

The Impact of Methodological Choices When Using Qualitative and Ethnographic Approaches for Conducting Ethnic Community-based Research

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ABSTRACT

Research approaches in the past few decades have provided many choices for researchers to design a research framework. Among these research approaches, this paper examines the impact of methodological choices when using qualitative and ethnographic approaches for conducting ethnic community-based research. This paper provides a review of three approaches to research (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approach) for preliminary considerations for the proper selection of a research approach or framework. In particular, the role of researchers within their own ethnic communities in the host society is discussed in order to establish and clarify the researcher's position both as a researcher and as a member of the ethnic community in the host society. Overall, this paper provides some insights for the practical and philosophical guide for conducting ethnic community-based research through the general review of research approaches, the concept of the ethnic community, qualitative research methods, and the role of researchers within their own ethnic communities in the host society.

Keywords: Research methodology, Qualitative research, Ethnography, Ethnic community based research, Role of researchers

INTRODUCTION

Research approaches in the past few decades have provided many choices for researchers to design a research framework (Creswell, 2003). In general, there are three approaches to research (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approach). Among these three approaches to research, this paper focuses on the impact of methodological choices when using qualitative and ethnographic approaches for conducting ethnic community-based research. In the first section of the paper, three general research approaches are briefly reviewed for preliminary considerations for the proper selection of a research approach or framework. Then, the merits of conducting ethnic community-based research using the qualitative methodological approaches and the impact of taking these methodological choices are investigated. In addition, the role of researchers in their own ethnic community is discussed since

the relationship between insiders and outsiders in their own ethnic communities “matters greatly because it impacts the nature of the research” (Delgado-Gaitan, 1993, p. 390). In this regard, researchers’ roles and positions within their own ethnic communities in the host society are also examined so that researchers can properly situate themselves as researchers in the community-based research in the last section of the paper.

THREE APPROACHES TO RESEARCH

Over the past several decades, the debate regarding the respective benefits of quantitative versus qualitative research has been the focus of a fervent dispute (e.g., Bryman, 1984; Creswell, 2003; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The main subject of the debate between quantitative versus qualitative methodology focuses on the respective merits and different characteristics of each approach (Bryman, 1984). With regard to the debate between the two approaches, Bryman argues that philosophical and technical issues have been synonymously used in indicating the differences between the two methodologies. As Bryman mentions, philosophical issues refer to epistemological issues, while technical issues refer to the selection and use of superior methods in approaching a topic. Thus, he tries to distinguish the two terms, ‘methodology’ and ‘method’. He maintains that the term ‘methodology’ represents an epistemological position, while the term ‘method’ represents the techniques and ways of collecting data (Bryman, 1984). This means that different levels of analysis are required in order to distinguish the two terms in research, even though the two terms are commonly used in equivalent ways. He also insists that the preference of a certain method should be decided based on the decision of a particular epistemological foundation in the study (Bryman, 1984).

In addition to the argument regarding quantitative versus qualitative research, the importance and significance of a mixed-methods approach has been raised as the third research paradigm in educational and social studies in the past few decades in order to maximize the strengths and minimize the weakness of both methodologies (Bryman, 1984; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). It is necessary, then, to explore both the merits and flaws in each of these three approaches to research in this section.

Quantitative approach

Quantitative methodology is usually referred to as ‘a natural science approach’, and ‘positivism/post-positivism’ (Bryman, 1984; Creswell, 2003). In quantitative research, researchers tend to investigate events from the outsider’s point of view on social reality in order to view events empirically and objectively. In this sense, quantitative researchers insist that inquiries in social science should be objective. In order to be objective, proponents of a quantitative approach underscore “a value-free framework” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 12). The distinctive characteristics of traditional quantitative research are “a focus on deduction, confirmation, theory and hypothesis testing, prediction, standardized data collection, and statistical analysis” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p.18). Quantitative approaches also emphasize that researchers’ biases should be eliminated through an emotional detachment from the study and the use of impersonal and third person prose in their writing in order to test their hypotheses and empirically verify theories through the conduct of value-free and objective research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Creswell (2003) mentions experimental designs and surveys as major strategies of inquiry associated with quantitative research. In fact, there are several merits of doing quantitative research including relatively fast data collection and analysis, and more credible and independent results on the basis of precise, quantitative, and numerical data. However, the abstract and general results produced from quantitative research may not be applied to specific local

contexts and individuals due to the lack of understandings of local situations and individuals (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Qualitative approach

