

Justifications for Qualitative Research in Organisations: A Step Forward

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ABSTRACT

During the past decade, there has been an increasing use of qualitative research in organisations. Due to the subjective nature of this method of research, it can be argued that quantitative research provides better findings. However, qualitative research can be used to explore several areas such as human behaviour which cannot be quantified but yet important to an organisation. Our study aims at providing a justification for the increasing use of this so called soft science using the different tools, techniques and theories of qualitative research. Furthermore, evidence will be provided on the fact that quantitative and qualitative analysis are complementary and it is therefore important that organisations lay equal emphasis on both.

*Keywords: Qualitative Research Methods ; Ethnography ;
Autoethnography ; Narrative Approach ;
Grounded Theory ; Case Studies ; Interviews ;
Discourse Analysis*

The objective of this study is to provide a justification for qualitative research in organisations. In general, qualitative research is more likely to take place in a natural setting. Qualitative research is said to be exploratory which is the collection, analysis and interpretation of data by observing human behaviour. On the other hand, quantitative research is more about the collection, analysis and interpretation of data by observing figures and numerical patterns. Both qualitative and quantitative researches are important for an organisation depending on the nature and the purpose of the information.

The following example has been used to better illustrate the differences between quantitative and qualitative analysis: a car manufacturer wants to determine which car model yields highest sales for the last three years. Descriptive statistics (Quantitative analysis) can be used to show graphically the sales figures for the

different models and the firm may decide to increase production of the model yielding highest returns. However, if the car manufacturer wanted to know why the sales figure is higher for a particular model and the reasons why people prefer to buy this car model, then information gathered through interviews, surveys and other methods will be analysed (Qualitative analysis). Eventually, the car manufacturer may use this information to manufacture cars that better suits customers' demands. Arguably, we can say that qualitative and quantitative researches are complementary. One of the tools used by finance analysts to value firms is ratio analysis but ratios on their own do not have any significant meaning unless they are interpreted which involves qualitative analysis. However, qualitative research is said to be a 'soft science' since it is subjective and not directly quantifiable in contrast to quantitative research which is a 'hard science.'

Having showed the main differences between quantitative and qualitative research, the key issue is to show how the use of qualitative research can be justified in organisations. This can be explained by various tools and theories that are used to collect, analyse and interpret information. Since it is quite difficult to incorporate all the tools and theories, the main ones that will be discussed in this paper are:

- Ethnography
- Grounded Theory
- Narrative Approach and Autobiographical Stories
- Discourse Analysis
- Case Studies.
- Interviews

Ethnography focuses on word and observational data to study human behaviour and cultures. Ethnography uses fieldwork, participant observation, in-depth interviews as well as other techniques to provide a descriptive study of human behaviour in different cultures and societies. Human behaviour is random and this can be compared to jazz musicians playing random notes and chords (Kamoche, Cunha and Cunha, 2003). Organisational ethnography is therefore a means of looking at what people do in organisations or in other words, how people carry out different tasks at work. By observing employees' behaviour, it is possible to improve office systems. For example, the top management of a firm has noticed that during the last three months, many employees have resigned from one of the firm's foreign subsidiary. In this case, a qualitative study would be suitable and the top management can actually send a researcher to carry out fieldwork to find out the reasons underlying the resignation of these employees. The findings of the research would help the top management to take necessary actions and measures to solve this problem; may be by increasing salary of the employees, less strict regulations, improving work conditions and work environment or other ways depending on the findings. Hence the main reason that justifies the use of ethnography (qualitative research) in organisations is that it helps to review and improve the existing office systems and processes over time (Hughes, Randall and Shapiro, 1993). Schools can also be referred as organisations and Russell (2005) used fieldwork to collect data for her research on students' resistance to schooling and explained that the main shortcoming of ethnography is that sometimes she had to deal with unexpected circumstances where her own behaviour and

perceptions would affect the research. However, ethnography has proved to be a useful tool as it allows the researcher to gain more insights on the organisation.

Grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960's and it can be described as a research method where the theory is developed from the data itself which makes it an inductive approach; meaning that there is a shift from more specific to more general. Grounded theory is widely used in the health sector since it provides a valid method of developing psychosocial processes to explain human behaviours and the ways people interact among themselves (Streubert-Speziale and Carpenter, 2003). Grounded theory was used by Roger Jeffery in his research in the hospital casualty departments in England where he classified patients into categories (Jeffery, 1979). Likewise, an example where grounded theory may be used is to explore how people whose relatives are hospitalized in an intensive care unit (ICU) cope with their feelings of uncertainty. Here after collecting all the responses, the next stage shall be the classification of the respondents into different groups with respect to their responses. For example first category "Positive" (they believe that the patient in ICU will recover as he/she is given intensive care), second category "Negative" (they think that the patient will not recover and will eventually die), third category "Mix" (they are in between the positive and negative categories) and a last category "Neutral" (they do not mention anything about their feelings). This type of qualitative research may also be used in other departments as we have observed its use in the case of Laskarina Holidays where employees were classified into three groups based on their responses to describe

the way they view the organisation (Brown, Humphreys and Gurney, 2005). Hence we can observe that apart from the health sector, grounded theory can also be used in other studies such as research on organisational identity. It can be argued that by classifying responses in different categories, the findings may be more reliable as the theories are derived from each category's data and is analysed on its own and can also be compared to the other categories thereby giving more insights on the subject being analysed. Grounded theory is therefore a valuable technique that can be used by organisations to better understand its organisational identity, business environment as well as customers' demands. As such, it gives a justification of qualitative research in organisations.

Narratives are focus on individual life stories that can be either in written or oral and they allow the understanding of patterns, culture and behaviour in an organisation. Haynes (2006) explained that since autobiographical stories are the stories of one's own life and/or experience, narratives can also be in the form of autobiographical stories. The narrative approach has been identified as one of the tools that can be used for transfer of knowledge in organisations (Connell, Klein and Meyer, 2004). For instance, an employee in an organisation is having some difficulties in dealing with a particular situation and the manager of the organisation tries to help the staff by sharing his personal experience and knowledge on how he managed a similar problem in the past. In this case the manager is narrating a story which can also be said to be an autobiographical story. Learmonth (2007) uses a narrative approach to explain the importance of critical management education (CME). Through

autobiographical stories based on his personal experience in different organisations, he argues that CME should be taught at schools so that students can think critically to improve decision making and also to have a true picture of management which will eventually enable them to better cope with the real life difficulties at the place of work. Another example where narratives can be used in an organisation is in the annual report of a company which usually starts with the chairman's address or statement. In this statement, the chairman provides a written narrative about the performance of the firm during the last financial period and also what the firm wish to achieve in the future. The chairman's statement therefore provides a summary of the current financial position of the firm and this information is important to the various stakeholders and to investors. Moreover, by stating what the company wish to achieve in the future, the chairman's statement gives a sense of direction to employees to achieve a common goal. A last example where narrative has an important use is to explain a particular situation with stories. For instance, Hill (2007) studied and explained the role of some important individuals in the Spanish transition to democracy and stated in the text:

"... I would like to thank my friends and family there for their time and interest in my project. The insight provided by conversations with them enabled me to provide my theoretical analysis with a human face. They are living proof of the transition in Spain..."

Therefore the author partly used narratives (stories) from family and friends for the purpose of his research. The findings of such a research could be useful to organisations such as

government of a country in policy making or in studies of political science.

Discourse analysis is a tool used to analyse written or spoken language. Discourse is widely used in politics as it can be argued that it is easier to retain attention of people in contrast to written documents or memos. Moufahim, Humphreys, Mitussis and Fitchett (2007) explain that discourse analysis is a useful tool to analyse the nature of political marketing and how political parties communicates to a wide audience where the language used is very important. Discourse is also a valuable tool that can be used in organisations. For example, assume a firm is implementing a new strategy. The top management of the firm may decide to gather the head of departments to deliver a discourse on the objectives of the new strategy and the time frame for implementation. It can be argued that the employees will better understand the new strategy through 'direct hearing' (discourse) rather than through grapevines which tend to deform the original information since the understanding of the discourse is subjective. Another illustration of the usefulness of discourses in organisations is when the government presents the yearly budget. In Mauritius, the budget discourse is presented by the minister of finance and can last up to 4 hours. It is important to note that the budget speech is publicly available in written format but most organisations in the island allow its staffs to listen to the budget speech broadcasted live on the radio and television during office hours. The main reason underlying this practice is that organisations are affected to a great extent by the policies as well as other provisions presented in the budget. Therefore analysing the budget discourse as well as the budget report (written

format) allows organisations to have a better understanding of the aims of the budget and to reset their strategies accordingly so as to achieve their goals. Discourse analysis is therefore an important tool for organisations.

