



Unveiling Perspectives: The Utility and Limitations of Qualitative Research Methods in Understanding Human Experiences and Behaviors

Talitha Candrakirana 

Faculty of Law, Universitas Gadjah Mada

*Corresponding author: candrakirana.talitha@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Revised February 11, 2025

Accepted February 15, 2025

Keywords:

Qualitative research methods, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observations

Kata kunci:

Metode penelitian kualitatif, wawancara mendalam, diskusi kelompok terfokus, observasi

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the advantages and drawbacks of qualitative research techniques, specifically interviews and focus group discussions, in obtaining detailed insights and comprehending participants' external behaviors. This analysis utilizes two case studies—Simpson's (2007) examination of emotional labor and gender identity in male caregivers and Akpabio et al.'s (2007) investigation of Nigerian students' perspectives on HIV/AIDS—to underscore how these methods provide valuable insights into participants' beliefs and experiences. Nonetheless, the results indicate that qualitative interviews and focus group discussions by themselves may not completely encompass behavioral patterns, highlighting the necessity for observational methods to enhance them.

ABSTRAK

Makalah ini mengkaji kelebihan dan kekurangan teknik penelitian kualitatif, khususnya wawancara dan diskusi kelompok terfokus, dalam memperoleh wawasan yang rinci dan memahami perilaku eksternal partisipan. Analisis ini menggunakan dua studi kasus—penelitian Simpson (2007) tentang kerja emosional dan identitas gender pada pengasuh laki-laki dan penelitian Akpabio dkk. (2007) tentang perspektif mahasiswa Nigeria tentang HIV/AIDS—untuk menggarisbawahi bagaimana metode-metode ini memberikan wawasan yang berharga mengenai keyakinan dan pengalaman partisipan. Meskipun demikian, hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa wawancara kualitatif dan diskusi kelompok terfokus sendiri tidak dapat sepenuhnya mencakup pola perilaku, dan menyoroti perlunya metode observasi untuk menyempurnakannya.

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research aims to elucidate and provide detailed descriptions of experiences, beliefs, and perceptions (Austin and Sutton, 2014). Typically, qualitative research methods consist of observation, focus group discussions ("FGD"), and interviews (Tumen Akyildiz and Ahmed, 2021). I will use the following 2 articles as examples to show that qualitative interviews and FGD are useful for gaining in-depth perspectives but limited to understanding participants' external behavior. Therefore, if researchers are interested in the participants' external behaviors and inner beliefs, it can be useful to complement interviews and FGD with observation.



RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The first article is titled “Emotional Labour and Identity Work of Men in Caring Roles” (Simpson, 2007). This research aims to explore (1) the gendered division of emotional labour; (2) perceptions of the match between personal capabilities and skill requirements; and (3) potential mismatch between gender and occupational identity and how men manage any tension in this respect. In order to investigate ideas regarding the consequences of men choosing non-traditional careers, Simpson interviewed 25 individuals: 10 teachers and 15 nurses. The nurses were from six different hospitals in the south-east of the United Kingdom, representing departments including general nursing, accident and emergency, mental health, and palliative care. The teachers were from a variety of departments, including the senior management team, nursery manager, and main-scale classroom teachers, and they came from six different schools located throughout London. The semi-structured interview was done based on the topics identified in the study questions. The interviews are taped, transcribed, and then framework analysis is used to examine the data. During these procedures, researchers sort, chart, and sift the material based on major themes and topics. The results of the conducted interview make it evident that there is a traditional gender-based division of emotional labor (“EL”) within caring roles. First, the study revealed that males tended to choose more “masculine” specializations within the profession. Because specializations in mental health and accident and emergency are perceived as more difficult and intriguing, male nurses opt to pursue them. In the meantime, the majority of male educators assisted male students with their athletic development. This entry was not entirely secure, though, as there are problems arising from defying established deferential standards. Second, men assumed the role of the authoritarian “father” and were assigned more demanding tasks in the kind of EL they undertook. Male nurses had the responsibility of caring for suicidal patients or delivering terrible news to family members, while male teachers were expected to fulfill the role of authority figures and enforce rules. Third, there were expectations of physical space between the male emotion worker and the female or child patients and limitations on how emotional labor was carried out. Even though the situation required that teachers provide comfort or assistance to the youngsters, they were nevertheless required to maintain a physical distance from them. Additional findings revealed that men's level of respect in caring roles can be influenced by their masculinity, their nurturing abilities in caring roles were frequently described as “different” from those of women and general men, and many men expressed a sense of self-fulfillment and satisfaction they gained from their caring role. Even still, there were clear conflicts between the job's feminine nature and prevailing ideas of masculinity.

