Article

Qualitative research: Defining features and guiding principles

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Abstract: In the present age and time, there has been a research explosion, thus a huge diversity in research and methods. Defining, characterizing, specializing, and isolating major and minor research and methodology diversity is very significant. Qualitative research, for example, is one of two major research approaches. However, what makes qualitative research qualitative or what is qualitative in qualitative research is a crucial question for understanding qualitative research. This is especially true for novices in the field of qualitative research who depart with this fundamental question. Scholarly attention is therefore needed to address this question. Noticeably, there is scanty literature on a substantial overview that captures the unique features of qualitative research. This paper aims to present a literature survey of the defining characteristics and guiding principles of qualitative research. The authors have extensive experience in qualitative research. Based on their review, the paper outlines the commonly shared characteristics of qualitative research. In the current landscape of resulting research diversity, the highlights of the overview of qualitative research in the present paper are particularly pertinent, especially for novice researchers entering the field.

Keywords: generalizability; transferability; triangulation; data saturation; member checking; qualitative method; credibility

1. Introduction

In delineating the concept of research, neophytes frequently posit that it entails a repetition of searching, reflected in the term "re-search." This interpretation is characterized by its simplicity and layman's perspective. However, transcending this literal denotation, research is a complex and multifaceted scholarly undertaking, encompassing a systematic array of actions, decisions, and procedures. Notably, research is intricately intertwined with the realm of academia, and diverse fields beyond academia contribute to the generation of new knowledge, as is explicitly stated and acknowledged by scholars [1–4].

Coherent systematicity inherently defines research as an intricate endeavor involving complex methodological undertakings. The diverse categories and manifestations of research, including various orientations (e.g., explorative, experimental, applied, etc.), and numerous fields and sub-fields of research (e.g., education, applied linguistics, mathematics, engineering, arts, science, etc.), along with fundamental principles, philosophical considerations, and objectives, questions, and phenomena, and many more, contribute to the intricate complexity inherent in the research process [5–11]. Given the multifaceted nature of research, involving complex methodologies, diverse orientations, and a plethora of principles and considerations, research can be overwhelming for those new to the field. Novice researchers commonly encounter challenges in comprehending both qualitative and quantitative

research methodologies. The distinctive characteristics of these approaches contribute to the complexity that novices grapple with during the early stages of their research endeavors. In particular, it is reported that researchers face a number of challenges while undertaking qualitative research [12–15]. One of the fundamental challenges faced by novice researchers is grasping the principles and philosophy of qualitative research, which is notably underscored in their research papers [16]. Evidently, the current trend in the literature around qualitative research is that most of the studies deal with single, focused, specifics of qualitative research, including survey tools [17], sample sizes [18], rapid techniques [19], and others. These studies have a deficit of an aggregate of easy understanding of qualitative research that serves as a multi-aspect guide in one place for novice researchers' fundamental learning. The present study addresses this gap. Along the way of addressing the above-mentioned challenges, novice researchers most definitely can benefit from scholarly guiding and informing resources (e.g., books and papers) created by experts that seek to enhance novices' understanding of research [20–23]. Against this backdrop, the present paper, thus, provides a comprehensive overview of qualitative research, focusing particularly on its definition and principles. Through an exploration of these key aspects, this paper aims to elucidate the key fundamental characteristics that offer conceptual clarity about qualitative research as a distinctive approach within the broader research landscape. Essentially, the present paper is a literature review that is grounded in the constructivist theoretical option. The researchers amalgamate their understanding of qualitative research constructed through their lived experiences and encounters along the journey of learning and accomplishments of qualitative studies. The authors' experiential knowledge acts as the constructivist driver that catalyzes literature visiting and revisiting for making the intended knowledge product of guiding principles and defining characteristics of qualitative research.

2. Objective and research question

The objective of this study is to synthesize the defining features and guiding principles of qualitative research through a literature review. To achieve this objective, the study is guided by the following research question:

What are the characterizing features and guiding principles of qualitative research?

3. Methods

Study: This study by type is unsystematic, uncritical, and a selective review of literature concerning the topics that restructure the defining characteristics and principles of qualitative research. In this sense, this is a simplified literature review article grounded on the solidification and compilation of the authors' understanding backed up by previous scholarly literature in the designated field. To some extent, the study can be aligned with narrative literature review, one of the functions of which is 'explicitly reviewing the concepts about a topic (in this case, 'qualitative research) [24].

Data: As implied by the above, this is obviously not a primary data-based empirical study. Therefore, the study did not collect any primary data of any type. The

previous literature was surveyed as the secondary data source. The literature search was random under different sub-themes around qualitative research without following any review protocol practice of systematic review [25]. The relevant scholarly underpinnings were identified and selected from the previous literature. The selected chunks of relevant literature were copied and put in the authors' texts in the forms of direct quotations and paraphrases with correct citations.

