THE ROLE OF QUALITATIVE METHODS IN SOCIAL RESEARCH: ANALYZING PHENOMENA BEYOND NUMBERS

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Purpose: The paper aims to explore the role and significance of qualitative methods in the research process, particularly focusing on their ability to interpret and understand complex social phenomena. It highlights the complementarity between qualitative and quantitative approaches and their joint use in comprehensive research.

Design/methodology/approach: This paper utilizes a theoretical approach to describe and analyze qualitative research methods, including observation, interviews, and group discussions. The discussion is grounded in a comparison with quantitative methods, emphasizing the interpretive and subjective aspects of qualitative research, which allows for a deeper understanding of phenomena.

Findings: The paper finds that qualitative methods play a crucial role in providing insights into phenomena that cannot be quantified. It highlights the importance of qualitative research in building theories from observed experiences, the value of respondents' personal experiences, and the essential interaction between researchers and participants. The findings also support the argument that qualitative and quantitative research are complementary, and using both approaches can enhance research outcomes.

Research limitations/implications: The paper acknowledges that purely qualitative research may lack generalizability due to its focus on individual or small group data. It suggests future research should continue to integrate both qualitative and quantitative methods to enhance the validity of the results.

Practical implications: While not directly aimed at providing commercial or economic recommendations, the findings emphasize the importance of incorporating qualitative methods in research processes to gain richer, more contextually grounded insights that can inform policy-making, social programs, and educational practices.

Social implications: The research can influence public attitudes by promoting a more nuanced understanding of social phenomena. It underscores the value of qualitative research in capturing human experiences and behaviors, which could be used to inform social policy and educational reforms.

Originality/value: This paper contributes to the field by offering a comprehensive exploration of qualitative research methods, highlighting their relevance in capturing the complexities of social phenomena. It is of value to researchers in social sciences, education, and policy development who seek to integrate qualitative approaches into their research methodologies.

Keywords: qualitative research, observation, interviews, social phenomena, research methodology.

Category of the paper: Research Paper, Conceptual Paper.

1. Introduction

Qualitative research methods, by their nature, delve into the activities undertaken by individuals, allowing for the analysis of newly emerging phenomena and the formulation of new categories and concepts. These methods also enable the development of hypotheses that serve as a foundation for applying quantitative approaches (Konecki, 2000). The scope of qualitative research includes:

- analyzing observed effects and phenomena,
- uncovering the components that form the whole,
- identifying and highlighting connections and relationships,
- describing structures in their entirety,
- interpreting and explaining phenomena, their functions, and meanings.

Unlike quantitative research, which often addresses larger populations, qualitative research typically focuses on individuals or small groups. The research investigates factors whose scale cannot generally be measured. This type of research involves structured interviews or discussions, which are directed and moderated by the researcher to ensure they remain focused on specific topics (Dźwigoł, 2018).

Researchers utilizing qualitative methods caution that their techniques alone should not be considered sufficient for drawing definitive conclusions from qualitative or field research (Cicourel, 1964). Many practices originating from quantitative research may not be suitable for qualitative research. This also ties into the notion that valid social science research must rely on quantifiable information, such as experimental data, random sample surveys, and official statistics, to ensure relevance and generalizability (Denzin, 1970). In contrast, qualitative research, which aims to describe and explain sequences of events, is closely tied to the personal experiences and emotions of both the subjects and the researchers involved.

The essence of qualitative research lies in its focus on interpreting and understanding phenomena rather than explaining them through causal sequences, as is the objective of quantitative research (Skorny, 1974). This paper discusses the role and importance of qualitative methods in research processes, highlighting various methods and emphasizing the importance of combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches in research.

2. Framework for qualitative research

The theoretical framework of research findings should be developed, selected, or adapted only at the research stage or even after the research has been completed. This is because, in qualitative research, theoretical justification is not always necessary. The theory plays

a supporting role here, helping to explain the observed phenomena, but it does not dictate what the researcher should be looking for. This approach allows the formulation of theories that are directly connected to the experiences gained during the research process. In contrast to quantitative methods, theory is a conclusion of the research rather than a guide for its direction or validity (Dźwigoł, 2018).

Respondents play a crucial role in qualitative research. For example, in the case of teachers, their professional experience should be highly valued, as many in this profession can provide valuable insights and advice that may assist in solving the research problem. Children and young people, who are often direct witnesses of the phenomena being studied, also represent an important source of information. While their perceptions may sometimes be mistaken, these very errors offer the researcher valuable material for further scientific exploration.

Thus, in qualitative research, it is impossible to strictly separate the researcher from the researched, as both parties play similar roles, especially during the data collection phase. It is important to engage appropriately with respondents, establish a rapport, and treat them as equal partners without placing oneself above them as someone who "knows more".

Qualitative research is often referred to as "soft research" because it employs unstructured techniques and methods, sharply contrasting with the quantitative approach. The results of such research are typically presented in narrative form or as essays, without complex statistical analyses. While the two approaches – qualitative and quantitative – are not mutually exclusive, they are in fact complementary. Qualitative methods explain processes and cause-and-effect relationships, capturing both the personal experiences of the researcher and the participants. For this reason, such research is often called fieldwork, ethnographic, or anthropological; terms such as "ecological" or "micro-ethnographic" research are also used (Dźwigoł, 2018).

