

A brief literature review of qualitative research

Literature



The application of qualitative research to social science studies has received mixed reviews. Some social scientists subscribe wholeheartedly to the use of qualitative research as a counterpoise to the traditional quantitative research methodology, which has been the vogue in social science research. Other social scientists however question the application of qualitative research to social science studies. Some reviewers, for example, question the appropriateness in retrospective evaluation of programs of programs in organizational change (Blackler and Brown, 1983, p. 349).

Other reviewers of the same research argue that good qualitative evaluation “ entails close and continuous involvement with the process of change. ” Blackler and Brown employed qualitative research methodology in their study of retrospective evaluation of programs of organizational change. They concluded that “ unlike some natural science paradigms, competing paradigms should not be thought of as mutually exclusive” in application of qualitative research in social science. (Blackler and Brown, *ibid*)

Crawford titled his paper ‘ Putting money in research pays: How companies large and small – benefit from research plans’. In it he discussed the advantages gained by business enterprises in the United States of America through both quantitative and qualitative research. (Crawford 2006). Dale in his study: ‘ Partnering with management to implement ergonomics in the industrial workplace’, concluded that for implementation of any research to be effective in changing workers’ attitude, there must be effective collaboration between the researcher and the management of the industrial establishment.

(Dale, 2004). Harris in his article entitled: ' Business to Business comes of age in qualitative research', highlights the use of modern information technology in advancing the frontier of qualitative research in business and industry. It is Harris's opinion that use of such technology as teleconferencing will not only ensure objectivity in data collection, but can allow the researcher to administer his protocol to large respondents at the same time. (Harris, 1995)

The role of qualitative methodology in ergonomics is discussed by Hignett in his paper 'Theoretical Issues to Ergonomics Science' Here, a four stage sampling method of qualitative research was used in the interview of academics and management practitioners to gain their views on all areas of ergonomics. (Hignett and Wilson, 2004). Karami, Rowley and Analoni studied some research methodologies used in generating knowledge for management through research. They concluded that whereas earlier research was skewed in favor of quantitative methodology, present day studies tend to favor qualitative research methods.

(Karami et al 2006). McPhee employed a qualitative research approach to his study of the organizational behavior of business practice in Europe. He concluded that although until recently, the pyramidal hierarchy structure was the norm in organizational framework of European companies, globalization of the world economy has forced many European firms to employ qualitative research in their transition to a more democratic organizational arrangement (McPhee, 2002). Russell in his paper titled ' Dangerous Intersections' x-rays the use of qualitative research as a tool in the campaign sponsored by an insurance company.

The thrust of the campaign was on awareness, education and safety promotion within the United States. (Russell, F. 2002). Yates in his paper drew attention to the opportunities which practitioners in business communications now have to shift emphasis away from quantitative methods to qualitative methodology in their research. (Yates, J. 1993). This brief literature review leads us to the analysis of the qualitative research methodology employed by Maximillian Brown in his dissertation titled: 'Trust, Power and Work place democracy: Safety and Health Works Councils in Oregon'. Description of Methodology:

In analyzing the qualitative research methodologies used in 'The Brown Dissertation' salient aspects of each methodology will be highlighted. The sum total of the evaluation of the 'Brown Dissertation' will reflect the contributions of all the different paradigms to the overall results of the qualitative research. The following are the research methods employed by Brown for his case studies.

- Preliminary contacts with employees and management in of target firms selected for his studies in the summer of 2002.
- Actual interviews took place in Fall 2002.
- Designing of research project.
- Gaining access to the worksites

- Process of actual interviews. Preparation for Field Work In order to become familiar with the environment of his research, Brown became an insider of the work stations. Brown used his membership of the Safety Committee in his university, and participated actively in its programs in order to gain first hand information on the philosophy underlying the Safety Committee operations. Moreover, in order to have a comprehensive knowledge of the safety operations in his university, he sought and obtained permission to

attend meetings of those safety subcommittees in which he was not a member.

Furthermore, Brown received training conducted by the State of Oregon in safety committee operations. By his own admission, Brown's experiences as a member and active participant in safety committee meetings strongly influenced his research design and the process of conducting interviews with his subjects. The oral questions put to his subjects were structured along the lines of his experience as a participant rather than an outsider. Being an insider conferred on him certain advantages which he utilized in preparation of his research protocols.

