QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOUR

T. HARI DAS

Department of Management, St. Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia

ABSTRACT

Qualitative and quantitative approaches to the study of organizations are not mutually exclusive. Yet, over the last several years they have tended to become as such. Also, the interest in qualitative research of organizations seems to be renewing in the recent years. The present paper looks at some of the currently popular qualitative tools of organizational research emphasizing the complementary nature of qualitative and quantitative approaches in most settings.

DEFINING THE TERRITORY

INTUITIVELY, most people have very little difficulty in recognizing qualitative data, particularly if they are contrasted with 'hard' quantitative data. However, the label 'qualitative methods' is difficult to define precisely, as it is at best a *pot-pourri* of interpretive techniques. In general, several approaches including participant observation, ethnography, case studies, projective techniques, role plays, cartoon completion, contrived and unobtrusive observations and focus group interviews come under the label of qualitative research. The objective of the researcher in all cases is 'to describe, decode, translate or otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world' (Van Maanen, 1979a, p. 520).

Qualitative research methodology combines the rational with the intuitive approach to knowledge; the focus in many qualitative studies typically is on the unfolding of *process* rather than the *structure*. Qualitative approaches lend themselves better to the production of serendipitous findings and are in many cases broader and more holistic in perspective than quantitative tools. Conclusions emerging from qualitative research are impressionistic rather than definitive (Sampson, 1972). As such, qualitative data consist of detailed descriptions of events, situations and interactions between people and things providing depth and detail (Patton, 1980). In quantitative research the emphasis is on the collection of metric data using well designed instruments, classifying them into response categories and synthesizing the collected infor-

Address for reprints: Dr. T. Hari Das, St. Mary's University, Department of Management, 923 Robie St., Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

mation to evaluate the existing body of knowledge or generate new knowledge; qualitative data are typically open-ended and related to a specific temporal or spatial domain (Van Maanen, 1979a). In this sense, qualitative data are perhaps more idiographic than nomothetic in nature.

EMERGING IMPORTANCE OF QUALITATIVE PARADIGMS

Qualitative and quantitative approaches to the study of organizations are not mutually exclusive. Yet, over a period of time, they have tended to become as such. As Van Maanen (1979a, p. 521) noted, 'perhaps Gresham's Law is at work in organizational studies wherein the programmed research is driving out the unprogrammed'. Several contributing factors to this phenomenon can be observed. First, our obsession with reliability and 'objectivity' of observations has led us away from qualitative-type approaches. It is pointed out again and again that a researcher who lives and works in an organization for a long period of time will lose detachment and personal involvement, the two desired attributes of a true scientist. Secondly, the major strides in quantitative data manipulation techniques have encouraged the collection of data amenable to sophisticated statistical analyzes. In some instances, the statistical tools instead of acting as our servants have in fact become our masters, placing constraints not only on our research methodology and specific hypotheses, but on our very thinking process itself. Thirdly, the editorial policies and controls in experimental design have made the researchers shy away from in-depth and unconventional research designs. The reward structure in many universities (at least many of the Canadian and U.S. universities) has created a 'publish or perish' syndrome in the early years of an academic's career discouraging the person away from qualitative research studies which by nature are time consuming. Finally, even a perfunctory look at the research publications in leading journals in the organizational behaviour area indicates a greater emphasis on hypothesis testing rather than hypothesis formation. It also seems fair to conclude that deductive-analytical research is more publishable than inductive-holistic attempts at the present time.

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in qualitative research techniques. The December 1979 issue of *Administrative Science Quarterly* was totally devoted to qualitative methodology. Articles and books using participant observation technique, ethnography, case cluster method and other qualitative approaches have been on the increase since the middle of the 1970s (see, for example, Bogdan and Taylor, 1975; Downey and Ireland, 1979; Greenhalgh and Jick, 1979; Manning, 1977; McClintock, 1978; Millman, 1977; Mintzberg, 1978; Pettigrew and Bumstead, 1980; Turner, 1974). It is as if qualitative research is slowly becoming respectable. What accounts for this emerging interest in qualitative research?