A qualitative approach is usually referred to as 'naturalistic field research', 'ethnographic', 'interpretive', and 'constructivist' (Bryman, 1984). Qualitative researchers insist that a qualitative approach should be understood based on phenomenology, which is the philosophical foundation of this methodology (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). In the case of a phenomenological approach, the main focus is placed on understanding people's meaningful events and their lived experience. In this regard, proponents of qualitative approaches emphasize researchers' close involvement with participants and research contexts and the facilitation of an inside view in the study (Bryman, 1984). Maykut and Morehouse (1994) also claim that qualitative researchers try to understand the participants' behaviors and words, because they are interested in the participants' interpretation of the world. Thus, qualitative researchers put an emphasis on the close relationship between the researcher and the researched and "the socially constructed nature of reality" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 12). In this sense, qualitative researchers indicate that inquiries in social science might not be totally objective because of "the value-laden nature of inquiry" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 12) in qualitative approaches.

Qualitative methodology is different from quantitative methodology in several ways (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). With regard to major differences between the two methodologies, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) point out the following: First, qualitative researchers argue that a reality cannot be fully revealed; rather, it can only be estimated by researchers. Second, qualitative researchers are concerned with understanding participants' perspectives and their everyday lives. Third, detailed descriptions of the social events are valued and secured in qualitative approaches. Fourth, first-person and ethnographic prose are used in qualitative research.

As strategies of inquiry associated with qualitative research, ethnographies, grounded theory, case studies, phenomenological research, and narrative research are generally used in qualitative studies (Creswell, 2003). With regard to the strengths of qualitative research, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) emphasize that a deep understanding of people's lived experiences and rich description of local contexts and situations can be gained in natural settings in qualitative research. However, knowledge gained in qualitative research may not be applied to other cases, since findings may be limited to relatively few participants in a particular event. In addition, qualitative researchers' personal biases may influence the results. Time-consuming data collection and data analysis are also some of weaknesses of qualitative research. They also maintain that the distinctive characteristics of traditional qualitative research are "induction, exploration, and theory/hypothesis generation" (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p.18). With regard to the major characteristics of qualitative research, Creswell (2003) mentions that data collection takes place in naturalistic settings and changes in the data collection process are permissible during the study. In addition, interactive multiple methods including open-ended observations and interviews are generally used and multiple strategies are often used in qualitative research (Creswell, 2003).

Mixed-methods approach

As the third research paradigm, mixed-methods research is emerged in social science (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). A mixed-methods approach can be defined as the combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods and approaches based on pragmatic knowledge claims (Bryman, 1984; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Mixed-methods research is a complementary, inclusive, and expansive form of research rather than a restrictive form of research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). As

strategies in mixed-methods research, sequential, concurrent, and transformative procedures are used (Creswell, 2003). Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) claim that the problems associated with a single method study can be reduced by the mixed use of quantitative and qualitative methods in a single study, since the strengths of both methodologies can be incorporated within the same research. They also maintain that research methods and approaches in mixed-methods research are more likely to be selected based on research questions and problems rather than based on some predetermined biases by either a quantitative or a qualitative research paradigm (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). However, a mixed-methods approach is more time-consuming, expensive, and difficult than either a quantitative or qualitative approach (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). With regard to the selection of research approach, they emphasize that there is no single superior research approach, since appropriate research approaches should be selected with respect to research problems under different contexts and circumstances (John & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

ETHNIC COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

In order to conduct ethnic community-based research, the concept of an ethnic community should be described and defined within the multi-ethnic societies in advance. With regard to the general definition of the community, Doughty and Doughty (1974) underscore “a sense of us-ness” (p. 30) through community members’ work, worship, and way of life by living in geographical nearness. In this sense, geographical closeness alone is not enough to define the notion of the community, since having the shared activity, work, beliefs, and way of life is much more important than just living in geographical closeness (Doughty & Doughty, 1974). They also emphasize the role of language in the community, for human relationships and social activities are possible through language. They also claim that sharing a common culture is one of key factors to be a member of a community.

