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Qualitative Research Methods in Social Sciences

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the potential of qualitative research methods in security studies of the social sciences. It deals with the research question of how triangulation may work to explain complex phenomena of social sciences. The paper serves as a model case, which has been employed as a methodological framework for a PhD dissertation to examine phenomenon of security. Hence, it could also serve as methodological toolkit to examine any social dynamic by combining different methods, approaches, and tools. It adopts the case study method and delineates a single-case design by combining various data collection and analytical tools at different levels in qualitative research. The paper concludes that any single method may deprive the researcher of accurate findings, whereas a combination of different techniques and tools may serve the cause in an appropriate manner.

Key Words: *Qualitative, Case Study, Bi-level analysis, Discourse, Policy, Positioning, Social Sciences*

Introduction

This paper explains the research design in detail. It contributes to how different approaches and methods may work together. The paper advocates that complex phenomena of security studies under examination demand triangulation at different levels. No single approach or method can help to examine the phenomena in a study. Therefore, the researcher may adopt different complementary methods and approaches in a study. This paper helps researchers to adopt the relevant approaches and methods in qualitative research. It endeavors to suggest to readers about the type, approach, and combination of methods of data collection and analysis, along with debates on epistemological and ontological preferences and characteristics of a study.

Pragmatic Approach

This study shed light on the pragmatic approach. The pragmatic view focuses on the research problem. It takes ‘truth’ as ‘what works as a philosophical stance.’ It could be a pluralistic way to attain knowledge about a research problem. The significant advantage of the pragmatic approach is that it does not prioritize any specific philosophical stance about reality, design, or method. Instead, it provides enough

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space for the researcher to choose among the available techniques or procedures according to the research purpose and requirement of the study (Creswell, 2014). In contrast, other approaches are strictly attached to particular ontological, epistemological, or methodological preferences and are restricted to making choices by the researcher.

The pragmatic approach navigates a study in the following ways. Primarily, it takes an overarching position to make choices from different approaches. It predominantly draws, however, on the interpretive/constructivist approach. The interpretive/constructive tradition connects with the pragmatist approach when it picks one dimension from the methodological framework of pragmatism provided by David L. Morgan (2007). That is about the relationship between theory and data.

As stated, there is no sharp dividing line between deductive and inductive reasoning. The procedure of connecting data and approach is not unidirectional. It is impossible to work either in a theoretical (deductive) or data-driven (inductive) manner. Instead, it is an abductive logic that allows for moving back and forth between theory and data. It facilitates the conversion of observation into theory and then the theory assessment through action. Hence, the inductive outcomes could be treated as inputs for deductive purposes and the other way around through this subsequent process. The other two dimensions of the pragmatic framework emphasize 'intersubjectivity' and 'transferability,' which combine the objective approach with subjective and context-specificity with generalization, respectively (Morgan, 2007, p.71). Both aspects already fall within interpretivism/constructivism as two criteria for rigorous interpretive research.

Epistemological and Ontological Underpinnings of the Study

The epistemological and ontological foundations of the study belong to any specific tradition in a study. The studies with interpretive/constructivist tradition may work with pragmatic approach. The purpose of the study, kind of research question, and choices of data-collecting and data-analytic techniques reveal the dominant leaning of a research are concerns of any specific paradigm. As far as the interpretive/constructivist paradigm is concerned, according to this approach, reality is not given or objective. Instead, it is constructed by human actions and social settings (Bhattacherjee, 2012). Hence, it is significant to bank on the participants' opinions in interpretive research. As in interpretive research[1], the researcher's basic motive is to interpret participants' meanings about a phenomenon or situation (Creswell, 2014). It has been frequently linked with qualitative research methods- also called inductive research. It usually presents descriptive arguments that address 'what' research questions, which include 'how,' 'when,' or 'whom' type of question/s (Gerring, 2012).

[1] People create meanings from their experiences and context. They subject those meanings to outwardly object to make an understanding about the world. The variety and multiplicity of the meanings directs researcher to consider the complexity of opinions and observations. People also construct meanings through interactions with other people in a particular social environments and with certain historical context. So, what people say and do becomes important. It is also pertinent to consider their cultural and historical context (Creswell, 2014).

