

# Understanding Qualitative Research Methodology: A Systematic Review



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## ABSTRACT

As novice researchers and supervisors, the researchers of the current study have noticed that many postgraduate students encounter challenges in understanding qualitative research methodology. As such, the purpose of this work is to offer guidelines for new researchers on how to undertake and comprehend qualitative research. The main objective of this research article is to further the discussion of qualitative research principles and its essential aspects. Researchers and scholars alike make an effort to define qualitative research and the essential components of qualitative research design. This paper is a guide for inexperienced researchers because it demystifies the use of these phrases and adds to the body of knowledge by providing guidance to novice researchers as they embark on their research journey, helping them comprehend the principles and characteristics of qualitative research. The main objective of this paper is to unfold a rich understanding of qualitative research methodology, and it attempts to explore on some of key issues in regard to social explanations to novice researchers in the arena of qualitative methods, also, to practically present qualitative research method. This paper concludes by putting forward examples of when to use qualitative research methodology.

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## INTRODUCTION

Research is a search for knowledge. For one to have a direction on how to acquire knowledge, a method is required. Novice researchers suffer from limited understanding of qualitative research methodology and share some insights into its philosophic foundations. The conceptual scheme of qualitative research method is outlined in this paper. Qualitative research methodology entails many research methods. This article focuses on the essence and philosophical foundations of qualitative research methodology. It also presents the principles and characteristics of qualitative research critically exploring and analyzing them. It also addresses the significance of qualitative research method in social science and unpacks some of the key elements of qualitative research, also providing a clear picture to the qualitative researchers on how to transcribe qualitative research data. This study makes key contributions to four main types of qualitative research designs with an objective to provide and unpack the appropriate knowledge about different forms of qualitative research methodologies in social sciences. This paper is centered to a response of quantitative researchers' critics concerning the validity of qualitative methods, as a result, this study reveals a subscription of distinctiveness between qualitative and quantitative research.

According to Bennett & Elman the most mainstream qualitative methodologists hold diverse ontological and epistemological commitments, which constitute a unique collection of methodological injunctions.<sup>1</sup> This article focuses on providing a critical overview and principles of qualitative research, as well as some significant aspects of each feature that can be employed in qualitative research studies. Mahoney opines that there has been a great interest in qualitative research and discussions focused primarily on comparative method.<sup>2</sup> This article breaks down some of the essential components of the qualitative research case study design. Bennett & Elman in their paper mentioned that research methodology has been praised for its ability to create verifiable results with scientific explanations of the social setting.<sup>3</sup> According to Alasuutari in qualitative research, many scholars have combined many quantitative methodologies, such as cross-tabulation of their data, and some have chosen a multivariate approach.<sup>4</sup> In line with this phenomenon, the purpose of qualitative research is to cover the significance of human behaviour by articulating the intrinsic or essential properties of social objects or the human experience.

Tracy in her study contends that qualitative studies are assessed not on their statistical generalizability, but on their "resonance," or the potential of the research study to reverberate, impact, affect, or move a wide range of viewers.<sup>5</sup> Schonfeld mentions that qualitative research is inductive rather than deductive, and it is used to describe events in detail without resolving causation issues or proving clear correlations between variables.<sup>6</sup> Mohajan states that the intention of qualitative research is to systematically designate and understand topics or events from the perspective of the individual or population under investigation, as well as to produce new concepts and theories.<sup>7</sup> Qualitative research, also known as interpretative research, is a type of social action that focuses on how people interpret and make meaning of their experiences to comprehend the social reality of individuals.<sup>8</sup> According to Ngulube, research methods influence how studies are conceptualized, measured and understood.<sup>9</sup> Palmer & Bolderston in their paper, suggest that research can be understood as "the systematic investigation into and study of materials, sources, etc. for the purpose of establishing facts and scope in the form of new conclusions."<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Fraser et al. hold a view that conducting research entails paying exceptionally close attention and intentionally considering everything we have heard and seen.<sup>11</sup> That being mentioned, this study focuses on qualitative research methods. The importance is on discovering a range of phenomena that brings a transformation in social life; therefore, quality is prioritized over quantity. The nature of this study is that qualitative research employs words as data and focuses on social issues.