Tosi (1998) also attempts the difficult task of identifying an ethnic community in heritage language maintenance. He insists that, due to the diverse characteristics of ethnic communities in multi-ethnic societies, it is not at all an easy undertaking to define community in a single sentence. He mentions that a group of people living in an ethnic enclave and sharing some “common social purposes” (Tosi, 1998, p. 325) has traditionally been regarded as an ethnic community. Aside from “geographical proximity and common purposes” (Tosi, 1998, p. 326), he claims that another major characteristic of an ethnic community should be considered to define the concept of an ethnic community (Tosi, 1998). Thus, Tosi suggests that the people should share a whole scope of beliefs and attitudes about daily life and they should participate, at least to some degree, in ethnic organizations for an ethnic group to be an ethnic community.

METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES WHEN USING QUALITATIVE AND ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES FOR CONDUCTING ETHNIC COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

Garcia (2003) claims that qualitative and ethnographic approaches can be adopted cooperatively in order to investigate unique problems in a specific ethnic community, while traditional methods including sociological surveys are still used in language maintenance research. In a similar vein, Wolcott (1987) explains that the interpretation and description of individuals’ cultural behavior is the aim of ethnographic research. He claims that culture should be inferred by the researcher from participants’ behaviors and words in the study, since culture cannot be explicitly represented and cannot be observed in a direct and straightforward way. He also underscores that a deep, diverse, and complete understanding of research problems cannot be achieved without considering “the cultural dimensions of

human behavior” (Wolcott, 1987, p. 54). Bryman (1984) also insists that a qualitative approach is more favored than quantitative approach when researchers investigate intricate social phenomena. In this regard, the impact and merits of taking these methodological choices will be examined in the next section.

Participant observation

Participant observation as a method of qualitative data has been developed by anthropologists who have tried to understand other people’s culture and lives in natural settings. Participant observation also has been refined and employed by researchers in the field of sociology and education (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Bryman (1984) mentions that participant observation is the most preferential method in a qualitative approach, since researchers can gather deep and rich data through participant observation compared to survey method which produces surface and deficient data on the social world.

Open-ended data-collection instruments are generally used in qualitative observation with the purpose of explaining relevant phenomena in natural research contexts unlike quantitative observation which uses closed-ended instruments for data collection with the purpose of confirming theory or testing hypotheses (Johnson & Christensen, 2003). They categorize qualitative observation into four types depending on the role of the researcher during the observation as follows: “complete participant, participant as observer, observer as participant, and complete observer” (Johnson & Christensen, 2003, p. 188). The researcher, as a complete participant, who is a member of the group being researched hides his/her role as a researcher in the study in order to gain an insider’s perspective through complete participation, while a complete observer as an outside observer do not reveal his/her role as a researcher to the group being observed. Complete observation is only possible either through a one-way mirror observation or in open settings such as an airport or a shopping mall where people being observed are not aware that they are being observed (Merriam, 1990; Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Both the participant as observer and the observer as participant are known to the group being observed as researchers. But the participant as observer spend a more time with participants through more participation than the observer as participant who spend less time in the field (Merriam, 1990; Johnson & Christensen, 2008). In this regard, the researcher as the participant as observer can gain an insider’s perspective with more participation and observation, while the researcher as the observer as participant can gain more objective and neutral perspective, even though it is not easy for the researcher to have an insider’s perspective due to the limited time and interactions with participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2003). However, the researcher’s role in the observation will vary depending on the different conditions and different times of the study.

Participant observation may help researchers to interpret what they observe with their own knowledge and experience as insiders compared to interviews which depend on “once-removed accounts” from interview data (Merriam, 1990, p. 88), even though participant observation as a data-collecting technique has been criticized due to its subjectivity and unreliability caused by “unreliable nature of human nature” (Merriam, 1990, p. 88). In order to enhance the quality of participant observation, Merriam (1990) underscores the fact that researchers should be trained how to observe and what to observe depending on the different research problems, participants, and settings. Furthermore, participant observation makes it possible to gather data without distortion, since the phenomena can be observed as they happen (Becker & Geer, 1970; Merriam, 1990). In general, observation can be effectively used for the research settings that can be observed first-hand and require a vivid and direct perspective.

However, there are also warnings that researchers may not observe the research settings and participants critically and objectively due to the contamination by “becoming too much of a participant” (Atkinson & Coffey, 2002, p. 811) when they rely entirely on participant observation. In this respect, this possible contamination that may be caused by participant observation should be reduced by active collaboration with other methods including interviewing.

