

Eight Moments in the History of Qualitative Research

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the history of qualitative research, from its origins in colonial ethnographies to the development of formalized methods, and the pluralism and interpretive approaches of the blurred genres period. The article also discusses the challenges and controversies faced by qualitative research in the present and future, leading to the rise of new approaches such as mixed-method research and critical conversations about diversity, moral discourse, and global society. The article also describes the three perspectives used to classify research: application, objective, and mode of inquiry. Qualitative research is a method of scientific inquiry that uses data collection and analysis, primarily focused on understanding an issue or solving a problem. The article explores the eight moments of qualitative research development as identified in 'The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research', from the traditional phase to the fractured future. Each moment is characterized by a different paradigm, ontology, and methodology, and has been influenced by key contributors such as Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead.

Finally, the article highlights the growing importance of qualitative research in the field of social science research, which is now considered equal to quantitative research. The mixed method approach, which links both quantitative and qualitative research, has also gained popularity. The article concludes by emphasizing the value of scientific inquiry and the importance of understanding the world around us in all its complexity and diversity.

Keywords: eight moments, qualitative research, paradigm, ontology, contributor

Introduction

The history of qualitative research has been a long and complex one, with numerous pivotal moments and contributions from a diverse array of scholars and disciplines. From its origins in the colonial ethnographies of the 17th to 19th centuries, to the development of formalized methods during the modernist phase, and the pluralism and interpretive approaches of the blurred genres period, the evolution of qualitative research has been marked by constant change and innovation. In recent times, the methodological controversies and challenges of the present and future have given rise to new approaches such as mixed-method research and critical conversations about diversity, moral discourse, and global society. Overall, the history of qualitative research is a testament to the value of scientific inquiry and the importance of understanding the world around us in all its complexity and diversity.

Research

The history of qualitative research is a testament to the value of scientific inquiry and the importance of understanding the world around us in all its complexity and diversity. Research is a systematic process of inquiry that involves the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data to gain new knowledge or expand existing knowledge. Research is creation of new knowledge and expansion of existing knowledge. Some scholar has defined research as following. Kothari (2004) defines research as “the method, which man employs for obtaining the knowledge of whatever the unknown, can be termed as research”(p. 1). Another scholar John W. Creswell defines research as systematic task that answer the curiosity. According to Creswell (2012), research means a process of “steps used to collect and analyze information to increase our understanding of a topic or issue. It

consists of three steps: pose a question, collect data to answer the question, and present an answer to the question” (p. 26). Similarly, Cook defines research as “an honest, exhaustive, intelligent searching for facts and their meanings or implications regarding a given problem” (cited in Pandey, 2015, p. 8). From the above definitions, we can conclude that research is a method of scientific inquiry which uses data collection and analysis. It is basically for understanding an issue or solving a problem.

Types of research

Research can be classified on the basis of perspective. According to Kumar (2014), there are three types of research based on perspective. The first perspective is the application perspective, which includes two broad categories: pure research and applied research. Pure research, as defined by Bailey (1978), involves developing and testing theories and hypotheses that are intellectually challenging to the researcher but may not have practical applications in the present or future. Applied research, on the other hand, aims to find solutions for immediate problems faced by society or industrial/business organizations (Kothari, 1990). Objective perspective: If you examine a research perspective of its objectivities, broadly a research endeavor can be classified as descriptive, correlation, explanatory or exploratory. Descriptive research describes systematically about phenomenon, problem or issue. Correlation research discovers or establishes the relationship between dependent and independent variables. Explanatory research attempts to clarify why and how there is relationship between two aspects of a situation or phenomenon. Explanatory research is that research where research is carried out from a view point of the objectives of a study. Exploratory research is carried out when a study is undertaken with the objective either of exploring an area where little is known or of investigating the possibilities of undertaking a particular research study.

Mode of enquiry perspective: From the prospective of mode of enquiry, research can be classified into three approaches. They are the quantitative approach, qualitative approach and mixed approach.

Based on the nature of information, there are two types of research approaches: Quantitative and Qualitative (Kothari, 2004; Pandey & Pandey, 2015). However, Creswell suggests the third research design called ‘mixed method research’. The quantitative research method is mostly used in hard-sciences research studies whereas psychology and social sciences mostly use qualitative research methods. Because of criticism on the qualitative research method as unable to theorize the findings, nowadays, the mixed method design is getting popularity in social sciences (Creswell, 2014a). As this paper only focuses on the history of the qualitative research method, we are not going to discuss more on the quantitative method and mixed methods.