MacDonald argues that qualitative research integrates the methods and procedures of observing, documenting, analysing, and interpreting traits, patterns, attributes, and meanings of human occurrences under research, highlighted that the in-depth descriptions of context and people are a major strength of qualitative research.<sup>12</sup> The following methods are used in qualitative research; interviews, diaries,

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, "Qualitative Research : Recent Developments in Case Study Methods," no. 2001 (2006), <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.8.082103.104918>.

<sup>2</sup> James Mahoney, "Qualitative Methodology and Comparative Politics," *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 2 (2007): 122–44.

<sup>3</sup> Bennett and Elman, "Qualitative Research : Recent Developments in Case Study Methods."

<sup>4</sup> Pertti Alasuutari, "The Rise and Relevance of Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 13, no. 2 (April 2010): 139–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570902966056>.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah J Tracy, "The Toxic and Mythical Combination of a Deductive Writing Logic for Inductive Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Communication Research* 1, no. 1 (2012): 109–41.

<sup>6</sup> David J. Schonfeld and Benard P. Dreyer, "Research Foundations, Methods, and Issues in Developmental-Behavioral Pediatrics," in *Developmental-Behavioral Pediatrics* (Elsevier, 2008), 47–56.

<sup>7</sup> Haradhan Kumar Mohajan, "Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Sciences and Related Subjects," *Journal of Economic Development, Environment and People* 7, no. 1 (2018): 23, <https://doi.org/10.26458/jedep.v7i1.571>.

<sup>8</sup> Patrik Aspers and Ugo Corte, "What Is Qualitative in Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Sociology* 42, no. 2 (June 27, 2019): 139–60, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-019-9413-7>.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Ngulube, "Blending Qualitative And Quantitative Research Methods In Library And Information Science In Sub-Saharan Africa" 32 (2013), File:///C:/Users/Tafita/Downloads/Blending\_Qualitative\_And\_Quantitative\_Re.Pdf.

<sup>10</sup> Cathryne Palmer and Amanda Bolderston, "A Brief Introduction to Qualitative Research," *Canadian Journal of Medical Radiation Technology* 37, no. 1 (2006): 16–19.

<sup>11</sup> Barry J. Fraser, Kenneth G. Tobin, and Campbell J. McRobbie, "Qualitative Research Methods for Science Education," *Second International Handbook of Science Education*, 2012, 1–1564, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9041-7>.

<sup>12</sup> Cathy MacDonald, "Understanding Participatory Action Research: A Qualitative Research Methodology Option," *The Canadian Journal of Action Research* 13, no. 2 (September 13, 2012): 34–50, <https://doi.org/10.33524/cjar.v13i2.37>.

notebooks, classroom observations and immersions, and open-ended questionnaires to collect, analyse, and interpret data from visual and textual elements, as well as oral history.<sup>13</sup> Gerring and Mahoney are of the view that these days, scholars employ qualitative methods to investigate the five key substantive topics in comparative politics.<sup>14</sup> Miller postulates that the concept of qualitative research is classified as an inquiry into meaning, and may be used to generate theories grounded on the coordination of findings and understandings.<sup>15</sup>

To comprehend qualitative research, researchers and practitioners need to grasp the brief history of research, its traditions, and philosophical grounding.<sup>16</sup> Mason states that there is a long qualitative tradition that sees every day or interpersonal interactions, life experiences, narratives, histories, and so on, as informing us not only about personal or micro experience, but also about the changing social and economic settings, cultures, and institutional frameworks through which ordinary lives are lived.<sup>17</sup> MacDonald preserves that qualitative approaches are naturalistic and interactive ways of inquiry that reveal individuals' lived experiences.<sup>18</sup>

