



Qualitative Research Paradigms in Social Work

Bijoy Das¹ M. Tineshowri Devi²

ABSTRACT: In current domains, research provides a way to search for and discover new knowledge. In the field of social sciences, particularly social work, qualitative research is extremely valuable. On the nature of studies in social work research, various methodologies are being employed to gain in-depth information of the societal environment. It aids research into individual and community behaviour to address various social challenges. It acquaints social workers and trainees with a social reality that is much diversified and continually changing, with a fresh diversity of causality. Qualitative research gives social workers an inner sense through topics like ontology, ethnography, and positivist methodologies. As a result, the paper primarily focuses on the fundamental domain of qualitative research and its paradigm in social work, particularly the importance of ontology, ethnography, positivism, interpretive, and fieldwork.

Keywords: qualitative research, social work, paradigms



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In the social sciences, qualitative research has a long history of viewing people and experiencing facts in their natural environments. It improves knowledge through communicating with people in their language. Spencer, Comte, Taylor, Morgan, Kuhn, Aristotle, and other notable philosophers and social scientists have benefited from the evolution of social science research. The contemporary civilization in this postmodern era reflects constructivist conceptions of reality (Gray and Webb, 2005; referenced in McGrayner, 2018), and it is believed that the postmodern age aptitudes various difficulties in society and solutions to such problems of reality. As a result, observations and experiences in social science research favour pragmatism in research language over practicality and knowledge of the underlying social structure and reality. Pragmatists or pragmatism think that reality may be renegotiated, disputed, and interpreted as the best technique for solving a problem (Guba, 1990), which is equally important in social sciences. As a component of the social sciences, social work encourages research into alternate solutions to real-world problems.

¹ Assam Down Town University, Guwahati, India

² Assam University, Silchar, India

The commonality of argument between qualitative and quantitative methodologies appears to exist in social work research. Our social reality is extremely diversified, and it is continually changing and undergoing new types of causation. It is necessary to generate scientifically valid knowledge about the phenomena that will be researched in the social sciences. As a result, social work requires a comprehensive variety of research paradigms to address different difficulties in our diverse social realities. Since the formation of the Charity Organization Society (COS) in the nineteenth century, social workers have worked with society to promote social justice and development by tackling various social concerns. Since then, social work has undergone extensive research to get more aware of society and individual issues to address them. Some of the basic features of qualitative research that are closely related to the field of social work research include identifying and knowing facts, becoming familiar with the environment to understand certain causes, arguing and explaining those facts to define the causes in a common platform, and defining the causes in a common platform. Hence, the paper will concentrate on the topic of qualitative research in social work, specifically ontology, ethnography, positivism and aspects of interpretivist and field research.

A Review of Qualitative Research

In the humanities, qualitative research has a long and illustrious history (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; cited in Halmi, 1994, p. 365). It refers to various research methods and activities with many qualities and commonalities. During the early part of the twentieth century, anthropologists and sociologists used this research method. Great social anthropologists like Malinowski (1922) and Mead (1935) and sociologists like Park and Burgess (1935) have all worked on qualitative research methodologies. Thus, the goal of qualitative research is set to develop new concepts and theories by systematically describing and interpreting topics or events from the perspective of the individual or population being examined (Viswambara and Priya, 2016; cited in Mahajan, 2018). The approaches are the same, yet they mean different things in various situations. Qualitative research conclusions are based entirely on natural phenomena that generalize from personal experiences. Qualitative research and related field have long been used in the social sciences, including sociology, education, political science, social work, and history. The following is an attempt by Nelson et al. (1992) to define qualitative research:

"Qualitative research is an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counter-disciplinary field. It crosscuts the humanities and the social and physical sciences. Qualitative research is many things at the same time. It is multi-paradigmatic in focus. Its practitioners are sensitive to the value of the multi-method approach. They are committed to the naturalistic perspective and to the interpretive understanding of human experience. At the same time, the field is inherently political and shaped by multiple ethical and political positions" (cited in Halmi, 1996, p. 366).

According to Max Weber, the purpose of qualitative research is typically 'understanding' rather than 'explanation' (King and Brook, 2017, Cited in Leaming, n.d). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) further characterised qualitative research as "multi-method in focus, using an interpretative

naturalistic approach to its subject matter" (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p.42). Qualitative research is significantly more dependable and important in social work practice and research. Contemporary social work handles a variety of societal challenges that encourage change and growth; hence, the qualitative research paradigm aims to investigate people's behaviour, viewpoints, and experiences to discover explanations for and solutions to the problems that society faces. In the implementation of qualitative research, there are certain restrictions as well. Qualitative research could not be generalized outside the sample. It aims to thoroughly understand a particular facet of human experience rather than just generalizing. Still, qualitative research is gaining popularity as a means of disseminating information across a wide range of social sciences fields.

