Critical Analysis of Qualitative Research Methods in Social Science Research in Nigeria

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Article History	Abstract
  	This study examines the significance and applications of qualitative research methods in social science research. Qualitative research provides nuanced understandings of complex social phenomena, offering rich, detailed insights into human behavior, attitudes, and experiences. The study explores the philosophical underpinnings, methodological approaches, strengths, and weaknesses of qualitative research methods. It also discusses the implications of qualitative research findings for social science theory, policy, and practice. The study highlights the importance of qualitative research in understanding complex social phenomena, giving voice to marginalized groups, and uncovering hidden patterns. By using qualitative research methods, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of social phenomena, contribute to theory development, and inform policy and practice. *Keywords: Qualitative, Research, Methods, Social Science, Research.*

Introduction

Qualitative research is gaining popularity in social sciences for its ability to provide in-depth insights into complex social issues. This approach explores social realities, uncovers emotions linked to problems, and understands personal experiences. Although it has been around for centuries, qualitative research took its current form between 1925 and 1945 (Mohajan, 2018).

Qualitative research is often used when measurement scales aren't applicable (Kaczynski, 2014). Researchers are turning to this approach, dissatisfied with quantitative methods' results, seeking new ways to observe and analyze social reality (Konecki, 2009).

Qualitative research seeks to comprehend, elucidate, investigate, and clarify the circumstances, emotions, and experiences of certain groups (Kumar, 2011). Researchers encounter a dilemma at the onset of a study: the selection between qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Mehrad & Zanganeh, 2019). These methodologies originate from constructivist and positivist paradigms, inciting continuous discourse (Kang & Evans, 2021).

Constructivists focus on subjective, inductive meaning-making, while positivists emphasize objective theory testing (Coşkun, 2020). Both approaches have their uses (Dawadi et al., 2021). Qualitative research suits social sciences, providing nuanced insights, while quantitative research is preferred in natural sciences for objective hypothesis testing (Mohajan, 2018).

However, qualitative research faces criticism for its subjective nature and limited generalizability (Borgstede & Scholz, 2021). Proponents argue it allows for open-minded exploration without preconceived notions. Quantitative research is criticized for approaching problems with preconceived assumptions, limiting its ability to capture unexpected experiences.

It is important to look at the pros and cons of each method in order to fix problems (Hammarberg et al., 2016). This comprehension assists researchers in making judicious decisions and addressing methodological obstacles.

Paradigms in Qualitative Research

A research paradigm is fundamentally a framework that researchers utilise to interpret the world. Tracy (2013) posits that paradigms are favoured methodologies for comprehending reality and acquiring knowledge. Various research methodologies possess distinct paradigms that dictate the way to addressing a research issue.

There are three basic types of qualitative research: positivist, interpretative, and critical (Punch, 2013).

Positivist Paradigm

This paradigm presumes that information and reality exist autonomously from human interpretation. It uses facts and information that are already known to help solve a research challenge. Positivists seek to validate or refute established knowledge and forecast consequences (Park, Konge, & Artino, 2020). They want to find patterns and trends to better comprehend the social world (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Positivism is most often linked to quantitative research, even if it can be employed in qualitative studies.

Interpretive Paradigm

This paradigm focuses on subjective interpretations of data, seeking to understand the world from the respondents' perspectives. Interpretivists believe truth and knowledge are subjective, shaped by cultural and historical contexts (Ryan, 2018). Researchers can't separate themselves from their own values and biases, influencing what they consider true or real (Kivunja & Kuyuni, 2017).

Critical Paradigm

Originating from Frankfurt School thinkers like Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, this paradigm aims to liberate people from oppressive circumstances (Horkheimer, 1982). Rooted in Marxist views, it seeks to address social inequalities and empower marginalized groups through scientific investigation (Kivunja & Kuyuni, 2017). This paradigm is also known as the transformative paradigm, driving societal change.

Data Collection Methods in Qualitative Research

Qualitative research employs various data collection methods to gather relevant information. These methods include:

1. Interviews: The most common method, involving conversations between researchers and respondents. Interviews can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured, and they can be done in person or through technology (Barrett & Twycross, 2018).
2. Focus Group Discussions: Researchers create manageable groups to collect data through dialogues, requiring effective facilitation skills (Mwita, 2022).
3. Observation: Researchers gather data by observing behaviours and traits in real environments, employing an observation checklist to constrain the data scope (Smit & Onwuegbuzie, 2018).