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In contrast, the positivist/post-positivist approach[2] claims about the objective nature of reality placed 'out there' and liberated from the context and individuals. It commences with a theory to be tested for approval or rejection (Creswell, 2014). This approach has been mostly associated with quantitative research methods- also termed deductive research. It generally deals 'why' question or causal argument that implicitly or explicitly considers a factor responsible for a particular outcome (Gerring, 2012).

In this paper the emphasis selectively lies on the pragmatic approach with a predominant leaning towards Interpretivism/constructivism because it alternatively uses inductive and deductive logic in the trajectory of inquiry-belonging to both approaches. As stated, studies always move back and forth with mixed flavors of deduction and induction because 'concepts and percepts are inseparable' (Gerring, 2012). At the same time, the rest of the criteria belong to the interpretive/constructivist approach. For instance, it builds on qualitative data collection and analysis techniques. It addresses the 'what' and 'how' questions. When the research is a hybrid pursuit of knowledge exploring and evaluating the phenomenon via theory-testing, this combination of approaches may serve the purpose of a study. As mentioned, there are several dissertations, and most dissertations execute more than one task in a single pursuit (Evera, 1997).

Characteristics of Study: Descriptive and Analytical Case Research

Characteristically, this paper suggests a case/case study research that builds on description and analysis.

Descriptive

A study may build on descriptive analysis with 'thick description' rather than causal analysis to explain and perform hypothesis testing. Gerring (2012) notes that research has to be descriptive rather than causal if its objective requires a broader range of evidence and if it addresses the intrinsically significant subject matter.[3] A description is neither only a preceding step of causal explanations nor subordinate research because the description is an 'inferential act,' except for specific events. To infer what is unknown from what is known. Or to infer from a studied sample or case to an extended population.

In both respects, it provides a 'formula' or a 'theory' for reproducing results. This research has considered taking a 'causal route.' Therefore, it is to say in the language of Gerring (2012) that a single causal theory does not help in this regard. Instead, correlation or associations among different dimensions serve the purpose of uncovering the complex phenomenon.

[2] It advocates the scientific method for social inquiry, called science research. It makes deterministic claims about the truth and reality which looks for causes that determine the effects in an experimental way. It reduces data into a small set, called variables .The relationship between these set of variables is presented in the form of a hypothesis that needs to be tested or verified (Creswell, 2014).

[3] Amongst the intrinsically important topics, Gerring (2012) includes topics e.g. democracy, human rights, war, revolution, ethnicity, inequality and so on and so forth. He argues, for instance it is equally important to know the level of prevalence of democracy in the world or how does it vary in relation to spatial and temporal modifications rather than only focusing on what causes democracy.

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Analytical

Most importantly, a study is analytical to address pitfalls that descriptive research might pose for a deep understanding of the phenomenon. Proponents of causal research do not readily accept illustrative designs; instead, they stipulate that these must include some analysis or evaluation (Evera, 1997, p. 95). Analysis pertains to measurement in descriptive designs where concepts associate with empirics. Or synonymously, where a collection of data is organized around theoretical concepts. It is, however, not free from challenges. For instance, concepts are abstract and difficult to operationalize. Therefore, the biggest challenge is to uncover the latent meanings, called the hermeneutic or interpretive challenge. Research participants may misrepresent the facts or have diverse approaches to their actions and experiences. Or it may also cause potential bias from the researcher (Gerring, 2012).

A similar challenge appears in interpretive research, which explicitly represents participants' perspectives with a more significant consideration of their socio-historical context. Of course, one way is 'thick description' to understand participants' meanings of a social phenomenon. Further, there are specific criteria[4] that interpretive research considers for rigorous study (Bhattacherjee, 2012). Yet, this research work forestalls these drawbacks by employing the discourse analysis technique, involving language (where deemed necessary) in consonance with qualitative/interpretive content analysis to avoid potential biases. The section on data analysis provides further details in this regard.

Case Study: An Embedded Single-Case

This papers refers to the case study method or case research. Case research provides an in-depth analysis of a "bounded system." This system could be case/s or issue/s, studied through multiple sources of data collection (Creswell, 2007). The case could be intrinsic. The intrinsic case study is based on an inherent interest in a particular case. This interest does not derive from an objective to learn about other cases. Instead, it emerges from the need to know about a specific case (Stake, 1995).