As a result, there is no single, objective reality; rather, there are various realisms dependent on subjective experience and situation. Against this backdrop, the main objective of this paper is to unfold a rich understanding of qualitative research methodology by expatiating on key issues related to social contexts for novice researchers. It also aims to present qualitative research methods in a practical, applied context.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative systematic review to identify the methods and analyse relevant understandings of qualitative research methodology. The use of secondary data for this paper was determined by the key terms search in books and online scholarly search databases (Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar). This paper comprises a brief study of the concept of qualitative methodology, as well as an outline of qualitative techniques. Resnik asserts that systematic review investigates specific questions and makes use of explicit, planned methods to select, assess, identify, and summarize the findings of similar but separate cases.<sup>19</sup>

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

McLeod states that qualitative research employs a descriptive, narrative approach; this study may be of particular help to practitioners since they could resort to qualitative reports in order to examine types of knowledge that would otherwise be unavailable, thereby acquiring new insight.<sup>20</sup> Huston mentions that qualitative research has been criticized for its lack of generalizability and inclination to be anecdotal.<sup>21</sup>

## Introducing the History of Qualitative Methodology in Social Sciences

The concept of history in accordance to Curtis is an intellectual effort to make sense of past human experience.<sup>22</sup> Mohajan, maintains that historical research is founded on study phenomena needed to categorize items into classes or identical groups with similar characteristics and you need logical reasoning based on solid premises.<sup>23</sup> The phenomena of research methods has been in existence

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<sup>13</sup> Mohajan, "Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Sciences and Related Subjects, 2018, Journal of Economic Development, Environment and People."

<sup>14</sup> John Gerring, "Qualitative Methods," *Annual Review of Political Science* 20, no. 1 (2017): 15–36; Mahoney, "Qualitative Methodology and Comparative Politics."

<sup>15</sup> Wendy Miller, "Understanding Grounded Theory," *Clinical Laboratory Science* 28, no. 3 (2015): 197–200.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Michie et al., "Developing and Using Ontologies in Behavioural Science: Addressing Issues Raised," *Wellcome Open Research* 7 (2023): 222; Mohajan, "Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Sciences and Related Subjects."

<sup>17</sup> Jennifer Mason, "Mixing Methods in a Qualitatively Driven Way," *Qualitative Research* 6, no. 1 (2006): 9–25.

<sup>18</sup> MacDonald, "Understanding Participatory Action Research: A Qualitative Research Methodology Option."

<sup>19</sup> Robert Resnik, "Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Saul McLeod, "What's the Difference between Qualitative and Quantitative Research," *Simply Psychology* 30 (2019).

<sup>21</sup> Patricia Huston, "Qualitative Studies Their Role in Medical Research," *Canadian Family Physician* 44, no. NOV. (1998): 2453–58.

<sup>22</sup> Mark H Curtis, "History and Qualitative Methodology," *New Directions for Institutional Research* 1982, no. 34 (1982): 55–61.

<sup>23</sup> Mohajan, "Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Sciences and Related Subjects.," "Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Sciences and Related Subjects."

throughout time. Sakyi, Musona, and Mweshi assert that the ancient philosophers came up with many logical and rational methods of arriving at valid conclusions<sup>24</sup>.

Mohajan explains that the qualitative research method originated in cultural and social history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology psychology.<sup>25</sup> Over the last two decades, the communication discipline has become increasingly obtainable to qualitative research. Academic journals, even those with a long history, according to Tracy, have preferred quantitative research.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, Jackson postulates that qualitative methods were advanced in the social sciences, in particular, anthropology and the rest largely on in-depth small-groups, interviews, and observation processes. Anthropologists and sociologists began to use qualitative research as a form of inquiry in the early twentieth century. For instance, in the 1920s and 1930s, social anthropologists Malinowski [1920], Mead [1935], and sociologists Park and Burgess [1925] made significant contributions to qualitative research. Furthermore, Mohajan argues that from 1900 to 1945 was the traditional age of qualitative research methods.<sup>27</sup>