The second article, titled “Utilisation of Focus Group Discussion as a Research Tool in Community Health Nursing Practice: A Case Study of the Views and Beliefs of Secondary School Students in Nigeria about HIV/AIDS and Its Prevention” is conducted to show the need for qualitative study in community health in nursing practice (Akpabio et al. 2007). The contextual issue surrounding this research is that many teenagers continue to behave in ways that betray their understanding of the risks to the health of those who engage in sexual activity, even in the middle of

the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Thus, six FGDs (3 groups of men and 3 groups of women) are held at three secondary schools in Akwa Ibom State in order to gain a thorough understanding of the students' attitudes toward HIV/AIDS and its prevention. Twelve male and thirteen female students participated in the FGD. The approach of FGD was selected due to its objective of offering comprehensive comprehension and insights into the discrepancy between health behaviors and knowledge. As part of the sampling process, we split the groups based on gender to ensure homogeneity. The process of gathering data involves the following steps: (1) obtaining consent from principals, teachers, and students for the study and tape recording; (2) outlining the possible benefits of the research; (3) conducting FGD with male participants and note takers, while female facilitators led the groups of female participants; (4) using the FGD guidelines and taking notes; (5) transcribing the data following the discussions and verifying the final written report with the participants. The findings indicate that although the majority of young people had favorable attitudes towards prevention and were aware of HIV/AIDS, a significant proportion continued to behave riskily and with a high degree of ignorance. The prevailing consensus was that commercial sex workers were the only ones most likely to develop AIDS. Students frequently cited peer pressure, the need to fit in, the desire to be one of the big boys, a lack of resources, and the promise of perks like money or test success as reasons for engaging in extramarital sex.

In my opinion, both the interview methods that are used for the first article and the FGD that is used for the second article are useful to some extent, as they are able to give the researchers the perspectives of the participants. However, they have limitations in capturing the external behaviors of the participants. For the first article, as Blaxter (2006) cited, conducting interviews is beneficial for researchers since it provides them with the chance to obtain information that may not be available through other methods like questionnaires and observations. When the interviewer is present, mutual comprehension can be guaranteed as they can clarify any questions that the interviewees did not grasp. However, these views may be subjective and subject to change depending on the situation. For instance, during an interview, individuals' responses can be influenced by their perceptions of the interviewer's intentions (Hammersley and Gomm, 2008). In this research, one of the aims is to find out the perceptions of nurses and teachers on the EL for men working in caring roles. Therefore, an interview is a suitable method to gain those perceptions. In questionnaires, the researcher cannot get an in-depth perspective of the participants as it does not allow rephrasing or flexibility of the questions. Observation alone is not sufficient, as the aim is to get the perspective of the worker. The interviews that are conducted show that there is a gendered division of emotional labor within a caring role, drawn along traditional gender lines. This transcript provides evidence of the gendered division of emotional labor within a caring role, drawn along traditional gender lines.

"Looking at people to whom I've broken bad news, they appreciate that it's a man who's breaking bad news. Doctors are men, and I know I'm not a doctor, but I think people see a man breaking bad news as a positive, like it means more."

Although interviewing is a powerful way of getting insights into the interviewee's perceptions, the reader does not get the full picture of the second aim, which is the gendered nature of EL in the workplace. Therefore, it would be better if the researcher used observation as a supplement to investigate participants' external behavior and get a better idea of the gendered nature of EL in the workplace.

For the second article, FGD can reveal previously unnoticed facets of a social phenomenon, and participant interactions can encourage participants to think more deeply and thoughtfully about aspects of their everyday lives that they might otherwise take for granted (Morgan and Spanish, 1984; Morrison, 1998). In order to prevent inhibition and discourage conversation, homogeneity is crucial (Marbach, 1982). For example, it is important to avoid pairing participants with too different cultural backgrounds, as this could lead to situations where some participants feel embarrassed to speak in front of people whose perspectives on life and the world are too different from their own (Greenbaum, 1988). If the goal of the FGD is to gather stereotypes and common sense related to the topic under analysis, non-expert participants with similar experiences are invited. This helps to avoid ambiguities and encourage more spontaneous communication among group members (Merton and Kendall, 1946). One of the objectives of this research is to obtain in-depth knowledge of the students' beliefs and views about HIV/AIDS and its prevention. Therefore, FGD is suitable for the objective as it can point out knowledge that the participants have. Aside from that, the FGD method can encourage the students to reflect on their lives in accordance with the topic. The researchers already have good strategies for creating a homogenous group and choosing students from the same state to avoid too many cultural differences. They also choose non-expert participants, which are high school students rather than medical students, to gain general views and stereotypes on the topic. These strategies maximize the collection of high-quality information. However, to get an accurate understanding of the behavior of the children towards the prevention of HIV/AIDS, observation is needed to supplement the FGD.