Qualitative research

Qualitative research is concerned with phenomena relating to or involving quality or kind (Kothari, 2004). When information is in the form of textual form, we use qualitative research (Pandey & Pandey, 2015). In qualitative research “data typically collected in the participant’s setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2014a, p. 32). In social science research studies, quantitative analysis cannot function well as the data are not numerical. Therefore, to deal with qualitative data, we use qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

History of Qualitative Research: The Eight Moments

The development of qualitative research has not been very long. Although the works of the Greek skeptical philosophers Sextus Empiricus, who conducted a cross-cultural survey of morality in 2nd century B.C. and Herodotus, who wrote cross-cultural as well as historical issues, these were not recognized as qualitative inquiry until the 20th century (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). However, during the 17th century the western researcher, who observed the customs, practices, and behaviours of “primitive” societies, sought to locate such diversity into new theories of racial and cultural-historical origins. During the 17th to the 19th century ‘colonial ethnographies’ were done and written by western explorers, missionaries, and colonial administrators (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

During the 1920s and 1930s, the work for the Chicago School in the USA highlighted the central role of qualitative research in social research. However, other disciplines like history, medicine, nursing, social work, and communication contributed to the development of qualitative research approaches (Given, 2008).

Qualitative research was equally popular in the American as well as the European continents. In Europe, there is a different history of it as mentioned above. In this paper, we will see the American history of qualitative research. 'The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research' has mentioned eight moments of the development of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

First moment: The traditional phase (1900-1949)

The traditional phase of qualitative research, spanning from 1900 to 1949, was marked by a focus on discovering valid and objective details about the cultures and traditions of "others" through the work of western scholars. During this time, researchers were often referred to as "lone ethnographers" who were committed to imperialism and the monumentalization of their subjects. The main paradigm of this period was the positivist scientific paradigm, which relied on the belief in a single reality that could be objectively observed and measured. In terms of ontology, the focus was on an objectivist ontology that emphasized the existence of a single reality. Methodologically, researchers relied on accounts of field experiences and lone-ethnography, including classic ethnographies, to try to reflect on the experiences of the subjects being studied. Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead were two of the key contributors to the traditional phase of qualitative research, whose work laid the foundation for future developments in the field. The main characteristics of this period were:

- Paradigm: Positivist scientific paradigm
- Ontology: Objectivist ontology (single reality)
- Methodology: Accounts of field experiences, lone-ethnography including classic ethnographies, try to reflect on the experiences
- Main contributors: Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead

Second moment: The modernist phase (1950-1969)

This period is marked by attempts to formalize qualitative research by making qualitative methods as rigorous as quantitative approaches. For this purpose, many textbooks were published in the USA (Given, 2008; Hubbard, 2016). During this period, there was a shift from the lone-ethnographer model to the use of research teams, which allowed for more diverse perspectives and greater rigor in research design (Hubbard, 2016). This period also saw the emergence of new qualitative research methods such as participant observation and content analysis. The focus was on understanding the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups such as women, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ+ communities. This phase also brought a renewed interest in the role of the researcher, with scholars such as Howard Becker and Erving Goffman emphasizing the importance of reflexivity and the researcher's role in shaping the research process (Given, 2008). The main characteristics of this period were:

- Paradigm: Critical paradigm (giving the marginalized a voice and presence)
- Ontology: Subjectivist ontology (multiple reality)
- Methodology: Observation of deviance and social control in specific settings, such as classrooms, and society; evolve of interpretive theories (such as ethnomethodology and feminism) and grounded theory.
- Main contributors: Harold S. Becker, Blanche Greer, Everett C. Hughes, Barney G. Glaser, and Anselm L. Strauss

Third moment: Blurred genres (1970-1986)

During the third moment of qualitative research, characterized by pluralism, open-mindedness, and interpretive approaches, various theoretical models and understandings of the objects and methods stood side by side, from semiotics to neo-Marxist theory and from critical theory to post-positivism. This allowed researchers to choose and weigh them against each other or combine them. The boundaries between the social sciences and humanities became blurred as social scientists used theories, methods, and concepts of humanities (Given, 2008; Hubbard, 2016). Constructivist ontology was adopted, which acknowledges the existence of multiple realities. Researchers were provided with diverse strategies and techniques, including narrative, phenomenology, feminism, and hermeneutic approaches, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, semiotics, case studies, and biographical research. Researchers acted as bricoleurs, utilizing multiple sources of data, methods, and approaches to answer their research questions. Additionally, the introduction of computers assisted in data analysis (Given, 2008). The main contributors of this phase were Clifford Geertz, George E. Marcus, Michael F. Fischer, Victor Turner, Edward Bruner, among others (Creswell, 2014). The main characteristics of this period were:

- Paradigm: Naturalistic, postpositivist and constructivist paradigms
- Ontology: Constructivist ontology (multiple reality)
- Methodology: Providing researchers with diverse strategies and techniques, including narrative, phenomenology, feminism and hermeneutic approaches, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, semiotics, case studies, biographical research; researcher as a bricoleur; introduction of computers in assisting data analysis
- Main contributors: Clifford Geertz, George E. Marcus, Michael F. Fischer, Victor Turner, Edward Bruner, etc.

