

Editorial

The Increasing Role of Qualitative Research in Psychology

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For some time now there has been considerable debate on the benefits of qualitative versus quantitative research in psychology. In its research orientation, psychology has been overwhelmingly affected by the experimental method since a number of years. The sharpness of the behaviorist school of thought has added to the need for research based on numbers. Psychology is considered a science and hence, the criteria of scientific fields apply when considering research. Primary among them is the need for a numerical assessment of phenomenon that can be generalized using the rules of probability.

Probability can be both subjective and objective. The use of statistics aids decision making based on the probability of data. Since science is meant to be both descriptive and predictive, the role of inferential statistics has increased vastly as we plot the development of research in psychology. The inclination towards a more objective methodology is so strong that not only do we find more research work based on statistics, but even within statistics there is a lot more emphasis on probability sampling techniques. A meta-analysis of articles [1] over the years has shown that most journals also prefer publishing articles that can show statistically significant values in its analysis, often known as the “file-draw problem.” In all of this, it appears, the richness of qualitative data may have been getting lost.

Qualitative research methods appear to be largely the domain of sociology where the need to understand a phenomenon includes its description and not just a prediction. This description aids in understanding phenomenon in the specific population although in this case, the size of the population may be far smaller than in the case of quantitative research. The desire to scale the depth of a phenomenon versus the need to measure its width drives qualitative research. The challenge is to discover meaning through sensitivity to language and to identify patterns and exceptions which ideally fall away from the center of the normal probability curve. The presence and the absence of information, the said and the unsaid, both play a role in qualitative research.

Reality demands objective measures. And objectivity is best served through quantitative means. Challenges arise when one decides to acknowledge the subjectivity in reality. The interface between the real and the subjective requires a methodology that can scan the horizon for minute specks that hint at a larger phenomenon beyond. Methodology always serves the ontological and epistemological masters. The qualitative paradigm would act as the inter-linking factor between self, reality and subjectivity.

There are various tools and techniques in the qualitative methodology. But the basic requirement is a keen understanding of language as it is the primary medium of information gathering. Very often the silences in a narrative or an interview are as informative as the words that are used. It is this nuance that the researcher needs to be able to pick if he wishes to create a body of information that can aid in the understanding of the phenomenon.

The subtlety of information gathering and the specificity of the phenomenon reduce generalizability to a large extent. But the astuteness of the researcher can provide a context to policy making and decision making. The complex dynamism of the organism called human precludes too much inductive reasoning. However, psychological science, influenced by the physical sciences, has depended for far too long on the objective scale of measurement. In the process there has been a gradual erosion of knowledge at the micro level. Inferential statistics requires assumptions about the sample which may not hold credibility in the population. The huge influx of influences on the population, with the ever increasing technological reach

and the closeness of communities across the world creates changes in most social phenomenon faster than they can be even recognized. Even before a phenomenon has been identified, much less studied, it has changed shape or form. It seems logical therefore to question the conclusions of studies that are based on assumptions of homogeneity and stability. As the familiar saying goes, *impermanence is the only permanent thing in life*.

The trend of logical positivism that began in the 1920's and continues even today influences techniques employed to study the social condition. The constructionists understanding of the world also did not provide for critical analysis of the phenomenon. With the advent of the critical research paradigm, opportunities arose to revisit our understanding of social situations leading to deconstruction as an outcome. The various qualitative techniques like Narrative Analysis, Thematic Analysis, Participatory Action Research, Feminist Research, in-depth interviews and focus group interviews highlight aspects of human conditions never explored before.

The measurement of absences is stronger in qualitative research whereas quantitative looks at presences. In the various forms of qualitative research mentioned above, the researcher attempts to join the dots and extract the pattern that acts as the breeding ground for the phenomenon under study. Although one can argue, inferential statistics also derives understanding by pursuing an idea or a concept, the focus in quantitative research is always to examine the obvious. Methods that comment on latent variables are frequently based on information that has been obtained by a strictly structured framework. The rigidity in data collection allows only for specific information to be obtained in a specific format. Other information that may be pertinent to the phenomenon may not even have been considered simply because of the researcher's lack of awareness about its existence. So although the research work may be thorough and rigorous, it may lack vital pieces of information that could add to the knowledge base.

There is a significant difference between the concept of data as understood in quantitative and qualitative research. In the quantitative sphere, the aim is to identify relationships, differences or enable prediction. It is based on the assumption that the vast majority of human beings from a similar background will function in a similar manner under similar circumstances. However, as history substantiates, sudden dramatic changes caused by certain exceptional individuals or situations have brought changes in culture and society that then get refined or adjusted over time. Consider religious leaders, scientific breakthroughs, world events like wars, natural disasters; these are all exceptions. In the graph plotting humankind's trajectory across time, such individuals and events will not fall under the bell shaped curve. It appears then that we spend a large part of our time studying the outcome of some momentous event rather than studying the event itself.

In qualitative studies, exceptions are welcomed and subjected to an in-depth analysis by any one of the various means. Once the exception has been completely and thoroughly examined, it then makes sense to evaluate it quantitatively by the rules of probability. It could also work the other way around where after quantitative study of a phenomenon, its understanding can be deepened by analyzing it qualitatively. Under both conditions, the phenomenon is researched far more thoroughly than when only one method is applied. For instance, understanding the various factors that rank India as 122nd in the World Happiness Index [2] would require an understanding of the culture, the history, and the current political and economic indices. This would require both a quantitative and a qualitative approach. India is a vastly complex and diverse nation. Within its boundaries it may contain groups that are much higher than the 122nd rank or much lower. Some groups may just have access to better living conditions or may have a healthier emotional constitution due to various factors that can't be judged from a superficial level. A quantitative study in this situation would only skim the surface. A qualitative study either before the quantitative one or after, can gather information about specific phenomenon that affects the happiness levels in different groups. The narrative for one group could be very different from the narrative for another group. There is of course the inclination to believe in the larger Indian psyche that acts as the grand narrative, where the same forces of time and space mould the population. The richness of information however is lost when the emphasis is on any one methodology only.

In conclusion, it is prudent to accept that no one method supersedes the other. The aim is not to look at the world in black in white, but to acknowledge, appreciate and understand the various shades of grey that predominate. Any tool that serves this purpose needs to be looked at with greater interest. Subjectivity is not to be feared or ridiculed as the entire understanding of life is based on perceptions. Even in the physical sciences, it is now common knowledge that what is being observed is affected simply by the act of observation itself. The observer effect applies to both qualitative and quantitative studies. But qualitative research has the added advantage of bringing in the researchers sharp eye into the phenomenon as it unfolds. The subjectivity that threatens the quality of the research can be largely reduced by appropriate training and orientation of the researcher. The amount of error that any research process can have is never equal to zero. There is always room for error, in both kinds of research. The high standards of measurement based sciences are not tarnished by qualitative research rather they are further illuminated by the light of subjectivity.

RECOMMENDED READING AND REFERENCES

1. Franco A, Malhotra N, Simonovits G. Publication bias in the social sciences: Unlocking the file drawer. *Science* 2014;345(6203):1502–1505.
2. Derived from <http://worldhappiness.report/ed/2017>.

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