Relevance of Qualitative Research in Social Work

When considering qualitative research in social work, one may need to ask oneself some concerns concerning the research's reliability and validity. Qualitative research is an important tool in social work practice. Hunt (2004) recognized the relevance of qualitative research, including interpretive, naturalistic, constructivist, ethnographic, and fieldwork methodologies. While working with communities or settings, qualitative research allows researchers to engage with people by building rapport to gain a deeper understanding of their thoughts and experiences. Investigating qualitative social work techniques According to Voiter (nd), qualitative approaches are already being used in three areas of social work: social work research, social worker everyday practice, and professional self-reflection. The goal of value-based social work is to find alternative solutions to a community or society's difficulties. As a result, the nature of decisive knowledge and philosophical assumptions may help improve the quality of the research base and creative research activity in social work practice. Qualitative research, like quantitative research, contains key aspects such as data collection, data processing and analysis, and report writing. As a result, social workers working in the field of qualitative research require a wide range of abilities, including observation, interviewing, fieldwork, narratives, and fact analysis, among others. According to the National Association of Social Workers, qualitative research paradigms are particularly important regarding social workers' ethical obligations and ethics. Social work research not only seeks to understand reality but also to apply constructivist perspectives to interpret it.

Regarding social science and social work, the constructivist approach is usually associated with qualitative approaches that rely on participants to interpret situations from an individual perspective based on their understanding (Creswell and Clark, 2011; Cited in Kaushik and Walsh, 2019). There are numerous interconnections between the nature of social work intervention and the nature of qualitative research. In social work, qualitative research refers to the actuality of any social phenomenon or causal link that is being examined. In this postmodern period, the qualitative research paradigm has thus become an integral domain of social work research. For instance, this will aid in the study of a society's or community's cultural variety when participant observations are highly reflective. Relevant examples of the essentials of the qualitative research paradigm in social work may be offered, which will be very useful in studying the nature of inter-linguistic and inter-community marriage in diverse communities. As a result, the question of why qualitative research would be more beneficial in social work has been answered. When it comes to

empirical matters, qualitative studies in social work might include case studies, personal experiences, introspection, life study, interview, observation, historical, and other methods. Hence, a large body of literature is now being developed on the importance of qualitative research in social work.

Qualitative Research Paradigms and Social Work

Paradigms are theoretical and practical methods for resolving specific research issues (Abott, 2004, p.42; cited in Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). The epistemology of knowledge that creates the theory of such knowledge that can be evidence in the field is the focus of qualitative research paradigms. As the method assumes and monitors the ongoing changes in human nature and experiences, the subject matter of a qualitative approach varies. Because the methodological approach is so different from the nature of the quantitative paradigm, qualitative research continues to be very important in the field of social work. The qualitative paradigm sees the social world as a complex and dynamic reality with various layers of meanings and perspectives influenced by the interaction of the environmental context and the subjective interpretations of situational players (Halmi, 1996, p.364). The field of social work deals with the world of current society and the complex and dynamic relationships that exist within it. In this case, the qualitative research paradigm investigates the repercussions and outcomes of relationships that reveal the truth about particular social occurrences. A paradigm disagreement has been seen among social scientists. Atkinson (1995) and Thorne et al. (1999) have both criticized the meaning of paradigm in research. Many social scientists have also debated and opined on the qualitative research paradigm shift compared to quantitative research. Kuhn's (1962, 1970) concept, as seen by Lincoln and Guba (1990), was followed by Atkinson's argument (1995). Thorne et al. (1999) published a paper in which they questioned the notion of a paradigm shift in qualitative research. More specifically, Kuhn (1970) defined the research paradigm as a set of shared views and agreements among scientists about how problems should be understood and treated.

Furthermore, Guba (1990) identified three aspects of the qualitative research paradigm that are based on answering specific questions, such as Ontological questions, such as "What is reality?" Epistemological questions, such as "How do you know something?" and Methodological questions, such as "How do you go about finding it?" These frameworks uniquely interpret qualitative research, and it's significant to social work practice because social work is acknowledged as practice-oriented and concerned with communities at the grass-roots level. As a result, social scientists might debate the nature of qualitative research paradigms while also debating their application in social work research. As an example, citing Challenger's viewpoints (2000), a) Ontology (study of reality), how things are placed; b) epistemology (study of knowledge), how we know the fact; c) Logic or logical standpoint in understanding the valid reason (How we state the reason), d) ethics to identify or justify what is right and wrong (i.e. how one should act) and e) phenomenology (study of our experience on the fact) (that reveals how we get experienced).

