

Qualitative Research in Organisations: A New Perspective

by

PURMESSUR Rajshree Deeptee

Currently completing a Masters in Finance and Investment at The University of Nottingham
(Email: deepteeurmessur@yahoo.com)

and

BOODHOO Roshan

Currently completing a Masters in Finance and Investment at The University of Nottingham
(Email: roshanboodhoo@intnet.mu ; Tel: +230-7891888)

ABSTRACT

The use of qualitative research methods is being extensively used in organisations nowadays. The main reason underlying this argument is that not everything can be quantified, for example human behavior is random and can be compared to Jazz musicians playing random notes and chords. Hence, qualitative analysis is a means of understanding things that cannot be explained solely by quantitative research methods. Therefore, qualitative analysis is an important tool for organisations. This paper attempts to assess the extent to which qualitative analysis is useful in organisations and how different approaches to qualitative research are used to obtain information.

*Keywords: Interviews ; Grounded Theory ; Discourse ;
Ethnography ; Narrative Approach ;
Qualitative Research Methods*

Research is scientific or critical study having as aim discovering and interpreting facts. Research may be classified into two main categories namely quantitative research and qualitative research.

Quantitative Research should begin with an idea (usually articulated as a hypothesis), which then, through measurement, generates numerical data or data that can be converted into numbers and eventually allows a conclusion to be drawn directly by looking at the figure or through software which manipulate the hard data. An example of a quantitative research is the number of teenage students who are smokers in a country conducted by the local health authority. Having obtained the data through surveys, they will be input in a software, for example SPSS, to generate a report classifying the different age groups who smoke and provide a numerical report for each age group and if the authority wants to know why teenagers smoke then a qualitative research should be conducted.

Qualitative Research on the other hand, yields non-numeric information. It allows the explorations of people's beliefs, experiences, behaviour, interactions, perceptions, attitudes, feelings and motivations and to understand how they are formed. It provides in depth information which can be used in its own right or to determine what attributes will subsequently be measured in quantitative studies. An example of qualitative research shall be the reasons that motivate teenagers to smoke. To obtain answers for this research question, interviews can be conducted or students might be asked to fill in questionnaires. For analysis of the data, the researchers should read the responses, interpret them and provide explanation(s) on what motivates students to smoke. However, since qualitative researches are not directly quantifiable, the information from qualitative research is not always considered as scientifically reliable.

Through the above definitions and examples we notice that qualitative researchers seek to explain research observations by providing descriptive evidences. This approach is distinct from that of quantitative research which usually quantify relations between variables. Clearly, the objective of quantitative research is to get statistical information (numbers). Qualitative research is highly descriptive and often recounts who said what to whom as well as how, when and why (Gephart, 2004) which is completely different and non statistical. There are so many arguments for and against both quantitative and qualitative researches but in the following sections we provide justifications why organisations use qualitative research.

One of the most common qualitative researches conducted by all organisations is *interview* for staff recruitment. After selecting the best applications through quantitative analysis (e.g. select all those who have at least an upper class second division for their bachelor degree), the applicant is requested to attend an interview. Why is an interview important if the person has the best qualifications? Through the interview, the employer (or usually Human Resource manager) will question and talk to the applicant about both general and specific issues. The way the person responds to the interview provides the employees an image about the personality, the qualities and negative aspects about the person. These factors are usually not seen in the curriculum vitae (CV) because applicants tend to send the best CV so as to provide a 'rosy' picture about themselves to impress the employers. Further through the interview the employer is able to judge the applicant's communication skill which is an important aspect for staffs working in sales, marketing or call centres. In brief, an interview which is a qualitative research technique shows to the employer the 'qualities' of the applicant. Likewise exit interviews are also conducted by many companies before staffs quits the company. Such interviews are conducted to know the reasons why the staffs want to leave the company for another. The responses obtained may help the company to review its strategies so as to prevent other staffs to jockey to other companies which are usually competitors.