Analysis: As this is not a systematic literature review, the study did not essentially involve any synthesizing and criticizing from an analytical perspective or method. However, the random general literature review was phased into researching databases, sorting out the studies in terms of relevance and recentness, matching the results with the indexes of Scopus and WoS, and finally, closely reading the pointed parts of the papers. This episodic survey aligns with qualitative content analysis [26]. The matched and relevant chunks are copied and integrated into the textual aggregates, contributing to a holistic understanding of the defining characteristics and guiding principles of qualitative research. Thus, the article comes as an introductory guide for the novice researchers stepping into the qualitative research field.

4. Literature survey results

4.1. What is qualitative research

Qualitative research is a methodological approach that is utilized in the social sciences, humanities, and many other domains and sub-domains in order to investigate and comprehend the underlying meanings, patterns, and subtleties of human experiences, actions, and occurrences. Qualitative research emphasizes the collection of non-numerical (descriptive) data, such as words, images, and observations, to acquire insights into the complexity of the issue under examination. This is in contrast to quantitative research, which focuses on numerical data and statistical analysis. Jackson et al. [27] point out that comprehending human experiences of some phenomena through a humanistic, interpretative approach is the main goal of qualitative research. Emotions, perceptions, behaviours, and interactions within a particular setting may be some examples of human phenomena. Understanding human experience through qualitative research does not mean describing or quantifying human experiences but delving deeply into the depth and complexity of these experiences in order to reveal the underlying meanings, viewpoints, and subtleties. 'Humanistic' approach refers to the distinctive qualities, values, and meanings that individuals attach to their lives. Furthermore, the interpretative approach recognizes how individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences in unique ways. In a few words, qualitative research aims to capture the depth, context, and meaning inherent in human experiences.

4.2. Guiding principles of qualitative research

Research principles are a guide for different kinds of research decisions and designs [28–30]. Several key principles govern qualitative research and guide the design, conduct, and interpretation of the undertaken qualitative studies. These principles help to ensure that qualitative research is conducted in a rigorous, credible,

and ethical manner. The basic principles of qualitative research are set out below for novice researchers to design qualitative research:

4.2.1. Qualitative research considers the whole context, not the whole population

Qualitative research takes a holistic approach in the sense that it considers the whole context but not the whole population. Hancock [31,32] explains that qualitative research cannot be conducted on an entire population. Therefore, the 'generalization' of qualitative research is possible not to the entire population but to one person or a group of the entire population (i.e., a sub-group of the whole population). Korstjens and Moser [33] maintain that qualitative research is the account of the context in which individuals or groups are intended to provide a comprehensive understanding of the world's problems that they experience [34].

4.2.2. Qualitative data are sensitive to contexts

As mentioned in the previous section, context in qualitative research is crucial. Researchers recognize that individuals' behaviors, meanings, and experiences are shaped by specific social, cultural, and historical contexts in which they live. As contexts are diverse, individuals living in the varying contexts experience a phenomenon in diverse ways, and they interpret the meaning of their experiences in diverse ways. For example, teachers' lived experiences of teaching English in Bangladeshi context may not be the same as the experiences of the teachers in Malaysia. Bryman et al. [35] maintain that qualitative data is highly sensitive to the context. Thus, understanding the context is essential for interpreting accurately the findings of qualitative research.

4.2.3. Qualitative research captures the individuals' subjective viewpoints

Qualitative research prioritizes the perspectives and experiences of participants. The aim is to capture the subjective meanings individuals attribute to their experiences, allowing for a deep understanding of their viewpoints. Qualitative research is inherently subjective [36,37].

4.2.4. Qualitative research develops hypotheses, not tests hypotheses

Existing hypotheses are tested using quantitative research. Qualitative research does not begin with a preconceived hypothesis. Instead, creating a hypothesis is the final goal of qualitative research. In the process, inductive reasoning is frequently used in qualitative research. Researchers gather data and build theories or models based on emergent patterns and themes that emerge throughout the investigation, as opposed to beginning with predefined beliefs or hypotheses. According to Sinuff et al. [38], complex phenomena that are difficult to grasp using formal hypothesis testing by quantitative procedures can be understood by using qualitative approaches.