1. There seems to be an increasing distrust and scepticism among organiz-

ational observers of findings emerging from studies using traditional tools like paper and pencil survey and laboratory experimentation (Van Maanen, 1979a). In particular, the frequent use of survey research has made several persons question the nature and quality of the variables used in organizational research. It is pointed out that even minor variations in survey design can affect response rates (Houston and Nevin, 1977) and response patterns (Blair, et al., 1977). Even in a well-planned interview, interviewer effects seem to account for a significant proportion of the variance of the dependent variables (McKenzie, 1977). Added to these are semantic problems and problems of unwilling interviewees commonly faced during interviewing (Becker and Greer, 1957). A number of writers in the past have commented on the artificiality, reactivity and lack of generalizability of the findings emerging from laboratory experiments (e.g. McGuire, 1969; Price, 1968). Given these findings, there seems to be very little reason for being overly fascinated by any research tool. This increasing disenchantment with traditional research tools, has brought some researchers to unconventional and qualitative methodology.

2. There is an increasing preference today for a more holistic view of organizational behaviour. Several of the organizational researchers of today are interested in understanding the gestalt or the totality of behaviour of the unit under study (e.g. Manning, 1977; Millman, 1977). The holistic approach assumes that the whole is different from the sum of its parts and hence any serious discussion of a phenomenon can happen only if its contexts (of occurrence) are carefully described and studied. Thus it is felt that a phenomenon (such as leadership) cannot be adequately understood by focusing only on a few variables such as the task structure, the leader's personality and the subordinate's goals, but rather has to be understood as a complex, situational phenomenon influenced by these and other variables.

3. Closely accompanying the above, is an increasing preference for naturalistic studies. The late sixties and most of the last decade saw a proliferation of surveys and laboratory experiments on several topics in the organizational behaviour area (some of the more popular ones being motivation, leadership, group behaviour and decision-making). There is a large number of researchers today in the field who believe that by the very nature of the subject, organizational behaviour cannot be adequately studied within neatly arranged compartments in isolated and artificial settings. As Mintzberg (1979, p. 586) noted:

> Measuring in real organizational terms means first of all getting out into the field, into real organizations. Questionnaires often won't do. Nor will laboratory simulations . . . what is the use of describing a reality that has been invented? The evidence of our research—of interruptions and soft data and information overload—suggests that

we do not yet understand enough about organizations to simulate their functioning in the laboratory. It is their inherent complexity and dynamic nature that characterize phenomena such as policy-making. Simplification squeezes out the very thing on which the research should focus. The qualitative research designs, on the other hand, permit the researcher to get close to the data, to know well all the individuals involved and observe and record what they do and say. It is argued that the study of human behavior in organized settings necessitates not merely the application of the canons of scientific method by researchers, but also an 'inter-subjective and trans-objective understanding of their data' (Filstead, 1970, p. 7). Above all, measurements need to be in real organizational terms which means 'measuring things that really happen in organizations, as they experience them' and not violate the organization by forcing 'it into abstract categories that have nothing to do with how it functions'.

4. Over a period of time, the complexity of theoretical frameworks used in the organizational behaviour research has grown at an exponential rate. The traditional sources of information about organizations (*e.g.* surveys, one-shot experimentation) have proved to be inadequate in handling these frameworks adequately and understanding the complexity of human behaviour. Longitudinal, in-depth and open-ended research designs have almost become a necessity to capture the complex and multi-dimensional behaviour patterns within organizations. This has resulted in several researchers looking beyond the quantitative research techniques, for capturing those dimensions of the phenomenon (under scrutiny) not readily susceptible to quantitative tools.