Case studies are used to collect descriptive data through the intensive examination of an event in a particular group, organisation or situation. Siggelkow (2007) argues that a single case analysis can be a very powerful example and can be used to fill in the gaps in existing theories. Case studies are particularly useful for studying rare or complex phenomena such as corporate failures. For instance, there is ongoing research being carried out on the failure of giant organisations such as WorldCom or Enron. These researches, through different approaches including case studies, try to find the causes of the corporate failures. Organisations can use such case studies, which consist mostly of qualitative data, for a better understanding of the business environment of the industry and also to improve the corporate structure of the firm such as internal policies, corporate governance and management of the organisation as a whole to considerably lower the risk of becoming insolvent. Another example where case studies have proved its usefulness is in medical research. For instance, researchers such as biological psychologists cannot alter a person's brain in the laboratory for the purpose of study and therefore, they are interested in people who have suffered brain injuries in accidents. Researchers examine these patients intensively over long periods of time and even though the sample of patients is very small, the findings of such studies are of utmost importance as they can contribute in developing treatment brain diseases. Therefore, the degree to which case studies justify

qualitative research in organisations depends on the usefulness of the information and the extent to which the organisation can relate to the subject being analysed. The main advantage of using case studies is that they show how things occur in practice and therefore can be useful for organisations.

Interview can be referred as conversations between two or more people where the interviewer asks questions to the interviewee to obtain information. Interviews are an important tool used to depict the story behind the interviewees' experiences (McNamara, 1999). Organisations usually carry out interviews for two main purposes. Firstly, interviews are used in recruiting staffs. The interviews are usually structured in a way to determine the academic background, experience and special skills (such as leadership or ability to work in teams) of the respondent which may be required for the position sought. Therefore, interviews provide a means of selecting and recruiting best candidates which will bring a valuable contribution to the organisation in terms of human capital, knowledge and expertise. The second main reason for the use of interviews in organisations is for promoting an employee. In this case also, the management (interviewer) will determine whether or not the employee deserves to be promoted to a higher position based on knowledge, expertise and commitment to the organisation. Apart from recruiting and promoting employees, it is common practice that an organisation conducts an 'exit' interview when employees resign from their job. The importance of exit interviews is that it allows organisations to understand the reasons of the resignations and come up with solutions for retaining its employees. From past literature, it

has been observed that the main factor that causes employees to shift to another job is higher compensation and this can be captured by quantitative analysis. However, if we want to find out if people shift from one job to another for specific reasons such as having entrepreneurial aspirations or the reasons people are dissatisfied with their current job, a qualitative research would be most suitable and data for these researches can be collected with interviews. Therefore, interview which is a qualitative analysis tool is convenient and useful for many reasons in organisations.

A general conclusion that can be drawn is that qualitative research is very important to organisations. Quantitative research methods are seen as the conventional method in organisation studies and are considered to be objective whereas qualitative research methods can be argued to be less reliable due to its subjective nature. However, the use of reflexivity on the part of the researcher will definitely lead to a reliable and valid research. The researcher should also take into account cultural issues which impact on the personality traits of a person; who we are dictates how we think. Several tools and theories can be used for the purpose of qualitative research in organisations depending on the information required and how this information will be used. This paper has provided justification of qualitative research in organisations through the illustration of several approaches and theories. There are many reasons or advantages of using qualitative research in organisations and the main ones are:

- qualitative research provides a more realistic feel of the world that cannot be experienced in the numerical data and

statistical analysis used in quantitative research.

- it provides flexible ways of collecting, analysing, and interpreting data and information.
- the use of primary and unstructured data gives qualitative research a descriptive capability.

Jean Lee (1992) argued that even if there is an increasing use of qualitative research in organisations, both quantitative and qualitative approaches should be equally emphasized. This statement gives further evidence that quantitative and qualitative approaches are complementary.

"The beauty of qualitative research is unpacking the black box and getting at the Why?"

– Dr. Prudence L. Carter

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