There are at least three advantages to conducting qualitative research. Qualitative research is able to (1) examine the quality of the phenomenon rather than the quantity; (2) involve relationships; and (3) have flexibility. First, according to Strauss and Corbin (1990), qualitative research can generate a complete description of participants' lives, lived experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings, in addition to information about organizational functioning, social movements, cultural phenomena, and cross-national contacts. Using qualitative methodologies allows the researcher to delve deeper and look for more specific data. This could support outcome studies by achieving adequate data and providing meaningful answers to research questions. Furthermore, qualitative research allows for the direct documentation of causal linkages. Frequently, scholars are drawn to elucidate the reasons behind an individual's actions (or inactions), the workings of societal structures, or the connections between many processes. Qualitative research designs have a flexible structure because they can be built and reassembled more than once (Maxwell, 2012). In the designs, researchers consider the social environment of the study. Regarding

the methods of sampling, qualitative research permits the modification of sampling plans as the investigation progresses and as the research questions evolve (Ohman, 2005). The adaptability of qualitative data gathering is especially helpful for exploring deeper psychological processes such as behavior causes, reasons, and values. On the other hand, the linear and non-flexible nature of quantitative research requires researchers to adhere to a specific sequence (Daniel, 2016). Thus, when a researcher wants to comprehend experiences, meanings, and viewpoints from the standpoint of the participants, qualitative research is appropriate to apply (Hammarberg, Kirkman, Lacey, 2016).

On the other hand, qualitative research has limitations as it (1) is prone to researcher's subjectivity; (2) involves complex data analysis; and (3) has limited scope in its generalizability. First, a qualitative approach is interpretive. In the meantime, various people may view the same things differently for a variety of reasons, including social and cultural background. Consequently, this introduces subjectivity into qualitative research (Mwitta, 2022). Second, researchers typically end up with mass data from qualitative data gathering techniques like FGD and interviews. When a researcher must go over the data they have gathered and save only the pertinent information, data analysis becomes challenging and complex. Third, small sample sizes are typical in qualitative research. There is an ongoing debate among researchers regarding the justification of generalizations about the results of qualitative research (Vasileiou et al., 2018). In summary, despite certain limitations, qualitative research remains valuable for knowledge generation because it allows researchers to investigate topics that are understudied when using quantitative approaches. Opinions, private activities, and social science research are a few of these (Tenny, Brannan, and Brannan, 2022). The researcher used the qualitative approach (FGD) to generate a list of potential reasons for performing extramarital sex in the second article. Qualitative research is crucial to understand the implications of men's non-traditional work choices and to help the health care team bridge the knowledge gap between health practices and knowledge, as the preceding two articles have demonstrated.

Qualitative research involves human subjects, so it is important to take ethics into account (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Participants should give their informed consent before taking part in the study, and the researcher should guarantee the complete privacy and anonymity of the gathered information. It is important to let participants know that this is a completely voluntary interview and that they are free to leave at any time. Positionality is another consideration. Positionality refers to how a researcher's identification influences their study (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). It entails taking into account the researcher's connection to the study's subjects, design, environment, and methodology (Holmes, 2020). The decisions made by the researcher and how other people (gatekeepers, participants, etc.) position them can influence the complicated concept of positionality. Scholarly positionality is typically examined from the inside out (emic vs. etic) (Huberman & Miles, 2002). Others, however, contend that there should be a continuum, with researchers alternately assuming insider and outsider positions (Arber, 2006). Others (Chhabra, 2020; Milligan, 2014)

suggest an "in-between" identity, one that is neither entirely within nor outside. Both insiders and outsiders have benefits and drawbacks. Because there is a shared understanding, insiders can more easily access participants and potentially obtain more authentic data. Prior knowledge, however, has the potential to skew data analysis and participant behavior. The researcher is less biased because, to an outsider, they have a new viewpoint. Building trust and getting access to people, however, may be more difficult for an outsider.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, qualitative research techniques such as FGDs and interviews offer priceless insights into the viewpoints, convictions, and experiences of participants. These techniques, however, are not very good at catching outside behaviors. This essay examined two studies: one that used FGDs to investigate students' opinions on HIV/AIDS prevention, and the other that used interviews to evaluate gendered emotional labor in caring roles. For their respective objectives, both studies made excellent use of qualitative methodologies. Nonetheless, they would get additional insight into participants' internal and external behavior by triangulating their data with observational approaches.