5. Qualitative observations may generate (and have in many cases generated) unexpected phenomena which form the basis of new hypotheses (Lundberg, 1976) and discovery of 'grounded theories' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Surprising quantitative results of the well-known 'bank wiring' experiment in the Hawthorne Study (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939) could not be explained without using qualitative data (*e.g.* informal group norms). Similarly in their study on how prejudiced people respond to cartoons ridiculing prejudice, Kendall and Wolfe (1949) found an unexpected type of response: *some of the respondents were neither shamed out of their prejudices nor insulted; they simply did not understand the meaning of the cartoon.* When this response was investigated in detail, the phenomenon of 'motivated misunderstanding' and 'derailment mechanism' was further explained. Since the researcher in qualitative studies is more likely to be aware of various aspects of the subject matter under investigation, it may be easier for that person to suggest alternative explanations for the conflicting evidence which can form the basis of further enquiry.

6. It may very well be that certain organizational phenomena *cannot* be

validly measured at all without using qualitative techniques. As Nicosia and Rosenberg (1972, p. 246) warned: 'the blind research for quantifiable regularities . . . can lead to ignorance of those aspects of man—the most important ones—that are intrinsically non-quantitative'. The 'objective' researcher is likely to 'fill in the process of interpretation with his own surmises in place of catching the process as it occurs in the experience of the acting unit which uses it' (Blumer, 1962, p. 188) and in that process risk being highly subjective. Qualitative tools may facilitate the understanding of complex social interaction typical of all large organizations since it provides a forum for integrating knowledge emerging from different disciplines and inductively synthesizes them.

The above items highlight some of the common concerns present in the field today. As Van Maanen (1979a, p. 522) noted, 'there is something of a quiet reconstruction going on in the social sciences and some of the applied disciplines'. The next section will examine some of the more popular qualitative approaches used in the discipline today.

QUALITATIVE STUDIES IN ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

Many of the qualitative research techniques currently in use in organizational research have their origins in clinical psychology (see Anderson and Anderson, 1951; Mills, 1969), sociology (Bruyn, 1966; Lindzey, 1961) and anthropology (Boas, 1948; Pelto and Pelto, 1978). They are also integrally related to the perspectives of phenomenology (Bussis et al., 1973), symbolic interactionism and naturalistic behaviourism (Denzin, 1978). Several qualitative research tools including ethnography and ethnomethodology, role playing, participant observation, projective techniques, cartoon completion, contrived and unobtrusive measures, focus group interviews, depth interviews, and case studies have been used in the organizational behaviour and related areas in the past. Some of the past research studies using qualitative tools will be discussed below [1]:

1. Ethnographic and Ethnomethodological Paradigms

Since the days of Boas, ethnography and participant observation methods have been important research tools in anthropology. In organizational behaviour research, however, the use of ethnographic and ethnomethodological approaches have been of recent origin [2].

The ethnographer becomes part of the situation being studied in order to gain an empathy and understanding of the values, attitudes and behaviours of the participants. The word 'ethno' refers to everyday life settings and individuals involved and ethnomethodological approaches focus on 'procedures and considerations actors invoke in relating terms of rational commonsense construction to things in the world' (Bittner, 1974, p. 75). From

this perspective, the organizational behaviour 'must be discovered by studying their use in real scenes of action' (Bittner, 1974, p. 75), that is by studying how the participants involved in those scenes or settings use their everyday life constructs to interpret the objects and events surrounding them.

The ethnographic paradigm used may be broadly classified into holistic, semiotic or behaviouristic schools depending on the researcher's focus (Sanday, 1979). The holistic approach [3] studies the culture as an integrated or whole phenomenon. The semiotic approach, on the other hand, is more interested in gaining the participant's view of events. The emphasis here, as Sanday pointed out, is on getting the 'native's point of view'. This has led to an increased interest in 'ethnoscience'. Finally the behaviouristic approach focuses not on uncovering 'meaning or to diagnose the whole. Rather its purpose is to provide observational data on pre-selected functionally relevant categories' (Sanday, 1979, p. 536).

An early study of organizations using the ethnographic paradigm can be seen in Garfinkel's (1956) analysis of status degradation ceremonies in organizations. This study focused on the transformation of the public identity of a deviant actor into something lower in the social schema. A similar approach in study of status degradation and organizational change is found in Gephart (1975).