4.2.5. Qualitative research is flexible and adaptable

Flexible research design is possible in qualitative research. Researchers generally value qualitative research as a flexible and versatile approach in different aspects [39–44]. It often starts with a broad research question, and works with a flexible research design. Researchers may have a general idea of the topics they want to explore but allow for modifications and adjustments as they delve deeper into the subject. This flexibility enables them to adapt to the evolving nature of their findings. In this sense,

qualitative research allows emergent design, where the study's direction and focus evolve as new insights and patterns emerge from the data. Unlike quantitative research with predefined variables and hypotheses, qualitative researchers are open to modifying their research strategies based on what they learn during the study. Because of this iterative nature, researchers can refine their research questions and data collection techniques as they progress. They can adjust their approach based on initial findings, ensuring that subsequent data collection is more targeted and relevant. Further, because of flexible characteristics, dynamic data collection is possible in qualitative research. Researchers can collect data through various data collection methods, such as interviews and observations. This allows researchers to interact with participants in real-time. This dynamic interaction in return provides the opportunity to explore unexpected avenues of inquiry and make adjustments to the research strategy based on participants' responses. Qualitative data are open to unexpected findings that the researchers may not primarily think of. This new finding can provide valuable insights into the research topic, and researchers can adjust their focus or methods to explore these unexpected aspects more thoroughly. This openness of qualitative data results in deeply delved understanding and nuanced meanings of the phenomenon.

4.2.6. Qualitative research is based on rich and descriptive data

Rich and descriptive data is a crucial aspect of qualitative research. This kind of data contributes significantly to the depth and trustworthiness of the findings. This is why qualitative research emphasizes rich and descriptive data [45–46]. Detailed descriptions (i.e., detailed descriptive data) allow researchers to understand the context in which participants' experiences unfold. This contextual information is essential for making sense of the meaning individuals attribute to their experiences. Further, rich data enable researchers to capture the nuances and subtleties inherent in human experiences. It is to be noted that this level of detail is often difficult to achieve through quantitative methods, which may focus on numerical data and statistical patterns. In collecting rich, descriptive data, qualitative research prioritizes the voices of participants. Through this approach, researchers can accurately represent the perspectives, emotions, and insights of the individuals being studied. One significant aspect of rich, descriptive data is that this kind of data often plays a key role in theory development. The richness of the data allows for the identification of patterns, themes, and theoretical insights that may emerge organically from the participants' experiences. Although qualitative research does not seek generalizability in the same way as quantitative research, the rich and descriptive data of qualitative research may enhance the transferability of findings. This means that readers can assess (transfer) the relevance of the study's findings to other contexts. In other words, the findings of qualitative research are not generalizable to a whole population but transferable to similar contexts. In addition, detailed information about the collection and analysis of rich, descriptive data contributes to the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transparency of the study. Rigor and trustworthiness are thus very important in qualitative research [47–49].

4.2.7. Qualitative research keeps collecting data until data start saturating

The concept of saturation in qualitative research is a crucial aspect of qualitative research methodology. It is, therefore, recommended that data saturation be achieved in qualitative research methods [50,51]. It is particularly notable in approaches like 'grounded theory' which is one of the five important sub-types of qualitative research. Achieving data saturation is important because it ensures that researchers have thoroughly explored the topic under investigation. When saturation is reached, it suggests that the researchers have gathered a sufficiently rich and diverse set of data, and further new data (information) are not yielding. At this point, the researchers can be more confident in drawing conclusions and developing theories based on the comprehensive understanding derived from the collected data. Saturation is often assessed through iterative data collection and analysis processes. Researchers may continue gathering data until they observe a repetition of themes, patterns, or concepts. It indicates that they have reached a point of saturation. This helps enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of qualitative research findings.

4.2.8. Qualitative research uses triangulation strategy

One of the essences of the qualitative research method is triangulation [52–56]. Triangulation is a research strategy that involves using multiple approaches, data sources, methods, theories, or researchers to examine the same research question. The triangulation strategy aims at enhancing the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings by cross-verifying information from different sources or perspectives. There are several types of triangulation, including data triangulation, methodological triangulation, and researcher triangulation. Data triangulation involves using different types of data or sources to study the same phenomenon. For example, a researcher might use interviews, observations, and documents to gain a comprehensive understanding of a particular issue. Methodological triangulation involves using multiple research methods to investigate the same phenomenon. For instance, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced view of a research topic. Researcher triangulation involves employing multiple researchers or observers to collect and interpret data. This can help mitigate individual biases and improve the overall trustworthiness of the study.