Grounded theory is a mode of inductive analysis that is derived from or "grounded" in everyday experiences and generates new concepts explaining human behaviours. This type of analysis may be used in the health sector where for instance a study by a nongovernmental

organisation to find out how HIV positive persons manage their illness. The grounded theory approach is an appropriate method as it involves three steps: at the first level, the researchers examine data (responses) line by line obtained from HIV patients, and at the second level, they compare and contrast the data to create categories. For example the researcher may refer the categories as “Exclusion” (they feel embarrassed in society as they are HIV positive thus avoid social interactions), “Guilt” (they feel guilty for being an HIV patient due to their previous activities e.g. drug addicts or prostitutions) and “Cool” (they are care free and accept their illness easily and do not care about what others think about them). At the third or final level, the researcher moves from data analysis to concept and theory development from each category’s data which eventually explain how HIV patients in each of the above categories manage their illness. Similarly, grounded theory was used in the by research Roger Jeffrey’s research (Jeffrey 1979) on the casualty departments’ patients or Ruston, Clayton and Calnan’s research on cardiac patients. Grounded theory is often used in the health sector since it provides better answers to the research questions. Apart from the health sector, grounded theory may be used in many other departments or for many other reasons in an organisation. For instance to understand organisational identity Brown, Humphreys and Gurney’s research on ‘Narrative identity and change: a case study of Laskarina Holidays’ was based on grounded theory. This qualitative research approach (grounded theory) is useful as it provides an explanation or theory derived from each category. Thus grounded theory answers to the research question from different perspectives thereby reducing biasness.

Discourse may be considered as a very important tool in different fields and it refers to expressing oneself using words. It aims at allowing us to view the issue from a higher stance and is used in everyday contexts for example in politics where politicians explain about the political situation of the country and how can things be improved or how they can do better than the actual ruling and opposing parties. Discourses are used because they easily catch public attention and while listening to the debate the public form their own opinion unlike reading a newspaper which is the opinion of the journalists. For instance the debate between Nicolas Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal though it mainly concerns the Republic of France still was considered as a global debate because people from different countries have watched it. Likewise if we consider recent presidential elections in the United States of America, the candidates have also used discourses. In fact political discourses are quickly mediated as compared to other political advertising tools. Further, discourse may be considered as a cheap political marketing tool which is very effective to advertise the candidates and their objectives since no advance technologies are necessary and is meant to provide a higher awareness of the hidden motivations. The research conducted by Moufahim, Humphreys, Mitussis and Fitchett (2007): ‘Interpreting discourses: a critical discourse analysis of the marketing of an extreme right party’ have shown that a discourse analysis framework provides tool to analyse the nature of political marketing and power relations. Discourse is also commonly used by religious representatives. For instance at the temple after prayers, the priest will preach about certain issues affecting society and advice people how to deal with them or preach on moral and religious values. Moreover, discourses are used in the

business sector for example at the annual general meeting the shareholders are given the financial statements and profit or loss making figures (quantitative) yet the discourses by the CEO and Chairman are required as they are of utmost importance since not all shareholders cannot read the financial statements. Hence explanations about all the investments, revenues and expenses and reasons for their occurrences and future plans of the management provide shareholders a better image about the financial situation of the company. This discourse by the chairman and the CEO are so critical that they are even included in the company's annual reports. Likewise if we consider the corporate banking sector, the financial positions of corporate customers must be regularly monitored before approving any long term debt obligations. Therefore, ratio analyses from company's annual reports are calculated (quantitative research); example the current ratio is 1:2. However, these ratios are not meaningful until the financial analysts make descriptive interpretations (qualitative), for example, based on the above current ratio, the company does not have enough assets to repay for its liabilities, and provide justifications for any changes with previous year.

Ethnography is a qualitative research technique which has as objective to provide detailed in depth description of everyday life practices. Ethnography has its use in organisations and is often referred as *organisational ethnography*. For instance one example in order to know if temporary staffs cause changes in the performances of permanent staffs for particular departments, organisational ethnography may provide the solution in two possible ways. Firstly, a researcher (non member of the organisation) may observe the working trends or

interview staffs to find out the answers. On the other hand *autoethnography* may be used where a member of the department or the organisation acts as the researcher and tries to find out how the work trends have changed in the presence of temporary staffs. Similarly, ethnography may be used in the marketing departments to study consumer behaviours – for examples why do consumers prefer Kit Kat chocolate (Nestle Products) more than Cadbury chocolates (Cadbury Products)? A quantitative research will only provide the sales figures for each brand but it does not explain why the figures differ. Hence qualitative research provides the answers to explain the differences which may be due to more attractive and extensive advertising campaign by one company or particular ingredients which people prefer. Apart from private organisations, for instance if government (Ministry of Education) want to find out reasons why certain students show resistance to schooling then, a qualitative research in terms of ethnography may be used. Ethnography in short provides answers which are attached to the human feelings and behaviours.