Fourth moment: Crises of representation (1986-1990)

The Crisis of Representation period led to a renewed focus on the politics of representation and power dynamics in qualitative research. Researchers were urged to engage with issues of subjectivity, reflexivity, and positionality in order to better understand how their own social location influenced their research process and findings. This period also saw the emergence of new research methods and approaches, such as autoethnography and critical race theory, which aimed to challenge dominant power structures and amplify the voices of marginalized communities. Additionally, there was a growing emphasis on collaborative and participatory research, where researchers worked in partnership with communities to co-create knowledge and promote social change. Overall, this period marked a significant shift in qualitative research towards a more reflexive, critical, and socially-engaged practice. The main characteristics of this period were:

- Paradigm: Feminist, culturalist, racial, and ethnic paradigms
- Ontology: Critical theory (questioning) and subjectivist ontology (multiple reality)
- Methodology: Issues of validity, reliability, and generalizability. The evaluation of research and findings became a central topic in methodological discussions.
- Main contributors: Clifford Geertz, George E. Marcus

Fifth moment: The postmodern period of experimental ethnography (1990-1995)

During the postmodern period of experimental ethnography (1990-1995), qualitative researchers continued to address the crises of representation and sought new approaches to ethnographic writing. The focus shifted from grand theories and narratives to situation-specific and localized theories that better fit qualitative research (Given, 2008). According to Hubbard (2016), this period emphasized the importance of theories and narratives that were

tailored to specific, delimited, local, historical situations and problems. The postmodernist paradigm, including moral and critical perspectives, guided research during this period, and researchers adopted experimental ethnography, action-based and activist research, and local, small-scale theories (Given, 2008). Notable contributors during this period included Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead (Hubbard, 2016). The main characteristics of this period were:

- Paradigm: Postmodernist paradigm including moral and critical perspectives
- Ontology: Localization of grand-theories, theories are read like narratives.
- Methodology: Experimental ethnography, action-based and activist research and local, small-scale theories better fit qualitative research.
- Main contributors: Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead

Sixth moment: Post-experimental inquiry (1995-2000)

The post-experimental inquiry period emphasized the use of creative techniques in qualitative research, such as poetry, drama, and multimedia approaches, to express lived experiences in new ways (Given, 2008). The researchers aimed to democratize qualitative research by engaging with diverse voices and perspectives in their work. As Aronson, Ellsworth, Carlsmith, and Gonzales (1998) noted, this approach allows for the exploration of "multiple realities, multiple perspectives, and multiple voices" (p. 4) in the research process. This period also saw a focus on the connection between qualitative research and democratic policies, with researchers exploring the ways in which their work could inform and shape public discourse and policy-making (Hubbard, 2016). The main characteristics of this period were:

- Paradigm: Postmodernist paradigm
- Ontology: Democratization of qualitative research
- Methodology: Use of poetry, literary forms, autobiography, multimedia techniques in ethnographic writings.
- Main contributors: Aronson, E., Ellsworth, P. C., Carlsmith, J. M., & Gonzales, M. H.

Seventh moment: The methodologically contested present (2000-2004)

The methodologically contested present has been described as a period of conflict between the traditional objectivist approaches to research and the more interpretive, reflexive approach of qualitative research (Given, 2008). Some researchers have criticized qualitative research for not being evidence-based enough, demanding more scientific methods to back up its claims (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, others have argued that qualitative research offers a valuable contribution to knowledge creation, particularly in understanding complex social phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Despite these challenges, new researchers across various disciplines continue to adopt the reflexive and interpretive approach of qualitative research (Given, 2008).

- Paradigm: Extreme postmodernist paradigm
- Ontology: Reflexive and interpretive ontology with objectivism
- Methodology: Evidence-based approaches to practice and knowledge, using objectivist models and experimental techniques
- Main contributors: Many researchers.

Eighth moment: The fractured future (2005- present)

The fractured future (2005-present) marks a period where qualitative researchers are challenged to address the methodological backlash and engage in critical conversations about the diversity of human life, including

experiences of freedom and control in a global society. Researchers are revisiting the demands of moral discourse and the sacred in their work (CourseHero, 2019). According to Creswell (2013), mixed-method research has emerged as a viable approach to bridging the gap between qualitative and quantitative research, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of complex social phenomena. Additionally, critical and post-structural theories have been integrated into qualitative research, enabling researchers to better understand the complexities of power and identity in their work (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The fractured future is marked by a growing emphasis on interdisciplinary and collaborative research, as well as a renewed focus on social justice and the ethical considerations of qualitative research (Given, 2008). The main characteristics of this period were:

- Paradigm: Humanistic paradigm
- Ontology: Critical conversations about the diversity
- Methodology: Mixed-method research, moral discourse, the sacred, and critical conversations, including experiences of freedom and control in a global society
- Main contributor researcher: John W. Creswell and many other researchers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article provides an overview of the history of qualitative research through eight moments, highlighting the paradigm, ontology, methodology, and significant contributors in each phase. It is clear from the history that qualitative research has undergone many changes over time, from the traditional phase to the postmodern period of experimental ethnography and the fractured future. Qualitative research has gained equal footing with quantitative research in the field of social science research, and researchers are increasingly using a mixed method approach to gain both factual data and emotional feelings. As research continues to evolve, it is essential to keep in mind the history of qualitative research and the contributions made by scholars in this field. Understanding the evolution of research methods helps researchers to make more informed decisions about which approach to use and how to carry out their research.

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