The disciplines of international security, peace studies, and strategic studies have successfully adopted the single-case and comparative case study methods. It has been considered a happy medium between Positivists and Constructivists. A brief overview of international security studies reveals that various researchers have utilized this method by taking a "soft positivist stance" different from the unified causal logic and statistical analyses. It has used the case study method to build or test theories by combining inductive and deductive conjectures (Kacowicz, 2002).

As case research may take the form of multiple case studies or a single embedded case which includes units of analysis at more than one level. In embedded analysis, the sub-unit level receives attention. Techniques of sampling may help to select these sub-units. The sub-units must be within a single case.[5] Another kind of single-case

[4] Rigor in Interpretive Research: Dependability, Credibility, Confirmability, and Transferability

[5] For example, in an embedded study about the internal politics of International Topographical Union, researchers' analysis extends to more than one level. International Topographical Union was the main unit while individual was the lowest, along with the intermediate levels: 'shops' belonging to particular groups, and 'locals or union chapters' etc. (Yin, 2018).

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study is 'holistic': a single-case analysis that studies the global nature of any organization (Yin, 2018). A single holistic case has a unitary focus, without division into sub-parts, which presents the single case by selecting one analytical facet (Creswell, 2007).

Given that the unitary analysis in a single holistic case may lead studies toward abstraction and becomes problematic for operationalizing the data, the embedded analysis makes a strong case for this study (Yin, 2018). Further, it also works for the study's theoretical framework, which analyzes phenomena at multiple levels. However, the most discussed challenge for embedded analysis is a divided focus that may fail the sub-unit level to establish a link with the larger or main unit.

Selection of Units/ Levels of Analysis

According to Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe (2010), the study's research questions and underlying assumptions help select units of analysis. Further, the technique of sampling may assist in selection. For instance, sampling may take place at the level of selecting a site (context), participants (respondents), or identifying any event or process (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2007).

National/ Unit Level of Analysis

Studies that are focused on only one country may consider national level as the prime unit or level of analysis. Therefore, analysis at the national level may take place adopting the suggested method of analysis.

Local /Sub-Unit Level of Analysis

Studies that are focused on a country overall, considering national level as the prime unit or level of analysis, but also intend to focus on another part of country specifically in the same study may consider the local or sub-unit level of analysis. Therefore, analysis at the local or sub-unit level along with national level may take place adopting the suggested method of analysis.

Data Collection: Methods and Techniques

This paper suggests a triangulation or mixed-method approach for the data collection. Triangulation means employing more than one approach, method, observer, or data source during the research (Denzin, 1970). In case research, prominent methodologists agree upon interviewing, observation, and documents as multiple sources of data collection (Yazan, 2015). Therefore, the study may consider interviewing or/and document selection as the basic techniques for data collection.

Interviewing

Field research may consists of in-depth and semi-structured interviews of representatives at both levels. Qualitative interviewing takes a parallel with semi-structured interviewing. It may be described as a process of engaging in discussion with the respondents and construing the meaning from their description of the discussed phenomenon. This format of interviews assigns an equivalent role and opportunity to the interviewee and interviewer in knowledge production. Unlike unstructured interviews, the researcher can monitor the focus of interaction on the

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subject matter of a research project (Brinkmann, 2014). Semi-structured interviews include 'general questions in their frame of reference' and permit researchers to alter the order of questions. The researcher may also take the liberty to ask subsequent questions because of interesting responses (Bryman, 2012). Interview guides help to conduct interviews. Different interview guides may be adopted at both levels, conforming to respondents' distinct research objectives and genres.

Documents

Documentation is one of the techniques for data collection in interpretive research (Bhattacherjee, 2012). It denotes any written, audio, visual or physical material in a natural context that can provide information about the phenomenon (Raptis, 2010). Documents can be divided into two categories: primary and secondary documents. Primary documents are produced by the people directly linked to the phenomenon, while secondary documents are produced by the external and not involved in the phenomenon under study (Olson, 2010).

Reflexivity in the Data Collection Process

To collect data at the national level, the researcher may consider interviewing as the technique for data collection. During the data collection process, if the researcher realizes the limitedness of one source of data collection, document analysis may be included. This strategy to gain insight from different sources works well in qualitative research. Further, it may help to check the potential biases that participants may induce, as the interpretive case research prefers the participants' viewpoints. Although text could also be the source of potential biases; however, triangulating data sources could reject, confirm, or suspect those biases.