4.2.9. Qualitative research highlights the significance of ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are fundamental to maintaining the integrity and trustworthiness of any research study [57–61]. Similarly, ethical issues also matter in qualitative research [62–64]. Qualitative researchers often engage directly with individuals or communities. Therefore, they have to follow some key ethical principles in qualitative research. For example, researchers must ensure that participants are fully informed about the purpose, procedures, and potential risks of the study before they agree to participate. Informed consent is an ongoing process [65], and participants should have the freedom to withdraw from the study at any point without facing negative consequences. Another ethical point is confidentiality. Researchers must take measures to protect the confidentiality of participants. This involves safeguarding their identities and ensuring that any information shared during the research process is kept confidential. This is especially important in studies where sensitive or personal

information is disclosed. Further, researchers should strive to minimize any potential harm or discomfort to participants. This involves carefully considering the impact of the research on individuals or communities and taking steps to mitigate any negative consequences. To add, researchers should respect the autonomy and rights of participants. This includes respecting their decisions to participate or withdraw from the study, as well as considering the power dynamics that may exist between researchers and participants. In addition, researchers should provide clear and transparent reporting of their methods and findings. It is unethical to hide, lie, or manipulate anything regarding the study. Ethical considerations contribute to the overall credibility of the study but also allow for scrutiny and replication by other researchers.

4.2.10. Qualitative research ensures confirmability and credibility by member checking

Member checking is a valuable method in qualitative research that enhances the credibility and confirmability of study findings [66]. Motulsky [67] points out that editors, peer reviewers, institutional review board (IRB), dissertation advisors, and research supervisors might presume that potential threats to credibility are insufficiently tackled unless the research design incorporates member checking. Member checking refers to checking whether or not the researchers' data interpretation matches with what the research participants actually meant when giving the data. It involves seeking feedback from the participants involved in the research to confirm that the interpretation of the data accurately represents their experiences, perspectives, and opinions. This process allows researchers to confirm their findings and ensures that the conclusions drawn from the data align with the participants' actual experiences. In the process of member checking, researchers should inform participants during the initial stages of the study that member checking will be conducted. This transparency helps build trust and establishes an expectation for future feedback. Besides, researchers should present the participants with a summary of the findings, which may include themes, patterns, or key insights derived from the data. This presentation could take the form of written summaries, visual representations, or even direct quotes from participants. The process also involves asking participants to review the presented information and provide feedback on its accuracy. They may confirm whether the interpretations align with their experiences or if there are discrepancies that need to be addressed. More importantly, member checking often involves open and honest discussions between researchers and participants. This dialogue allows participants to express any concerns, corrections, or additional insights that might not have been captured in the initial data analysis. Eventually, these open dialogues lead to researchers refining their interpretations, modifying themes, or making adjustments to the findings. This iterative process helps enhance the accuracy and depth of the study's conclusions.

4.2.11. Qualitative research emphasizes researcher-participant relationship

Besides respect, rapport between the researcher and participants is required in qualitative inquiry [68]. The researcher-participant relationship is recognized as a fundamental aspect of qualitative research. According to Guillemin and Heggen [69], qualitative research relies heavily on establishing strong interpersonal connections

between the researcher and the participant. By this, qualitative research emphasizes the importance of establishing a positive and trusting connection between the researcher and those participating in the study. This relationship goes beyond a mere transactional interaction and involves building a rapport that encourages participants to share their experiences openly and honestly. That is, when participants feel a sense of trust and comfort with the researcher, they are more likely to provide rich and authentic information. This depth of connection enhances the quality of data collected, as participants may feel more inclined to share personal insights, feelings, and perspectives. Conversely, a strained or distant relationship can hinder the openness of participants and may result in less nuanced or genuine data. Precisely, the researcher-participant relationship is a critical factor that influences the overall success and trustworthiness of qualitative research. Therefore, researchers need to invest time and effort in establishing a positive rapport to ensure that the data collected accurately reflects the nuances of participants' experiences and perspectives.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed at reviewing literature in order to offer the defining characteristics and guiding principles of qualitative research. The paper concludes that qualitative research embodies a multifaceted approach to understanding phenomena, emphasizing depth, contextuality, and the subjective experiences of individuals. Guided by a set of principles, it delves into the intricate layers of human behavior, culture, and society. By considering the whole context rather than focusing solely on statistical representation, qualitative research provides a nuanced understanding that enriches our comprehension of complex phenomena. Its sensitivity to contexts and reliance on rich, descriptive data enable researchers to capture the subtleties and nuances that quantitative methods may overlook.

Moreover, qualitative research fosters a collaborative relationship between researchers and participants, emphasizing ethical considerations and ensuring the trustworthiness of findings through member checking and triangulation. Its flexibility allows for adaptation to evolving research questions and emergent themes, while its iterative nature, characterized by data saturation and hypothesis generation, contributes to the advancement of knowledge within various disciplines.

To sum up, qualitative research serves as a vital tool for exploring the intricacies of human experiences, shedding light on diverse perspectives, and enriching our understanding of the world around us. As we navigate increasingly complex social, cultural, and scientific landscapes, qualitative research continues to play a pivotal role in uncovering the richness and depth of human phenomena.

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