REFERENCES

- Akpabio, I., Asuzu, M., Fajemilehin, B. and OFI, B. 2007. Utilisation of focus group discussion (FGD) as a research tool in community health nursing practice: A case study of the views and beliefs of secondary school students in Nigeria about HIV/AIDS and its prevention. *Africa Journal of Nursing and Midwifery* 9. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/256387994_Utilisation_of_focus_group_discussion_FGD_as_a_research_tool_in_community_health_nursing_practice_A_case_study_of_the_views_and_beliefs_of_secondary_school_students_in_Nigeria_about_HIVAIDS_and_its_pr.
- Alshenqeeti, H. 2014. Interviewing as a Data Collection Method: A Critical Review. *English Linguistics Research* 3(1). Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5430/elr.v3n1p39>.
- Arber A. (2006). Reflexivity: A challenge for the researcher as practitioner? *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 11(2), 147–157.
- Austin, Z. and Sutton, J. 2014. Qualitative Research: Getting Started. *The Canadian Journal of Hospital Pharmacy* 67(6). Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4212/cjhp.v67i6.1406>.
- Blaxter, L., Hughes, C. & Tight, M. (2006). How to Research. (3rd Ed.) New York: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Chhabra G. (2020). Insider, outsider or an in-between? Epistemological reflections of a legally blind researcher on conducting cross-national disability research. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 22, 307–317.
- TÜMEN AKYILDIZ, S. and AHMED, K.H. 2021. An Overview of Qualitative Research and Focus Group Discussion. *International Journal of Academic Research in Education* 7(1), pp. 1–15. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17985/ijare.866762>.
- Simpson, R. 2007. Emotional labour and identity work of men in caring roles. *Gendering Emotions in Organizations*, pp. 57–74. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-07297-9_4.

- Öhman, A. 2005. Qualitative methodology for rehabilitation research1. *Journal of Rehabilitation Medicine* 37(5), pp. 273–280. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/16501970510040056>.
- Hammarberg, K., Kirkman, M. and de Lacey, S. 2016. Qualitative research methods: when to use them and how to judge them. *Human Reproduction* 31(3), pp. 498–501. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/humrep/dev334>.
- Mwita, K. 2022. Strengths and weaknesses of qualitative research in social science studies. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science* (2147- 4478) 11(6), pp. 618–625. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v11i6.1920>.
- Steven Tenny, Brannan, J. and Grace Bannan 2022. Qualitative Study. *StatPearls Publishing LLC* . Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK470395/#:~:text=Furthermore%2C%20with%20qualitative%20research%20researchers,with%20a%20goal%20or%20objective>.
- Hammersley, M. & Gomm, R. (2008). Assessing the radical critiques of interviews. In: M. Hammersley, (Ed.), *Questioning Qualitative Inquiry: Critical Essays* (pp. 89-100) London: Sage.
- Morgan D.L., Spanish M.T.: Focus group: a new tool for qualitative research. *Qual. Sociol.* 7(3), 253–270 (1984)
- Morrison D.E.: *The Search for a Method*. University of Luton Press, Luton (1998)
- Marbach G.: *Le ricerche di mercato*. UTET, Torino (1982)
- Greenbaum T.L.: *The Handbook for Focus Group Research*. D.C. Health and Company, Lexington (1988)
- Merton R.K., Kendall P.L.: The focused interview. *Am. J. Sociol.* 51(6), 541–557 (1946)
- Maxwell, J. A. (2012). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. London: Sage.
- Vasileiou, K., Barnett, J. B., Thorpe, S. & Young, T. (2018). Characterising and justifying sample size sufficiency in interview-based studies: systematic analysis of qualitative health research over a 15-year period. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*.18(48), 1-18.
- Holmes A. (2020). Researcher positionality. A consideration of its influence and place in qualitative research: A new researcher guide. *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 8, 1–10.
- Huberman A. M. & Miles M. B. (2002). *The qualitative researcher's companion*. SAGE Publications.
- Savin-Baden M. & Major C. (2013). *Qualitative research: The essential guide to theory and practice*. Routledge
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. M. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research* (Vol. 15). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.