Ronald et al., in their work, mention that the purpose of all sciences is to discover answers to questions regarding the evolution of a phenomena, an experience through observation.<sup>28</sup> Social science aims to develop new or different ways of comprehending the changing nature of living social realities. Alasuutari highlights that in light of the current increase in evidence-based policy movement, it is rather mystifying that the recent decades have seen the development of a new sphere of discovery of qualitative research.<sup>29</sup> Social science research holds diverse ontological, epistemological, and methodological methods. Alasuutari remarks that over the past years, there has been an increased interest in quantitative approaches and an increasingly pluralist attitude towards multiple modalities of investigation in social sciences found in rich societies.<sup>30</sup>

### The Quality of Qualitative Research

Strauss and Corbin hold that quality quantitative research can be done using all of the different methodologies as long as the user adheres to the method.<sup>31</sup> Mason in his investigation argues that qualitative research is focused on answering the ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions, rooted in providing the dynamics of social processes, social context, and change.<sup>32</sup> Mason postulates that qualitative researchers must employ major principles of research design, such as, bringing a link between research questions and methodological approaches, taking into consideration matters of how data is collected and analyzed by integrating it and clearly outlining the purposes of the research investigation.<sup>33</sup>

### A Distinction between Method and Methodology in Research

The concept method should not be confused with the term methodology. In line with the understanding of Kothari, research methods are to be understood as all the techniques or instruments that are used to conduct research.<sup>34</sup> Research instruments or methods, therefore, refer to the ways of the researchers. On the other hand, Jackson et al., elucidate this distinction, as has been discussed elsewhere that method is about “how to” and methodology is about “why to” collect data in a certain way.<sup>35</sup> Campbell indicates

<sup>24</sup> Kwesi Atta Sakyi, David Musona, and Geoffrey Mweshi, “Research Methods and Methodology,” *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal* 7, no. 3 (2020): 296–302, <https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.73.7993>.

<sup>25</sup> Mohajan, “Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Sciences and Related Subjects.”, “Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Sciences and Related Subjects.”

<sup>26</sup> Tracy, “The Toxic and Mythical Combination of a Deductive Writing Logic for Inductive Qualitative Research.”

<sup>27</sup> Mohajan, “Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Sciences and Related Subjects.”, “Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Sciences and Related Subjects.”

<sup>28</sup> Ronald L Jackson, Darlene K Drummond, and Sakile Camara, “What Is Qualitative Research?,” *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication* 8, no. 1 (2007): 21–28.

<sup>29</sup> Alasuutari, Pertti. “The Rise and Relevance of Qualitative Research.” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570902966056>.

<sup>30</sup> Alasuutari, Pertti. “The Rise and Relevance of Qualitative Research.” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570902966056>.

<sup>31</sup> Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* ( Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1990).

<sup>32</sup> Mason, “Mixing Methods in a Qualitatively Driven Way.”

<sup>33</sup> Mason, “Mixing Methods in a Qualitatively Driven Way.”

<sup>34</sup> C R Kothari, “Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques,” *New Age International*, 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Jackson, Drummond, and Camara, “What Is Qualitative Research?”

that method in simple terms, constitutes what the researchers actively did in their study.<sup>36</sup> They are the tools and techniques used by researchers. According to Kothari, a research technique is a systematic approach to solving research problems.<sup>37</sup> It may be understood as the study of how scientific research is investigated. However, the primary emphasis in this paper is on a qualitative investigation methodology. Researchers must have a clear understanding of distinguishing both research methodologies and methodology. For years, some research scholars have maintained that the main difference between quantitative and qualitative research is that they have opposite epistemology. Campbell maintains that research methodology and techniques cannot be considered separately, method and methodology are inextricably linked, for instance, in the development of research proposals and the conduct of the best possible research studies.<sup>38</sup>