Data Analysis: Methods and Techniques

For data analysis[6], the study may employs qualitative content analysis, thematic analysis, discourse analysis, or in combination. What do strategies mean in this research? It could be clarified by explaining the study steps for analyzing data. However, it is essential to emphasize that how study deals with combining strategies. Simply speaking, the descriptive analysis using qualitative content analysis as a technique may help to get hold of data. It could be followed by a strategy of discourse analysis to make sense of that data for rigorous analysis. This is how Morgan (1998) suggests using qualitative content analysis- as a priority or sequence model (Prior, 2014, p. 361).

The qualitative content analysis[7] further guides to perform thematic analysis. The data

[6] It refers to a stage where the researcher associates with empirics. Although there are not sharp distinction between previous stages and analysis. Restrictively, it is about assigning numbers to elements or happenings by a framework of rules. Broadly, it brings up a link between theoretical stances and empirical realities (Gerring, 2012).

[7] It is a systematic way of exploring and designating meanings to both manifest and latent content in the different kind of texts (Drisko & Maschi, 2016, p.87). This approach of meaning making does not restrict itself to the texts of documents. It incorporates, rather, interviews by analyzing the transcribed data (Drisko & Maschi, 2016, p. 360; Prior, 2014, p.101). This technique has usually been considered as quantitative method which involves numeric. This claim is not valid for the qualitative

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is coded regarding specific themes or subjects (Bryman, 2012, p. 295-298). As for qualitative content, analysis is important to identify whether words, sentences, grammatical configurations, clauses, or even themes need to be analyzed. It could also help to reveal dispositions that whether a particular stance taken in a text is positive, negative, or neutral. Overall, based on thematic analysis, qualitative content analysis helps determine predilections or a certain type of discourse by estimating the frequency of certain words or their key accompanying words (Ibid.). A study may notice the frequency of emerging themes, what themes have emerged, or both.

A deductive, inductive or combined coding approach could be used to codify data. The deductive approach refers to using already existing material or theory for codification. This material or theory sets the rules for the inclusion and exclusion of data (Drisko & Maschi, 2016, p. 106). On the other hand, the inductive approach guides the development of categories. The inductive approach pertains to grasping the meaning (manifest and latent) of the content in actual data. It works by developing a data-driven definition of a category. It is important for many reasons. First, it represents the perspectives of research participants-an important characteristic of interpretive research. Second, it may discover new aspects related to or diverted to overarching theoretical dimensions/themes. Third, it aligns with the study's objectives because it may challenge, complement, or extend the theory by testing the theoretical assumptions.

Third, bearing in mind that the deductive approach to coding can supplement and assist inductive coding in a suitable manner (Drisko & Maschi, 2016, p.106), a codebook needs to be developed. The codebook includes words, clauses, headings, or sections of text from documentary data, and terms and statements from the transcription of interviews have been coded, which developed the categories. The emergent categories have been allocated to the overarching themes/theoretical dimensions using a deductive approach.

The codification and allocation of these categories to overarching themes reveal the pattern in data. The pattern refers to the frequency, similarity, difference, sequence, correspondence, or causation (Saldaña, 2016). For the process of codification, NVIVO software could also be utilized. This software is useful for qualitative research. It assists in organizing data and assessing the number and percentage of code references, which facilitates gauging the similarity and occurrence of different categories within the related themes.

Some might think of it using a quantitative approach. Although there is no harm in combining qualitative and quantitative methods or taking what Morgan (1998) refers a hybrid approach (Prior, 2014), a research sticking to the qualitative method to the extent it shares its perspective with Bhattacherjee (2012, p.103). According to this perspective, the qualitative approach does not embrace statistical analyses. Although it may tabulate qualitative data, it does not lead to statistical analysis. This somewhat

content analysis. As it differentiates itself from the basic content analysis-based on realist epistemology (Drisko & Maschi, 2016, p.58), and conflates with interpretive content analysis. Epistemologically, methodologists are divided on realist and constructivist foundations of this approach. The inquiry in this regard, however, renders it either a hybrid (Prior, 2014, p. 361), or synonymous with interpretive content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2016, p.61). This study takes qualitative content analysis as an approach that is grounded in constructivist epistemology.