Brown was able to ask questions which were directed at specific areas of operation of the safety councils; which an outsider might not be privy to. Brown also gained leverage on his subjects by being knowledgeable about their schedule of duties. More so, Brown's membership of a university committee whose functions are similar to those of the subjects of his enquiry influenced his tailoring his questions to more specific subject matters which an outsider will not be aware of. Brown's research protocols were gleaned from Richard Freeman and Joel Rogers book with the title: 'What Workers want' which was published in 1999.

Furthermore, Brown had gained prior and valuable hands-on experience of the workings of the industries in which he was to later conduct his qualitative research. After choosing two very different industries in which he wanted to conduct his research, Brown set out to get a working knowledge of these industries. He relied heavily on authoritative publications of the Oregon State Occupational Safety and Safety Administration for first hand information on

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the industries of his choice. These publications complemented his own practical experience in one of the industries; while filling the gaps in his knowledge of the other.

With these preparations, Brown was thus able to formulate intelligent questions for his target interviewees. Brown acknowledged the obvious fact that an outsider cannot know as much about a factory as those who work in the place. As an icing on his cake, the Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) assisted Brown to select target factories relevant to his research. Visits to Target Factories Brown approached his target audience in three stages. He first made preliminary visits to the factories in order to get himself familiar with the people and places where he was to conduct his research.

His initial visit to each of the two factories afforded Brown the opportunity to conduct background checks on the facilities available in the factories. Some of the background information he had earlier obtained from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration website came in handy during his preliminary visits. From OSHA website he had obtain vital statistics about each factory. These included the number of employees in each factory, products manufactured, and the mission statement of each organization on their safety and health programs. The next stage of his approach was to make a preparatory visit to each factory.

He was able to obtain a tour of each factory. He also used the opportunity of the preparatory visit to collect in-house documents which came in handy to him while preparing his research protocols. These documents included minutes of committee meetings, training materials, and other records

germane to his investigations. Brown's subsequent visits represented the third and last phase of his plan. This was the stage at which he conducted open-ended interviews to representatives of both management and labor in the premises of the two factories earlier chosen. Equal numbers of representatives of labor and management were interviewed.

The interviews were conducted in private. The identities of those interviewed were kept confidential as per university policies on such matters. After explaining the purpose of the research project to the subjects, their written consent was individually obtained before the interview started. Since his project was targeted at the safety policies and practices in the selected factories, only members of the safety committees were interviewed. The interviews which were conducted in a free and friendly manner, employed the 'active interview' format designed by Holstein and Gubrium.

(Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). In this interview approach, subjects were asked questions which had been prepared in form of a protocol. At the onset, subjects were asked general questions pertaining to their working experiences at the factory. Subjects were also asked questions of personal interest to the respondents with respect to the issue central to the research. This phase formed the preliminary stage as formulated by Holstein and Gubrium. The next set of questions centered on the perception of the respondents regarding the effectiveness of the program of the committee in which they were members.

The subjects were asked of the perception of their fellow workers on their election or selection into the committee. This formed the overview question stage of the interview. The next stage of the interview centered on training.

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The respondents were asked to assess the depth and relevance of the training which they received towards performance of their duties as committee members. Questions on the perceived quality of the content of their training, the methods of dissemination of information and the net change effect of the training on the participants, concluded the set of questions on training.

The next set of questions for the subjects, centered on the meetings of the committee. Subjects were asked to analyze the interpersonal relations among members of the committee, the atmosphere of the meetings; the procedures adopted during the meetings and the dissemination of information to members before and after each meeting. The last set of specific questions put to the subjects was on the authority granted the committee by management, and the influence of the committee on management.

They were questioned on how they communicated the decisions arrived at their meetings to management, and the effect of their recommendations on management policies. Subjects were also asked to give their views on the industrial atmosphere of their work place, and specifically on the labor and management relations; whether they were cordial, or if there were unresolved issues dividing the two parties. Finally, subjects were asked whether they felt a sense of power by their membership of the committee.