Type	Methods	Techniques
1. Library Research	(i) Analysis of historical records (ii) Analysis of documents	Recording of notes, Content analysis, Tape and Film listening and analysis. Statistical compilations and manipulations, reference and abstract guides, contents analysis.
2. Field Research	(i) Non-participant direct observation (ii) Participant observation (iii) Mass observation (iv) Mail questionnaire (v) Opinionnaire (vi) Personal interview (vii) Focused interview (viii) Group interview (ix) Telephone survey (x) Case study and life history	Observational behavioural scales, use of score cards, etc. Interactional recording, possible use of tape recorders, photo graphic techniques. Recording mass behaviour, interview using independent observers in public places. Identification of social and economic background of respondents. Use of attitude scales, projective techniques, use of sociometric scales. Interviewer uses a detailed schedule with open and closed questions. Interviewer focuses attention upon a given experience and its effects. Small groups of respondents are interviewed simultaneously. Used as a survey technique for information and for discerning opinion; may also be used as a follow up of questionnaire. Cross sectional collection of data for intensive analysis, longitudinal collection of data of intensive character.
3. Laboratory Research	Small group study of random behaviour, play and role analysis	Use of audio-visual recording devices, use of observers, etc.

*Figure 1. Distinction between methods and techniques in research.  
Adapted from Kothari.<sup>39</sup>*

Kothari states that research methodology is a way to systematically solve the research problem.<sup>40</sup> It may be understood as a science of studying how research is done scientifically. However, the main emphasis of this paper is a qualitative research methodology. It is essential for researchers to understand not only research methods but also methodology. For years, scholars have argued that the principal distinction between qualitative and quantitative research is that they do not share the same epistemology.

### **A Distinction between Qualitative and Quantitative Research**

In basic terms, quantitative research comprises gathering mostly numerical data and analysing them using statistical methods while qualitative research collects textual data and examines it using interpretive analysis. Kielmann et al. argue that to understand quantitative and qualitative methods, there is a need to contrast their philosophical positions about the state of reality: constructivism and positivism.<sup>41</sup> Ngulube further postulates that the reason for these distinctions is that qualitative methods are connected

<sup>36</sup> Steve Campbell, "Perspectives: Method and Methodology in Nursing Research," *Journal of Research in Nursing* 21, no. 8 (December 2016): 656–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987116679583>.

<sup>37</sup> Kothari, "Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques."

<sup>38</sup> Campbell, "Perspectives: Method and Methodology in Nursing Research."

<sup>39</sup> Kothari, "Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques."

<sup>40</sup> Kothari, "Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques."

<sup>41</sup> Karina Kielmann, Fabian Cataldo, and Janet Seeley, "Introduction to Qualitative Research Methodology: A Training Manual," 2012.

to the paradigm of constructivism and interpretivism while quantitative methods are linked to that of positivism.<sup>42</sup>

To Jackson et al. there are three significant distinctions between quantitative and qualitative investigations and they are provided in the figure below.<sup>43</sup>

**Table 1:** Major distinctions between quantitative and qualitative research.

Aspect	Quantitative research	Qualitative research
Purpose of Inquiry: Explanation vs. Understanding	Primarily focused on explaining relationships, testing hypotheses, and establishing causality through statistical analysis.	Primarily focused on understanding complex phenomena, exploring subjective experiences, and generating in-depth insights.
Role of the Researcher: Personal vs. Impersonal	Typically adopts an impersonal, objective stance with minimal direct involvement of the researcher in the research process.	Often involves the researcher as an active participant, acknowledging their subjectivity and potential influence on the study.
Nature of Knowledge: Discovered vs. Constructed	Aims to discover objective, generalizable knowledge based on numerical data and statistical methods.	Aims to construct context-specific, subjective knowledge based on interpretation, narratives, and in-depth analysis.