4. Open-Ended Questionnaires: Documents containing questions that allow respondents to express feelings and opinions freely, offering flexibility (Allen, 2017).
5. Documentary Review: Collecting data from written materials like newspapers, reports, and books, helping to access information from people who can no longer provide it (Dalglish et al., 2020).

Challenges and Considerations

1. Each method requires specific skills and techniques to ensure data quality.
2. Researchers must manage large amounts of data and avoid biases.
3. Methods may have limitations, such as time-consuming or restricted access to information.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing use of qualitative research methods, there's a need for comprehensive evaluation of their effectiveness, rigor, and relevance in understanding complex social phenomena. Criticisms and debates surround qualitative research, questioning its validity, reliability, and generalizability. Clear guidelines and standards are lacking, leading to inconsistencies in research quality.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the philosophical underpinnings and methodological approaches of qualitative research in social science research.
2. To critically evaluate the strengths and Weaknesses of qualitative research methods.
3. To explore the applications and contributions of qualitative research methods in social science research.
4. To discuss the implications of qualitative research findings for social science.

Philosophical Underpinnings

1. Constructivism: Reality is constructed through social interactions and experiences. Researchers focus on understanding how participants construct meaning and reality, acknowledging their own biases and perspectives.
2. Interpretivism: Knowledge is subjective and context-dependent. Researchers seek to understand participants' meanings and interpretations, using qualitative methods like interviews and observations.

3. Critical Theory: Seeks to reveal power dynamics, inequities, and social injustices. Researchers aim to empower marginalised people and foster social change, acknowledging that knowledge is influenced by power dynamics.

Methodological Approaches

1. Phenomenology: Explores lived experiences and meanings, using in-depth interviews or written accounts.
2. Grounded Theory: Develops theory from data, identifying patterns and themes through participant observation and interviews.
3. Ethnography: Studies cultures and social phenomena in natural settings, using prolonged engagement and participant observation.
4. Case Study: Examines a single case or multiple cases in-depth, using multiple data sources.

Strengths of Qualitative Research

1. Provides rich, detailed insights into participants' experiences and perspectives.
2. Flexible and adaptable approach.
3. Contextual understanding of social, cultural, and historical context.
4. Participant-centered, prioritizing their perspectives and experiences.
5. Can generate theory and inform further research.

Weaknesses of Qualitative Research

1. Subjectivity and researcher bias.
2. Sampling limitations and lack of generalizability.
3. Data analysis challenges and complexity.
4. No statistical generalizability.
5. Dependence on researcher expertise.

Addressing Weaknesses

1. Triangulation: using multiple data sources and methods.
2. Member checking: verifying findings with participants.
3. Peer debriefing: discussing findings with colleagues.
4. Audit trails: maintaining a detailed research record.
5. Reflexivity: recognizing and mitigating researcher bias.

Best Practices

1. Clearly define research question and objectives.
2. Systematic and transparent approach.
3. Ensure data quality and validity.
4. Appropriate data analysis techniques.
5. Interpret findings in context.

Applications and Contributions

Qualitative research provides rich insights into human behavior, attitudes, and experiences, informing various fields like social sciences, education, and healthcare.

Understanding Complex Social Phenomena

Qualitative research methods are especially helpful for figuring out complicated social issues, like social hierarchies, cultural practices, and group identities. These techniques enable researchers to investigate the subtleties of social interactions, power dynamics, and cultural norms, yielding a more refined comprehension of how people and communities engage and interpret their experiences. Researchers can learn more about complicated social issues by applying qualitative research methodologies, such as:

1. Social hierarchies: Qualitative research methods can help researchers understand how social hierarchies are constructed and maintained, and how they impact individuals and groups.
2. Cultural practices: These methods can provide insights into cultural practices and norms, and how they shape individual and group behavior.
3. Collective identities: Qualitative research methods can help researchers understand how collective identities are formed and maintained, and how they impact individual and group behavior.

Giving Voice to Marginalized Groups

Qualitative research methodologies can serve to amplify the voices of marginalised people, advancing social justice and contesting prevailing narratives. These strategies give people and groups a way to communicate their stories and points of view, which helps researchers learn more about the social and cultural settings in which they live. Researchers can:

1. Amplify the voices of underrepresented groups: These methods can help researchers amplify the voices of underrepresented groups, promoting social justice and challenging dominant narratives.
2. Challenge dominant narratives: Qualitative research methods can be used to challenge dominant narratives and provide alternative perspectives on social phenomena.
3. Promote social justice: By giving voice to marginalized groups, qualitative research methods can contribute to promoting social justice and challenging inequality.