Qualitative interviewing

Interviewing is a basic form of inquiry and meaning making process from other people’s experience and lives through their language and a most commonly used method for acquiring information about humans (Seidman, 1991; Fontana & Frey, 2004). Concerning reasons for choosing qualitative interviews as a research method, Seidman (1991) claims that researchers can gain an insight into research problems through participants’ words and they can understand individuals’ experiences and perspectives from participants’ story. Conversation between researchers and participants is essential for qualitative interviewing (Warren, 2002). Fontana and Frey (2004) also claim that qualitative interviews are active interactions between an interviewer and an interviewee rather than “neutral tools” (p. 698) for gathering data. This means that qualitative interviews tend to be a meaning-making process through conversation between interviewers and participants rather than a passive information-gathering process from participants’ responses. Warren (2002) emphasizes that qualitative interviewing is an interpreting process that makes participants’ responses understandable and meaningful through “a kind of guided conversation” (p. 85). In addition, qualitative interviewing is used in order to draw and infer cultural meanings from participants through the analysis of their behaviors and words. In this respect, Warren (2002) claims that qualitative interviewing should be designed with the purpose of inferring and finding common patterns from the participants’ cultural and social experiences. With regard to the qualitative interview process, Warren (2002) underscores the importance of researchers’ flexibility to the diverse of meanings from participants’ responses by maintaining interview open-ended. However, this does not mean that interview questions are not needed for qualitative interviewing. In fact, specific questions should be prepared in advance, because researchers cannot conduct interview endlessly due to practical reasons including limited time and access to participants. Overall, researchers should be flexible with an open stance during the research, while considering practical matters such as financial and emotional costs and availability of time and participants in order that they can complete the study (Warren, 2002).

However, the interview depends solely on what respondents describe, so researchers may not know whether responses are true or not, and they have no way to find out whether respondents are telling the truth or not (Becker & Geer, 1970; Atkinson & Coffey, 2002). That is why many qualitative researchers use qualitative interviewing over ethnographic fieldwork together, including participant observation in their study. Regarding the combination of methods will be discussed later in detail.

Documents

Personal documents including journals, diaries, letters, autobiographies, and e-mail discussions may be used for another source in qualitative research (e.g., Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Creswell, 2003). Maykut and Morehouse (1994) underscore the value of personal documents for seeking participants’ experience and lives in the field of psychology, education, and social science. Creswell (2003) also mentions that researchers can obtain participants’ own language and words through their personal documents. In addition, he mentions that public documents including newspapers, official reports, and policy manuals may also be used in qualitative research (Creswell, 2003). He also indicates that personal and public documents may help researchers save time and cost of transcribing as written proof (Creswell, 2003). However, Creswell warns that personal documents may not be genuine, complete, or

trustworthy, while public documents may not be easily accessible or unavailable. Thus, Maykut and Morehouse (1994) suggest that documents should be combined with other methods, even though it is also possible for researchers to use only documents as a single source of qualitative data in their research.

METHODOLOGICAL COMBINATION IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative interviewing is often combined with other methods, since human experiences and lives cannot be fully understood and captured through a single method (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). Angrosino (2005) also points out that in studies using interviewing as a main data collection instrument, observational methods are also frequently employed in order to find meanings and cues from participants' behaviors and gestures that cannot be captured through the interviews.

In general, qualitative interviewing is traditionally combined with ethnographic methods, including participant observation in qualitative research (Warren, 2002). The data gathered through both the qualitative interviewing and the ethnographic observations are different. Qualitative interviewing is based on the participants' verbal responses through what they say, while observation is focusing on participants' lived experience through how they behave (Warren, 2002). In this respect, researchers normally use qualitative interviewing along with ethnographic methods in order to seek common topics and patterns with the aim of inferring participants' responses and behaviors from different angles. Concerning the relationship between qualitative interviewing and participant observation, Becker and Geer (1970) compared interviews and participant observation as data collecting methods, emphasizing the importance and advantages of participant observation as "the most complete form of the sociological datum" (p. 133). However, the general trend of current research underscores the additive and integrative mixture of two methods (Atkinson & Coffey, 2002). Atkinson and Coffey (2002) point out that a balanced relationship between two methods should be pursued in order to gain more symmetrical perspectives from different forms of data, rather than privileging one method over the other. In this regard, Atkinson and Coffey (2002) suggest that data of different forms collected through observation and interviewing should be understood and interpreted "as incorporating social actions of different kinds" (p. 809). Overall, the incorporative and additive combination of participant observation and qualitative interviewing in a single study may help researchers to understand participants' diverse lived experiences, deep insight, different perspectives, and actual behaviors through supplementary and complementary methodological triangulation for the elevation of credibility in research results (Atkinson & Coffey, 2002).