Garfinkel's 1967 book, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, details several ethnomethodological research studies in organizational settings. For example, the practices of the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center staff in responding to requests and enquiries from the outside environment are detailed by Garfinkel in the book. Other research studies described by Garfinkel (1967) include an investigation of records maintenance, an outpatient psychiatric clinic, studies of jury deliberation in negligence cases, and coding procedures used by graduate students in analyzing research data.

Aaron Cicourel (1968) studied the complex interaction pattern that exists among policemen, juveniles, probation officers and parents using an essentially ethnographic framework. In particular Cicourel was interested in understanding the interrogation process used by juvenile officers in the field and the police stations. The results kept by the police do not reflect the ' "logic-in-use" of the organizational actors' (Cicourel, 1968, p. 22). In other ethnographic studies of police agencies, Van Maanen identified dimensions of internal social structure not readily apparent to a casual researcher: for example, the importance of not being a 'call jumper' or the tactic of 'street justice' used by patrolmen (see Van Maanen, 1974, 1979b).

Several organizational and programme evaluation studies have been conducted in the past with the use of qualitative methods (see Patton, 1980, for a brief review of major studies in this area). The use of an 'adversary model' (where two teams are formed with the express mandate of collecting positive and negative evidence about the programme respectively) has been found to

be a viable qualitative approach by several researchers for evaluating prog-
rammes effectively. The use of case studies and observation of participant
behaviours have also been popular in the past in the area of programme
evaluation (see Patton, 1980).

In sum, the past research of organizations using ethnographic method-
ology has mainly been carried out in social service, health and educational
institutions. The use of ethnographic paradigm has not been popular in the
study of large commercial or international organizations or the adminis-
trative units of provincial and federal governments. Much of this unpopu-
larity may be attributable to the existing concerns about the realiability of
data generated by this method and the long periods of time necessary to do
an adequate study of large, complex industrial units.

2. Unobtrusive and 'Contrived' Observations

Several past research studies have attempted to avoid the apparent diffi-
culties of self reported and ethnographic data by using unobtrusive measures
of behaviour. The use of physical data, natural erosion measures, controlled
erosion and accretion measures, archival data and data from running
records, are a few of the available unobtrusive measures (Webb *et al.*, 1972).
To avoid some of the problems of field survey data in assessing the popularity
of a museum, the state of tiles in various exhibit rooms can be compared
(Webb *et al.*, 1972). Similarly radio-dial settings of automobiles can be
studied to find out the popularity of different radio stations (*Advertising Age*,
1962). Du Bois (1963) in a similar vein estimated the readership of advertise-
ments in a magazine analyzing the number of finger prints on each page.

Apart from looking at traces of past events for generating valid conclu-
sions, 'contrived observation' techniques also can be extremely useful (Webb
et al., 1972). Instead of merely being a passive observer and recorder of
organizational events, the researcher also consciously provokes or tests the
behaviour of organizations under specific situational stimuli. A good
example of this is seen in Goodsell's (1976) research where post office
employees were forced to haggle over the price of a stamp. In a similar vein,
Langer *et al.* (1978) examined the effect of impersonal memos on behaviour
of office secretaries by systematically manipulating the style of the memo.
Pennebaker and Sanders (1976) examined the response of male university
students to orders from higher authority and concluded that one effective
way to make them write graffiti on the lavatory wall is by putting up a sign
saying 'do not write on the walls'. Details of several of these and other
studies can be found in Webb and Weick (1979), Salancik (1979) and Webb
et al.(1972).

Some of the above studies may closely resemble field experiments.
However, the essential difference between unobtrusive and traditional mea-
sures is the use of qualitative and often multiple indices in the former by the

researchers. As Weick and Webb (1979, p. 652) pointed out 'unobtrusive measures have come to be associated with a light hearted, playful stance toward the world in data collection. If the same event, for example, is regarded as both absurd and serious then more of it is likely to be seen because, in fact, it contains both qualities'. Researchers who use unobtrusive measures value deviations and variance at least as much as the mean and are willing to consider even non-serious events as interesting.