Narrative is a story created in a spoken or written format that describes a sequence of events. In many organisations, narratives have its purpose. Archaeology studies past human life and cultures through analysis of materials which have been left behind by the civilisation. Analysis of the goods, building foundations, structures, tools, clothing and burial sites are undertaken in terms of the materials they were made of and their uses. Then archaeologists engage themselves in a narrative approach where they tell the story about how things were at that time. It is through such studies that today we know about the ancient civilisations, their cultures and daily practices. In

the business world narrative approach is also used. For instance to relate about corporate failures such as Enron scandal, WorldCom's failure there are many stories (narratives) written and they are used by other organisations as examples to avoid failures. Similarly, successful managers or companies often write about their success and such articles are used by others as a guide to achieve success in their businesses. Hence we notice that narratives as the name implies does not mean only 'fairy tales' but narratives are used by many organisations where they analyse 'corporate stories' to learn from them which are helpful in their strategies.

The financial world by its very nature is always attached to money. Thus this world deals with quantitative research techniques in terms of statistics to calculate the expected returns, the actual returns, and the variance in returns, futures investments, forecasting, profits and losses. All of these items are expressed in numerical terms. The sole objective in finance is profit maximisation. However, companies and even government are unable to achieve it fully because of losses arising due to certain adverse financial aspects that cannot be quantified for example money laundering. The negative effects of money laundering on economic development are difficult to quantify given its clandestine nature, yet it is clear that such activity damages the financial institutions that are critical to economic growth. Therefore, what can organisations especially government do to eliminate or reduce money laundering transactions even though it cannot be quantified? Qualitative research is one solution to find out ways how money laundering transactions occur and find out ways to mitigate their occurrences. Likewise another aspect which cannot be quantified in finance is the calendar

effects also known as seasonal effects which are one of the various stock market anomalies which cause share prices to rise or fall at particular days of the week or months of the year. These include the January effect, Monday effect, weekend effect, public holidays effect, end of year effect, etc. The end of year effect is very often experienced by many stock markets where at this period of the year share prices fall because investors are uncertain about the future (next year) and hence tend to sell their share causing decrease in share price in the market. Financial literatures have shown that such uncertain feelings among investors occur due their perceptions about the future. Therefore, to overcome the calendar effects which are attached to a great extent to human feelings and perceptions (which cannot be quantified), financial institutions may carry out qualitative research to understand why investors have such reactions and find out possible solutions to overcome them so that the market can function efficiently.

We notice that qualitative researches are used in many organisations for different purposes. Therefore one question which people must be wondering is "which is better: a quantitative research or a qualitative research?" In fact, these two types of research have a high degree of complementarities such as in the example on teenagers smoking. However, due to the nature of the research and the objectives of the research, some research may be categorised fully under a quantitative research while others fall under qualitative. In general, most researches include both the quantitative and qualitative aspects. However, some researchers argue that it is necessary, when assessing the validity of qualitative research, to ask whether the

interpretation placed on the data accords with common sense and is relatively untainted with personal or cultural perspective of the researchers (that is the researcher must be reflexive). This can be a difficult exercise, because the language we use to describe things tends to impugn meanings and motives which the subjects themselves may not share, thus making qualitative research less reliable as compared to quantitative research which may be reproduced repeatedly using the same sample and conditions. Moreover, the time taken to conduct a qualitative research usually outweighs the advantages of qualitative research.

Therefore for an effective study, the organisation must be aware of all the research techniques and know how to apply each of them in particular circumstances. Both the qualitative and quantitative aspects are important and they are useful to answer questions which can improve the organisation's performance. Thus in search of a numerical answer, the organisation should undertake the quantitative research. But to understand 'why', 'what', 'when', 'who' and 'how' of a research the qualitative research is the best option.

"Qualitative research provides insights that are difficult to produce with quantitative research."

– Gephart (2004)

REFERENCES

- Brown, A.D., Humphreys, M. and Gurney, P.M. (2005) Narrative, identity and change: a case study of Laskarina Holidays. *Journal of Organisational Change Management*, 18(4), pp. 312-326.
- Gephart, B. (2004) Qualitative Research and the Academy of Management Journal. *Academy of Management Journal*, 47(4), pp. 454–462.
- Jeffery, R. (1979) Normal rubbish: deviant patients in casualty departments. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 1(1), pp. 90-107.
- Moufahim, M., Humphreys, M., Mitussis, D. and Fitchett, J. (2007) Interpreting discourse: a critical discourse analysis of the marketing of an extreme right party. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 23(5), pp. 537-558.
- Ruston, A., Clayton, J. and Calnan, M. (1998) Patients' action during their cardiac event: qualitative study exploring differences and modifiable factors. *General Practice*, 316, pp. 1060-1070.
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1998) *Basics of Qualitative Research*. Sage Publications, London.