

Case study: dysfunctional families



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The paper aims to describe, compare and contrast research methods of varying natures i. e. quantitative, qualitative and mixed, in regard with the topic 'dysfunctional families'. The paper will give a brief introduction of the research topic itself, and will then progress to describe in detail the strengths, weaknesses and suitability of each of the research methods mentioned above. These methods, and their data collection and analysis methods will then be compared and contrasted, so that the best method can be identified. In conclusion, a summation will be presented of the reasons for the mode of research identified as the most suitable and applicable one, in studying dysfunctional families.

A dysfunctional family system exists when problems in one or more of the hierarchical, boundary or alignment elements of its structure have impaired its resources for coping with and adapting effectively to contextual stressors (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). This largely centers on families who are neglecting or lacking in their performances and responsibilities of a family, allowing abuse and neglect to run common, so that a child and other members may feel deprived or/and guilty. This may result in a reaction of overtly aggressive behavior. In such cases and situations, 'a family system can no longer deal successfully with everyday stressors or adequately nurture the growth of its individual members (Colapinto, 1995), especially of children dependent on parents/adults for support and guidance.

The dysfunctional family is an important topic of study in the field of sociology, and thus research carried out on the topic must be acute, so that findings can be generalized and studies across demographically and geographically defined boundaries. For this purpose, an analysis of varying

research methodologies, in regard with the topic is presented, so that the most suitable method for understanding the dynamics of a dysfunctional family may be understood. However, before details of each method are presented, it must be kept in mind that 'there are certain principles: the aims of the study, and the particular research questions devised to meet those aims, determine the methods of investigation, data collection and analysis. Picking preferred methods, and then fitting the research questions around these, is definitely not good practice. The nature of the research question(s) to be pursued may require a sensible combination of methods across the continuum of qualitative and quantitative research techniques' (Butt, G. 2010)

The first method of research to be detailed is that of qualitative research. This refers to research tactics that aim to understand and collect data on variables involved in their natural settings, and aim to interpret the interactions they have with their environment. This is research methods and data that can be anything that is not clustered into statistical and numerical form. In case of understanding and reaching conclusions about the dysfunctional family phenomenon, qualitative research will include tactics of observation, case studies and interviews (ranging from open ended to focused, but being exploratory in nature), focus groups, audio and video tape analysis; all of which aim to give the researcher detailed information, rich in context and explanation(s). During the process of collecting qualitative research, data collection will largely and commonly be done through primary methods mentioned earlier (case study, interviews and observation) or less generally, through secondary methods, which include a review of literature

and records of previously available data on the topic. Both methods, however, try to uncover the human side of the data and try to include and interpret from participant's experience and feelings.

This allows us to infer that the analytical tools for understanding qualitative data are largely interpretative in nature, originating from inductive reasoning and processes. This also leads to the structuring of definitions and meanings, pertinent to the research topic in question. More specifically, analytical strategies used to interpret are many, and beyond the scope of the paper. A few are being mentioned for reader-benefit however. The first analytical strategy employed by qualitative researchers is that of 'constant comparative analysis', which 'involves taking one piece of data (one interview, one statement, one theme) and comparing it with all others that may be similar or different in order to develop conceptualizations of the possible relations between various pieces of data. (Thorne, S, 2000). For example, by comparing the accounts of two different people who had a similar nurturing experience in dysfunctional families, possibly two siblings, a researcher might pose analytical questions like: why is this different from that? And how are these two related?' This approach is often directed towards finding commonalities and patterns within the human experience of dysfunctional families. Another common approach for analyzing qualitative data is through phenomenological approaches, which seek to uncover the underlying structure and essence of dysfunctional family experiences, through intensive and in-depth study of individual cases. For example, rather than explaining the phases and transitions that an individual goes through in a dysfunctional family, a phenomenological study will possibly attempt to

find about and explain the essential nature of the transition, presenting it in such a way that a person who has not experienced the phenomenon is able to appreciate the clarity and vividness of the explanation.

The qualitative research method offers considerable strengths with a fair share of draw backs for the researcher. The strength includes the fact that the study presents an in-depth, rich and vivid explanation of a possibly complicated and complex phenomenon. This is particularly helpful in evolving theories and presenting conceptual bases, as well as proposing hypothesis to clarify a phenomenon regarding dysfunctional families.

However, because qualitative data are extensive and time consuming to carry out, they are narrowed down geographically, therefore the sample being studied cannot be taken as a true representative and the findings of the research can therefore, not be generalized. For example, a researcher studying dysfunctional family and its related issues in North America cannot generalize the findings and hold the same results true for a dysfunctional family in Japan, because of the changed variable situational variables and context. In addition, small differences that might be important in regard with dysfunctional families are often over looked by researcher while carrying out qualitative research. Also, because of the subjective nature of the research along with high chances of researcher-bias, the results of qualitative research lack reliability and validity in most cases.