3. Depth and Focus Interviews

Depth interviews aim to identify a respondent's attitudes, motives and behaviour by encouraging the person to talk freely and to express his or her ideas on the subject matter under discussion. The depth interview is usually designed as a one-to-one interview and may last several hours. The depth interview has been a popular tool, until now, to measure respondents' attitudes toward their jobs, colleagues, work organizations and to specific outside products or events.

An early example of the use of interview method is seen in Gouldner's three year investigation of a gypsum factory. The data which formed the basis for his conclusions were largely obtained through 174 interviews, each lasting an average of an hour-and-a-half to two hours (Gouldner, 1954). Similarly, the employee and customer perceptions of service in banks (which formed the basis of development of a survey instrument used later in the study) were identified using interviews (Schneider et al., 1980). The developmental challenges facing a social agency were recently analyzed using interviews (Hirschhorn and Gilmore, 1980). The role of interviews in programme evaluation area is detailed by Patton (1980); a more exhaustive evaluation of the role of interviews in organizational research is available in Bouchard (1976).

The focus group interview (or group depth interview) has, until now, been mainly popular for identifying customers' reactions to an organization's products and services. This technique grew out of the group therapy method used by psychiatrists and is based on the assumption that individuals who share a problem will be more willing to provide their responses (on the problem) amidst the security of other persons (similar to themselves). Focus groups' responses have been found to be extremely useful in generating hypotheses, in structuring questionnaires, in getting clients' impressions on new products and services and in interpreting previously collected quantitative results. Bellenger et al. (1976) provide details of how one firm successfully used focus groups for hypothesis generation. In this instance, a series of focus group sessions were conducted with potential users of a bank's automated tellers. The results indicated that most persons found the automated tellers very impersonal and hence efforts should be made to 'personalize' the machines. Following this, each machine was given a name and personality

and the customers were allowed to create their own secret code and free hamburgers were given as incentives for trying out the tellers. The machine had the highest usage rate of any automatic tellers in the U.S. in 1976.

Interviews with focus groups result in synergism, stimulation and spontaneity on the part of the respondents (Hess, 1971). The focus group technique may also result in serendipitous findings which are amenable to scientific scrutiny later (Bellenger *et al.*, 1976). In any event, the usefulness of the method to facilitate interpretation of available information and design of new studies seems unquestionable.

MIXING QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE METHODS

By their very nature, qualitative research methods have several limitations. Qualitative methods, in several instances collect subjective opinions and attitudes and impressions about events and people—the methodology employed in several cases is also subjective and judgmental. The results of interviews are as good as the questions asked; yet good questions that are open-ended, neutral and clear may not be easy to identify. Unobtrusive measures may not provide a representative sample of behaviours or phenomena under observation; field simulations and contrived observations may be, in many cases, unethical or criticized for invading a person's or an institution's right to privacy. The samples used in many qualitative research studies may be small or unrepresentative; and, the data collected from even the most representative samples may be hard to systematically and 'objectively' classify into categories. The categories used, to be helpful, should proceed in steps from the general to the specific, be exhaustive and mutually exclusive, adapt to the structure of the situation, and adapt to the respondent's frame of reference (Lazarsfeld and Barton, 1971); yet several of the categories actually used in specific research studies may not meet all the above criteria. The qualitative methods may also overload the researcher at every point because of his or her intense involvement in observing, writing, coding and interpreting the data. The 'earthy' or 'serendipitous' conclusions may in fact be 'wrong' unless the researcher is careful (Miles, 1979).

One strategy to avoid many of these problems is to *combine* qualitative and quantitative methodologies in research studies. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies are not antithetical or even alternative. As Kaplan (1964, p. 207) pointed out, 'quantities are *of* qualities, and a measured quality *has* just the magnitude expressed in its measure'. Since Campbell and Fiske developed the idea of 'multiple operatism' in 1959, several researchers have successfully mixed quantitative and qualitative research tools.