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directs the discussion toward the next choice of strategy for data analysis. Although the interpretive understanding presented by Bhattacherjee (2012, p.103) does not include this method in a quantitative realm, it indicates a shared space by qualitative/interpretive (as generally understood) and quantitative/positivist approaches.

However, Douglas (2017) argues that both methods support data fragmentation/reduction and the researcher's exclusion from the research process. Positivists call for numbers and value neutrality, whereas interpretive researchers ask for codes and 'voices of the participants' by delinking with a priori theory. Douglas (2017), on the other hand, suggests a move towards 'post-qualitative' analysis or 'thinking with theory.' The focus here is not on delinking with a priori theory. Rather, the point of concern is a suggestive move for 'deep- interpretation' to other methods, for instance, deconstructive analysis- a Derridean approach (Douglas, 2017). Others, however, highlight the potential, and present examples, for combining qualitative content analysis and discourse methods (Bryman, 2012, p. 558; Drisko & Maschi, 2016, p. 87; Prior, 2014, pp. 366–370).

Data Analysis at the National/Unit Level

For national/unit-level analysis, the study may choose a combination of qualitative content analysis along with thematic analysis and/or discourse methods. To call it discourse methods is based on the choice of the way the study employs this technique. Given the pragmatic anchoring of the study, qualitative content analysis may be followed by an approach premised on discourse analysis: 'what's the problem represented to be - called WPR approach. It is a poststructuralist approach that combines four traditions: social constructionism, post-structural discourse psychology, feminist body theory, and governmentality theory. The approach is directed toward policy analysis, presented in the book 'Analysing Policy: What's the problem represented?' by Carol Bacchi (2009). It takes a shift from 'problem-solving to 'problem questioning and endeavors to problematize the problems presented by governing bodies. It aids in analyzing public policy, which is also applicable to other domains, by posing the following six questions and subsequent guidelines (Bacchi, 2009, p. 48).

What's the problem represented to be in specific policy?
What presupposition or assumptions underlie this representation of 'problem'?
How has this representation of the problem come about?
What is left unproblematic? Where are the silences?
What effects are produced by this representation of the problem?
How/where is the representation of the 'problem' produced, disseminated, and defended?

Data Analysis at the Local/Sub-Unit Level

The purpose of analysis at the local/sub-unit level could be to voice individuals. If it looks at policies at the local/sub-unit level, then same analytical methods at the unit/national could be employed. However, if it does not voice the governing institutions at the local level. Then the thematic indigenous people's voices could also be subjected to the positioning analysis. Positioning analysis is based on storylines,

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positions, and speech acts. The analytical positioning method is proposed by positioning theory that emphasizes the role of the analytical triad by considering part of five kinds of moral orders as the background features (Harre & Langenhove, 1991).

Reflexivity in Data Analysis Process

The reflexive caution mainly guides the reflexivity of not only the section of data analysis but the whole study. The researcher, however, may fulfills these criteria to rationalize the selection of approaches or methods at each level and why not other alternatives if there are.

This paper has considered using the Derridean approach of deconstructive analysis, for the national/unit level, by employing two analytical techniques: absent presence/ trace and 'Difference.' These techniques help to address silences and contradictions, respectively. However, Bacchi's approach also encompasses ways to address 'silences' and 'contradictions.' Contradictions have not been categorically highlighted in the six-question criteria. Nevertheless, the definition of discourse provided by the author that highlights it as an embodiment of tensions and contradictions[8] provides a space for analysis in this domain. Besides, Baachi's approach is specifically crafted to analyze policies. Therefore, it could be a better choice, if it serves the purpose.

For analysis at the local/sub-unit level, this paper has considered finding more patterns in data by extending it from count on frequency to correspondence between different themes/categories. The positioning analysis method has been preferred to dig deep into the voices of people.

In short, the study, anchored in interpretive/constructivist tradition, could pragmatically be designed as qualitative embedded single-case research by triangulating data collection and analysis methods. Data analysis methods reinforce the theory development by incorporating the critical methodologies highlighted by Newman (2010).

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[8] See Glossary in the book: P.275

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