Another mean of collecting data and carrying our research is through quantitative measures, which seek to collect data and rely on strict numerical and statistical analysis, following ways of natural sciences to

maintain objectivity. Common ways to carry out quantitative research is through surveys and questionnaires of pre-designed questions. These questions are asked in a consistent fashion to collect data of people. Characteristics of the participant sample for the research purpose are carefully structured so that they match those of the larger population being studied. For example, a researcher studying traits of children in dysfunctional families may gather in his participants a percentage of children, which in their number and gender represent the larger ratio of children in dysfunctional families. These children will then be asked questions that are pre-designed and objective in nature, in a consistent and similar fashion to eliminate any sort of bias.

Data generated in this manner is generally inferred through deductive means i. e. the researcher begins with a hypothesis and carries out quantitative research methods to confirm and disconfirm the initial hypothesis. Complex and lengthy statistical models are used to analyze the data and reach conclusions. Results and findings are numerically guarded and explained. Statistical analysis for quantitative data can range from correlations to frequency models and beyond, all employing simple or complex statistical models and techniques.

Strengths for quantitative measures for carrying out research include the fact that the research problem is specifically stated, in set terms in addition to the dependent and independent variables being clearly and precisely specified. Statistical inference allows the research to follow strictly the set research goals and thus arrive at more objective conclusions, as well as allowing the researcher to test the hypothesis and determine issues of

causality. In addition, because data is simple in nature and is easy to analyze and summarize comparisons across various cultures and societies regarding dysfunctional families can be drawn upon. The research methods are particularly precise through their elimination and minimization of 'subjectivity of judgment' (Kealey & Protheroe, 1996).

However, at the same time, quantitative research fails to provide the researcher with details and context of the situation. For example, the nature of dysfunction in families may vary and may have come about owing to different variables and situational factors: quantitative research and subsequent data collection will fail to take note of these elements. Also, because the surveys are carried out in an environment that is not natural to the participants, behavioral differences might be observed. This means that the respondents may respond untruthfully and dishonestly, to impress the interviewer or appear in a favorable light. The closed end structure of the questionnaires and survey questions are also a drawback as they lead to limited outcomes, of those that are outlined in the original research question(s) only. Continuous investigation of a phenomenon is not encouraged and detail of the situational context neglected.

Given the mass surveys and controlled observations, that generally represent the entire population, quantitative research methods hold reliability and validity in their findings and results. Also, because quantitative research methods generally aim to answer the 'why' question regarding dysfunctional families, these results and data findings can be generalized to larger population groups, often across nationally and culturally separated boundaries. For example, in explaining reasons for aggression in children

belonging to dysfunctional families, researchers may generalize the findings across two or more culturally similar groups and communities.

The third and the final means of obtaining data regarding issues of dysfunctional families are ‘mixed methods’ i. e. a research methodology whereby methods from different paradigms (qualitative and quantitative) are brought together, to collect and analyze data. ‘in general, mixed methods research represents research that involves collecting, analyzing, and interpreting quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or in a series of studies that investigate the same underlying phenomenon’ (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). For example, a researcher may conduct a series of semi-structured interviews with a small number of children and also carry out a large-scale survey to understand the impact of the ‘dysfunctional variable’ in families on child-aggression. This integration of qualitative measures with quantitative research methods are also referred to as multi-strategy research.

Data collection and analysis processes for the methods used are similar in nature to those explained previously. It should be remembered that “methodological congruence” (Watts & Bentley, 1986) should always be present in the research being carried out – that is, a consistency and compatibility between the methods used to collect research data and those used to analyze it. The mixed method strategy of data collection is particularly useful in studying topics like that of dysfunctional families, because they leave space for and allow triangulation to take place. This means that one information source is often supplemented by the other, so that the research topic can be approached and understood using multiple

viewpoints. In addition, by assuring that a research topic regarding dysfunctional families is studied through varying viewpoints, a researcher minimizes bias and subjectivity, thus ensuring that the findings of the research and results reached are objective and transparent in their nature.

However, because the data collection method is still in its infancy stages, practical applicability of the methods is particularly confusing. Also, the researcher is faced with the challenge of choosing the optimal research-method designs, offset of which can be devastating to research objectives.

The research results are reliable and valid in their standing because the usage of different approaches helps the researcher maintain focus on the pertinent research question and thus confirms its accuracy. Information and results are complemented from one type of research to another, thus not a single point of available data is neglected. Therefore, research findings in this manner can be generalized across different cultures and societies.

Having studied in detail the three methods of data collection and research on dysfunctional families, comparing and contrasting their strengths and weaknesses, I believe that the most suitable and appropriate way of studying dysfunctional families will be through the use of mixed methods, as they will be extensive and accurate in their findings, as well as generalizable. They will allow a researcher to carry a compounded research, inclusive of all aspects of the topic, and not neglecting a single point of importance. Instead of focusing solely on any one method, they will allow the researcher to focus on the research question at large, covering all points of consideration and

thus allowing the researcher to present a complete overview of the topic in question.