Uncovering Hidden Patterns

Qualitative research methods can also be used to uncover hidden patterns and themes in data, contributing to theory development and refinement. These methods allow

researchers to identify recurring themes, patterns, and concepts that emerge from the data, providing insights into complex social phenomena. By using qualitative research methods, researchers can:

1. Identify recurring themes and patterns: These methods can help researchers identify recurring themes and patterns in data, providing insights into complex social phenomena.
2. Develop theory: Qualitative research methods can be used to develop theory, providing a framework for understanding complex social phenomena.
3. Refine existing theory: These methods can also be used to refine existing theory, providing a more nuanced understanding of complex social phenomena.

Advancing Theoretical Frameworks

Qualitative research methods can also contribute to the development and refinement of sociological theories. By exploring social phenomena in-depth, qualitative research methods can provide insights into complex social phenomena, allowing researchers to develop and refine theoretical frameworks. By using qualitative research methods, researchers can:

1. Develop new theoretical frameworks: These methods can be used to develop new theoretical frameworks, providing a framework for understanding complex social phenomena.
2. Refine existing theoretical frameworks: Qualitative research methods can also be used to refine existing theoretical frameworks, providing a more nuanced understanding of complex social phenomena.
3. Challenge existing theoretical frameworks: These methods can also be used to challenge existing theoretical frameworks, providing alternative perspectives on social phenomena.

Implications of Qualitative Research for Social Science

According to Allen, (2017) Qualitative research has far-reaching implications for social science, providing a unique perspective on complex social phenomena. By exploring the experiences, perspectives, and meanings of individuals and groups, qualitative research can inform theory development, shape policy decisions, and improve practice in various fields.

Informing Theory Development

Qualitative research can contribute to the development of new theories or refinement of existing ones by providing rich, contextual data that captures the nuances of social phenomena. By exploring the experiences and perspectives of individuals and groups, qualitative research can help researchers develop theories that are grounded in empirical data and sensitive to the complexities of social life.

Shaping Policy Decisions

Qualitative research can inform policy decisions by providing insights into the experiences, needs, and perspectives of individuals and groups. By providing contextual data and nuanced understandings of social phenomena, qualitative research can help policymakers develop policies that are tailored to the specific needs of individuals and groups.

Improving Practice

Qualitative research can improve practice in various fields, such as education, healthcare, and social work, by providing insights into the experiences and needs of individuals and groups. By providing contextual data and nuanced understandings of social phenomena, qualitative research can help practitioners develop more effective interventions and programs.

Understanding Complex Social Phenomena

Qualitative research can provide a deep understanding of complex social phenomena, such as social inequality, cultural identity, and power dynamics. By exploring the experiences and perspectives of individuals and groups, qualitative research can help researchers understand the nuances of these phenomena and develop theories that capture their complexity.

Giving Voice to Marginalized Groups

Qualitative research can give voice to marginalized groups, providing a platform for individuals and groups to share their experiences and perspectives. By amplifying the voices of marginalized groups, qualitative research can help promote social justice and challenge dominant narratives.

Recommendations

1. Increased use of qualitative research methods: Researchers should consider using qualitative research methods to explore complex social phenomena and give voice to marginalized groups.

2. Improved research design: Researchers should ensure that their research design is rigorous and well-suited to the research question and objectives.

3. Enhanced data analysis: Researchers should use appropriate data analysis techniques to ensure that the findings are valid and reliable.

4. Increased transparency: Researchers should be transparent about their research methods and findings, and provide sufficient detail to allow for replication and verification.

5. Collaboration: Researchers should collaborate with stakeholders, including policymakers,

Conclusion

In summary, qualitative research methods are an important tool for social science study since they give us a lot of information about complicated social events. Researchers can create and carry out studies that are rigorous, valid, and relevant to the study topic and goals if they know what the strengths and shortcomings of qualitative research methodologies are. The results of this study have ramifications for social scientific theory, policy, and practice, and they add to the current discussion over the importance of qualitative research methods in social science research. Qualitative research approaches enable researchers to attain a profound comprehension of intricate social phenomena, amplify the voices of marginalised people, and reveal obscured patterns, so fostering positive social transformation.

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