*Source - Designed by Authors.*

The distinctions noted in Table 1 represent the diverse aims, researcher responsibilities, and the nature of knowledge in quantitative and qualitative research, which influence the methodologies and approaches used in each. Researchers select any of these methodologies based on their research objectives, questions, and aims. Jackson et al. postulate that, unlike quantitative research, which relies on a set of fixed questions to elicit categorized, restricted, forced-choice responses with limited choice for open-ended responses, qualitative research relies heavily on participants to provide in-depth responses to questions about how they have understood and interpreted their lived experiences.<sup>44</sup>

### Arguments against Qualitative Research

Mays contends that in the scientific study of health, which has a strong legacy and history of biomedical research that employs traditional, quantitative, and often experimental methodologies, qualitative research is frequently criticized for lacking scientific rigor.<sup>45</sup> He also maintains that labelling a technique as "unscientific" is especially significant in an era where scientific knowledge is widely considered the ultimate system of knowledge. Many qualitative researchers have failed to adequately describe their assumptions and procedures in their research papers, particularly when it comes to data analysis. These are fluid approaches - for instance, in research design, technique selection, sampling, and decisions regarding what are acceptable practices, units of analysis and data analysis. Cardano's argument is that in accordance with the theoretical sensitivity of this philosophical discipline, defending is meant to be more of generation of arguments to ensure the dependability of our assertions than the practice of martial arts to be applied against the qualitative research.<sup>46</sup> In addition to this point, Mohajan further explains that qualitative investigators have an interest in people's experiences, beliefs, and interpretations of their own lives.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Ngulube, "Blending Qualitative And Quantitative Research Methods In Library And Information Science In Sub-Saharan Africa."

<sup>43</sup> Jackson, Drummond, and Camara, "What Is Qualitative Research?"

<sup>44</sup> Jackson, Drummond, and Camara, "What Is Qualitative Research?"

<sup>45</sup> Nicholas Mays, "Qualitative Research: Rigour and Qualitative Research," 1995.

<sup>46</sup> Mario Cardano, *Defending Qualitative Research: Design, Analysis, and Textualization*, Routledge Advances in Research Methods (Taylor & Francis, 2020).

<sup>47</sup> Mohajan, "Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Sciences and Related Subjects."

## When to apply Qualitative Methods?

Patton and Cochran are of the opinion that the nature of qualitative research is to answer questions; What, how, and why attitudes of patients, and the community sustains those qualitative methods generally with the aim to understand the experiences of health care employees.<sup>48</sup> Patton and Cochran suggest the following subjects that qualitative methodologies can employ in research:

- People's perspectives on health matters, healthcare, accessing care, and staying well.
- Understanding various viewpoints of belief, including those of professionals and patients.
- How experiences, attitudes, and life circumstances influence health needs and behaviour.

It is evident that qualitative research focuses on people's perspectives, attitudes, thus reflecting their interpretations about their lived experiences

## CONCLUSION

The motivation for doing qualitative research, as opposed to quantitative research, comes from the observation that, if there is one thing which distinguishes humans from the natural world, is their ability to talk. In conclusion, Kothari, in his work of research methodology suggests that researchers not only need to know how to develop certain indices or tests, how to calculate the mean, the mode, the median or the standard deviation or chi-square, how to apply particular research techniques, but they also need to know which of these methods or techniques, are relevant and which of them are not, and what they would mean and indicate and why.<sup>49</sup> Researchers in this paper have been able to make a distinction between a research methodology and research methods. In this context, they were able to detect that research methodology has many dimensions and the research methods partake in research methodology. The subscription of two major research methods has been introduced in this study. Qualitative research therefore, must be understood as an approach that can be useful in providing in-depth information to understand target behaviours, lived experiences and participants' perceptions about their reality.

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Quinn Patton and Michael Cochran, "A Guide to Using Qualitative Research Methodology," *Medecins Sans Frontieres*, 2007, 1–36.

<sup>49</sup> Kothari, "Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques."

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