THE ROLE AND POSITION OF THE RESEARCHER WITHIN ETHNIC COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

Villenas (1996) maintains that the researcher can become an insider to the community through the sharing of the common cultural and social experiences. However, the sharing of the same social and cultural experiences with the research participants may not make the researcher a complete insider to the community, since the position of the researcher varies depending on different conditions and different times over the study. In addition, becoming the insider to the research community does not guarantee that the researcher is a more knowledgeable and better researcher, because the insider researcher may hold misconceptions about participants who share the same ethnic background and social experiences on the basis of "assumed cultural knowledge" (Delgado-Gaitan, 1993, p. 391). In this regard, the role of the researcher in ethnic community-based research should be considered based on

the relationship between insiders and outsiders, because the nature of the research can be greatly influenced by the role and position of the researcher (Delgado-Gaitan, 1993).

Insider-outsider relations

The insider-outsider relationship is still a problem in educational research, due to its complex dimensions depending on research types and research problems (Elliott, 1988). Each relationship has its own merits and demerits. Researchers may use the insider's perspective referred to as the emic perspective, in order to explore the meanings and perspectives of participants' cultural values and social experiences within the community based on their shared cultural experience and social knowledge, and the same ethnic background with the participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2003). At the same time, researchers as insiders may lose objectivity by over-identifying themselves with the research participants and settings, and they may gather and interpret data only within the insiders' viewpoint if researchers exclusively take insiders' perspectives.

On the other hand, researchers may use the outsider's perspective referred to as the etic perspective, in order to describe the objective research questions and to find answers to specific questions (Johnson & Christensen, 2003). However, by excluding the native perspectives, researchers as outsiders may not fully understand participants and research settings, and they may also interpret data based on their preconceptions about the participants and the community. Even though both perspectives have their own aims, Johnson and Christensen (2003) underscore that researchers should effectively use both perspectives in order that they can remain objective without sacrificing a deeper understanding from the insider's perspectives in their study.

With regard to the multiplicity of researchers within their own ethnic communities in the host society, Enos (2001) struggles with her multiple identities between American Indian identity as a member of Pueblo communities and academic identity as a trained researcher in her research in Pueblo communities in the United States. She mentions that researchers should recognize their multiple identities in a given research setting in order to make the research valuable without being biased against both insiders' and outsiders' perspectives. In this respect, researchers must therefore keep considering their multiple research identities as insider, outsider, and in-between so that their perceptions and understandings can be examined and negotiated through interactions with the host society and majority culture, as well as with respect to the research participants within the ethnic community as a research context.

CONCLUSION

In the first section of this paper, three general approaches to research (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approach) for the purpose of preliminary considerations for the proper selection of a research approach or framework in social science and education were reviewed. Among these three approaches to research in social science and education, the main focus of ethnic community-based researchers was on a qualitative approach, since they would like to gain the deeper understanding of people's lived experiences and rich description of local contexts and situations within their ethnic community in the host society.

Before addressing the impact and merits of taking a qualitative approach for conducting ethnic community-based research, the notion of the ethnic community was reviewed in order to clarify the position of the ethnic community as a research context in the field of ethnic language maintenance in the host society.

With regard to the impact of qualitative methodological choices, participant observation, qualitative interviewing, and the use of personal and public documents were reviewed as the main sources of qualitative data. Furthermore, the importance of effective methodological combination in qualitative research was addressed for the enhancement of reliability in qualitative research results.

Finally, the role and position of the researcher were examined focusing on the relationship between the insider's perspectives and the outsider's perspectives within the community-based research in order to establish and clarify the researcher's position both as a researcher and as a member of the ethnic community in the host society. This review suggests that researchers' multiple identities within their own ethnic communities in the host society as insiders, outsiders, and in-between should always be examined and negotiated based on the relationship between their own ethnic community as a research setting and the host society and majority culture.

Overall, this paper provided some insights for the practical and philosophical guide for conducting ethnic community-based research through the general review of research approaches, the concept of the ethnic community, qualitative research methods, and the role of researchers within their own ethnic communities in the host society.

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