Consider the popular case study approach. Much of the subjectivity in case analysis can be eliminated (or provided for in analysis) by using one or more of these methods (Foreman, 1948):

1. Validation of the data by allowing several competent investigations to

come independently to their conclusions; (this way the *number* of obser-
vations of the same event can also be increased) ;

2. Validation of the data by comparing it with outside sources and known
facts;

3. Validation by self-confrontation and checking the internal consistency
of the data;

4. Validation by review of the researcher's interpretations by the subjects
or functionaries of the study; and

5. Validation by predictive discrimination.

The different segments of the information collected may also be compared
for mutual compatibility and as a check for the internal consistency of the
data. The 'degrees of freedom' of the typical case study can in fact be
increased. Campbell (1975) discusses how the richness of case analysis can be
significantly improved by looking for multiple implications of the theoretical
ideas under investigation.

Similarly, the validity of data collected through participant observation
techniques may be reduced because of reactive effects, or researcher's char-
acteristics and actions (*e.g.* ethnocentrism and lack of knowledge on the part
of the researcher, over-identification on the part of the observer with the
group). Naroll (1962) describes some statistical procedures for testing the
data quality in anthropological field studies. The procedures suggested by
McCall (1969) can also be used to improve the reliability and validity of
participant observation data. Sieber (1973) provides several suggestions for
integrating quantitative and qualitative data in field work and survey
studies.

The combination of research methodologies (or 'triangulation') provides
the researcher with more confidence of their results and can also provide
innovative approaches to study of organizational issues. As Jick (1979, p.
609) puts it 'triangulation may also help to uncover the deviant or off-
quadrant dimension of a phenomenon'. Thus it may synthesize existing
theories and help the researcher to create new ones. LaPierre's (1934) early
investigation into the relationship between attitudes and behaviour, Van
Maanen's (1975) study on police socialization and Jick's (1979) study on
effects of a merger on employees are a few illustrations of successful combin-
ing of different research methodologies. A quick review of the literature
indicates that the kind of triangulation labelled by Denzin (1978, pp. 301–2)
as 'between (or across) methods' type is more popular than the 'within-
method' type where a researcher uses multiple research tools that came
under one major research technique.

CONCLUSION

The objective of the present paper has been to highlight the role of qualitat-
ive research tools in improving the holistic, inductive and naturalistic char-

acter of organizational research. Until now, the use of qualitative research tools has been restricted to specific research areas and settings. While there have been a number of instances of successful triangulation of qualitative and quantitative techniques, several researchers still seem to perceive qualitative and quantitative techniques as somewhat mutually exclusive.

The present writer believes that the qualitative and quantitative methodologies are not antithetic or divergent. Rather, they focus on the different dimensions of the same phenomenon. Sometimes, these dimensions may appear to be confluent; but even in these instances where they apparently diverge, the underlying unity may become visible on deeper penetration. Issues of reliability and validity seem to preoccupy the minds of quantitative researchers while the qualitative researchers are said to concern themselves more with the relevance, richness and depth of observation.

To this writer it makes very little sense when a researcher achieves one of the above while totally sacrificing the other. The situational contingencies and objectives of the researcher would seem to play a decisive role in the design and execution of the study. Further polemics and investigations into the effective mixing of qualitative and quantitative research techniques would seem in order.

NOTES

[1] Due to space constraints, the focus here is on highlighting the applicability of qualitative techniques for organizational research, rather than providing an exhaustive review of all past work done in the area.

[2] Ethnographic research is of course broader than any single tool that is typically used in any ethnographic study. The present paper will not make a fine distinction among the nuances of ethnographic and ethnomethodological studies, but will broadly use the term to refer to a variety of studies using techniques such as participant observation, direct observation and documentary analysis.

[3] The holistic school itself is composed of at least two divergent subgroups: the Configurationalists like Benedict and Mead and the Functionalists like Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown (see Sanday, 1979). However both groups were committed to study the culture as a whole.

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