When we say paradigm, we're talking about a set of fundamental assumptions and a philosophical assumption that helps us generalize the process's outcomes. The qualitative research paradigm in social work discusses the changing and adoption of new research techniques in the

social work field. Multidisciplinary and multi-method research: Through the application of many research methodologies and techniques, social work research is now advancing towards the interchange of information in multiple layers of society with interdisciplinarity. Qualitative research can thus be used in social work practice to investigate the nature of subject matter communities and the lives of human nature.

When discussing ethnographic research in social work, ethnographic research establishes a major grasp of reality through experiences or participant observation of experiences. This paradigm in social work research may thus assist in formulating and constructing ideas based on data, reflections, and interpretation, such as understanding development, feminist model, and ethnocentric model. Interpretivists try to derive and develop concepts from the field by examining phenomena of interest in depth. As a result, social work research may have an autonomous foundation of thought for interpreting the facts. It can be comprehended through the use of various social work theories and viewpoints. Ethnography, focus group discussions, and participant observation or participatory rural evaluation are examples of interpretative paradigms. Ethnographic research in the social sciences, particularly in the field of social work, is far more relevant to the reality of field experiences. Understanding the nature of social work intervention at the community level is also important in understanding the societal dynamic and lifestyle of various groups. Ethnographic research needs to be more narrative to study the ground truth of society, such as a community's way of life, habitats, culture, and so on. Gender concerns, ethnic issues, casteism, and a variety of other issues may be addressed with this study approach. As a result, society's diversity and structural frameworks are crucial to understanding through social research, and qualitative research plays a vital role in society's ground reality.

Furthermore, feminist perspectives, ethnic models, and cultural studies are currently some of the growing theoretical paradigms in social work research that are strongly tied to social work research or qualitative research perspectives in social work. The Feminist paradigm has opened up the observation against patriarchal authority, women's submissive role, and uneven societal standing in recent paradigm shifts. Observing community-based practice shows multiple forms of violence and women's marginalization in terms of power, socioeconomic status, and decision-making processes. As a result, social workers who use feminist approaches will encourage women's empowerment, research on right-based approaches, equal pay for equal work, and power and decision-making liberty. As a result, the feminist paradigm begins by creating a network of social ties within the current social order rather than focusing solely on the individual. In qualitative research and social work, the feminist research paradigm may give researchers unambiguous signals that they should conduct research 'for' rather than 'on' women. As a result, the feminist paradigm recognizes the significance of the nature of the conduct in the acquisition of gender. Feminist Empiricism, Feminist Standpoint, and Postmodern Feminism are the three types of feminist research proposed by Oleson (1994) and Thompson (1992).

Theorizing Qualitative Research in Social Work

The development of theories is an important part and goal of qualitative research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1995, Strauss & Carbin, 1990). In qualitative research, theorizing is important because it attempts to explain existing and locally observable facts or occurrences.

However, remember that theories do not advise how to explain a phenomenon; rather, they present an alternative perspective or viewpoint that may reflect some truth. Comparing ontology and epistemology of knowledge systematically aids in developing a theoretical framework for the study. Qualitative research, by virtue of its inductive nature, aids in developing ideas and generalizing facts. Individuals, families, and small groups are dealt with by social workers, who aid in the representation of a theoretical model and mechanism. As a result, theorizing in qualitative research entails making plausible conclusions to explain data. It may link opposing perspectives on social realities and represent the existence of a fact (ontology) about which questions emerge, allowing scholars to develop a theory of knowledge (epistemology). Every study is founded on a certain philosophy of knowledge. First, a concern for theory is perfectly compatible with qualitative research; second, a blend of theory and data is the hallmark of effective qualitative work; and third, this particular combination generates precisely the kind of work that is likely to have an impact upon others.

Conclusion

Many social scientists and researchers believe qualitative research is more difficult than quantitative research. Yet, it can be quite interesting if the researcher is interested in learning more about human nature and behaviour. Similarly, in social work practice, it is critical to be able to understand phenomena that are difficult to quantify. Thus, social workers can thoroughly understand the nature of practice by employing qualitative methodologies. As a result, social workers in qualitative studies act as investigators, collecting data in various ways. By upholding society's responsibilities, social workers require innovative qualitative ways to get to the heart of people or community to understand the challenges faced by them. The evolving trends in methodology have broadened the acceptance of multi-method investigations into the cause's ground reality. In this postmodern period, qualitative research and related paradigms provide new directions for social work research and practice.

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