's experiences (Malterud, 2001a). Therefore, qualitative researchers may argue that this approach could provide

the deeper insight into people's experiences that could not be represented by measurement theory in the quantitative approach (Ponterotto, 2005), such as how people's beliefs are constructed by political context in their countries. Second, the qualitative approach may provide new knowledge that the researchers did not expect. This benefit results from a lot of information that qualitative research provides in describing and interpreting human experiences. Finally, the qualitative research approach can be applicable in cross-cultural research without the language boundary (Stead & Young, 2007). In cross-cultural research, there are a lot of problems in translating questionnaires. Although, the items in the questionnaires are translated in equivalent literal meaning, the functions of the items change (Behling & Law, 2000). The qualitative research method can alleviate this language boundary in cross-cultural research because this approach gathers the knowledge from the participant by open-ended questions.

Because of these advantages and disadvantages, the qualitative approach is suitable for specific kinds of research questions: reflecting natural experiences, involving interaction from different levels, and lack of theoretical background. First of all, qualitative research questions should reflect natural experiences, or describing experiences. For example, why does juvenile delinquency occur? The qualitative approach can find out the various aspects of juvenile delinquency. Second, the research question that involves the interaction from different levels, such as social and individual levels, is suited to the qualitative approach. For example, how do school and community socialize students' morality? The qualitative approach may extract research answers by interviewing students. Finally, the qualitative approach is suitable for research questions that lack a firm theoretical background or specific, a priori hypotheses. For example, what kinds of rumination thoughts can be found in people who were sexually abused?

The qualitative approach, like grounded theory, can be used to search for a theory. Therefore, qualitative research may be the precursor for quantitative research (Malterud, 2001b).

To explain how different research questions are suitable for either qualitative or quantitative approaches, I will contrast these research paradigms in the same research topic by two examples. In personnel selection, psychologists tried to predict job performance by applicants' characteristics. If the research question is which predictor is the most efficient, the quantitative approach, such as regression analysis, is suitable. However, if the psychologists have already found the most efficient predictor and would like to find out the reason why this predictor was the most efficient, then qualitative research methods, such as observations or interviews, are suitable. In counseling psychology, as another example, counselors tried to find out the most effective therapy for each kind of client. When comparing the effectiveness between different approaches, quantitative methods are suitable. However, if quantitative research found that cognitive behavioral therapy was more effective than client-centered therapy for people who suffered from acute stress disorder and if counselors would like to explain this difference, then qualitative research methods are suitable.

In conclusion, qualitative methods have benefits and drawbacks compared to quantitative methods. However, in spite of the different research paradigms between qualitative and quantitative research, qualitative methods can generate depth, insight, and different perspectives in the same research topics. Therefore, psychologists should try to understand both research paradigms and use both tools to enhance their researches.

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