Evaluation of Brown's Qualitative Research Methodology

The methodologies applied by Brown in his dissertation are identifiable and well structured. They follow the pattern of a well organized qualitative research project. Preliminary work was done in two main areas. Relevant

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literature was searched and the context applied as and when necessary, as per specifications in the original publication. For example, the method of interview was patterned after the universally accepted standard procedure of Holstein and Gubrium termed: "Active Interviews" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

The use of 'Active Interviews' by Brown was appropriate to the qualitative research design in his case study. A lot of preliminary work was done by Brown, in order to identify firms at which to carry out his research study. Background studies were first carried out on these companies. Where the researcher felt that he had insufficient experience and inadequate knowledge and information, necessary recourse was made to authoritative state government publications on the subject of his research. Initial visits to the premises of the firms under study, were made by Brown.

He got himself familiarized with both the staff and the environment of the factories where he planned to administer his qualitative research protocol. Those initial visits afforded him the opportunity to interact with representatives of both labor and management. The visits also afforded him the chance to obtain their consent and cooperation. Brown prepared his interview protocols in two similar sets, one for employees and the other for managements of the firms under study. The research protocols were well structured in such a way as to first put general questions to his subjects.

From the responses elicited from the respondents, more specific questions relevant to the subject matter of the study were then put to the subjects. This pattern of questioning is in line with the Holstein and Gubrium process of 'active interviews'. Maximillian Brown's success in putting his subjects at

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ease at this initial stage, helped him to take the interview to a less formal and friendlier conversational atmosphere. Subsequent pieces of information obtained from the respondents were then given freely and honestly without pressure. Brown's approach evidently made for more reliable and truthful answers to the interviewer's questions.

With the active cooperation of the subjects, Brown was able to plumb the depths of the activities of the safety committees under study, to arrive at a more reliable assessment of their functions, and the perceptions of members of the committee on the relevance and importance of their work on the committee. **Limitations and Weaknesses of Brown's Qualitative Research Methodology** By his own admission, Brown recognized that there are some obvious limitations and weaknesses in the methodology he employed in the qualitative research for his dissertation.

Three of these weaknesses, Brown identified as follows: Problems of trust, accuracy in record keeping, and validity of subjects responses. Unless the interviewer is able to scale the wall of distrust erected between him and his subject during the interview, the information gathered from the respondent will be suspect. According to McCracken, lack of trust between interviewer and respondent will restrict the interview to a mere formality. " The intimacy required for the two parties to move from formal to informal conversational style will be inhibited.

"(McCracken, 1988). Hence the first objective of an interviewer is to gain the trust of the interviewee. Right from the onset, the interviewer needs to establish a friendly rapport with his subjects even before the interview is scheduled. Brown admitted his lack of familiarity with his subjects, which

made some of them to give curt and perfunctory replies to his questions. Secondly, Brown's inability to import a reliable means of recording his interviews made his transcripts of such interviews less than accurate.

The third problem of validity of his subjects' responses, Brown admits to be his most difficult. There is no easy solution to the issue of whether a respondent is truthful, except perhaps to administer a lie-detector test to each respondent before the interview, as a method of pre screening all participants. Applications of Brown's Qualitative Research Methodology The research methodology of ' active interviews' adopted by Brown in his dissertation generated valuable information on the social interactions within an industrial environment.

In spite of its limitations and shortcomings, Brown's qualitative research methodology provides a suitable and reliable template on which further research study can be undertaken to obtain knowledge of the interpersonal relationships within an industrial workplace. By using modern information technological innovations like teleconferencing and remote control recording devices, greater objectivity can be introduced into Brown's qualitative research methodology. (Harris, 1995).

Overall, the methodology employed in Maximillian Brown's dissertation can be validly adopted in qualitative research studies for dissertations and other quality academic publications. BIBLIOGRAPHY 1. Blackler, F. H. M. , Brown, C. A. (1983), Qualitative Research and Paradigms of Practice, Journal of Management Studies, 20(3), 349-366. 2. Crawford, A. P. (2006). Putting money into research pays: How companies -- large and small -- benefit from research plans, Public Relations Tactics, 13(8), 20-20 3. Dale, L. (2004). <https://assignbuster.com/a-brief-literature-review-of-qualitative-research/>

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