It is important to remember that various descriptions and qualitative analyses, without an appropriate approach, may be imprecise and not fully reflect the essence of the phenomenon being studied. This is because they may not accurately represent the respondents' understanding of the variables and indicators involved. This shortcoming is addressed by qualitative methods, which is why most quantitative studies also require a qualitative approach as a complement. This recommendation works in both directions, as purely qualitative research, based for example solely on uncategorised observation or essays without elements of quantitative methods, is also incomplete.

In recent years, numerous studies have focused on the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods with the aim of mutual verification of results. These studies are particularly relevant in the context of digitalisation, sustainable development, and combined methodologies. For example, Dźwigoł (2018) examined the methodological and methodical foundations of contemporary research processes in management sciences, and later, Dzwigol (2020a) developed a triangulation platform in strategic management. His subsequent works (Dzwigol, 2020; Dźwigoł, Trzeciak, 2023) explore innovations in marketing research and pragmatic methodology in management sciences. Researchers have also investigated the

relationship between sustainable development, green logistics, and energy efficiency (Dźwigoł et al., 2021, 2023a, 2023b). These studies highlight the importance of using both qualitative and quantitative methods for a comprehensive and accurate interpretation of complex phenomena.

Continuing the theme of mutual supplementation between qualitative and quantitative methods, other works also emphasise the importance of using combined approaches. For instance, Kwilinski (2019a) proposed a mechanism for assessing the competitiveness of industrial enterprises in the information economy, while in another work, Kwilinski (2019b) examined the implementation of blockchain technologies in accounting. In the study by Kharazishvili et al. (2020), social indicators of sustainable development are analysed, and Kharazishvili et al. (2021) proposed a systemic approach to assessing energy security, using Ukraine as a case study. Moreover, Kharazishvili and Kwilinski (2022) developed a methodology for determining the threshold values of national security indicators using artificial intelligence methods.

Research has also examined the importance of digitalisation in sustainable development. For instance, the work of Kwilinski et al. (2022b) focused on integrative smart grid assessment systems, while more recent studies by Kwilinski et al. (2023a, 2023b) investigated the impact of digital transformations on achieving sustainable development, particularly in the transport sector. The crucial role of urbanisation in environmental growth was also addressed in the study by Kwilinski et al. (2023c), which explored the effects of urbanisation in the context of sustainable development. The work of Kwilinski et al. (2023d) examines the effects of green finance on achieving sustainable development goals, utilising the Spatial Durbin Model.

Finally, the research by Kwiliński et al. (2024) is dedicated to promoting sustainable development goals through digital culture, providing a global research overview in this area. All these studies affirm the significance of combining quantitative and qualitative methods to achieve a deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied and to meet the objectives of sustainable development.

The simultaneous use of quantitative and qualitative methods in research arises from the complexity and uniqueness of the subject matter. However, it is not always appropriate to treat both methods equally in every case of scientific exploration. Doing so would contradict the principle that the choice of methods should depend on the nature of the object being studied and that the object should not be altered to fit predetermined, idealised approaches to data collection and analysis (Dźwigoł, 2018).

3. Selected qualitative research methods

3.1. Observation

Studies that rely on observation often provide only a broad and suggestive overview of the collected data (Silverman, 2008). A. Kamiński describes observation as "a unilateral activity, carried out solely by the researcher, who is motivated by the aim to conduct a purposeful, planned, systematic, and critical observation of particular behaviours, objects, etc." (Kamiński, 1974). Similarly, T. Pilch (Pilch, 1977) defines observation as a research activity focused on gathering data through observations.

Observation involves systematically and discreetly observing the objects of study within their natural environment. One classification identifies five types of observation:

- Categorised: The researcher uses pre-prepared tools like charts or questionnaires, and observation is based on the data collected from these documents.
- Uncategorised: The researcher does not rely on any pre-arranged questionnaires or guidelines, leading to a more spontaneous and free form of observation.
- Overt: Subjects are aware that they are being observed, which may cause them to act unnaturally, potentially distorting the information.
- Participatory: The researcher immerses themselves in the observed environment, conducting research from within.
- Direct: The researcher not only collects data but also verifies its accuracy through other research methods.

In categorised observation, the researcher is well-prepared and familiar with the working conditions. They record findings using pre-structured tools, such as diagrams or questionnaires, noting only what the predefined categories on these tools capture (Altkorn, 1998).

A researcher interacting with a particular community typically adopts one of the following roles:

- Full participant.
- Completely external observer.
- Observer as participant.
- Participant as observer (Konecki, 2000).

When the researcher assumes the role of a participant as an observer, it means they have gained "permission from the group to take part in its activities and observe it in its natural setting" (Konecki, 2000), without having an organisational role in the group (Kostera, 2003). In this position, the researcher faces the challenge of avoiding the interpretation of the group's actions and behaviours, even though "the natural process of perception leads us to automatically categorise the world around us" (Kostera, 2003).

Observation can be seen as one of the most versatile and comprehensive techniques for gathering information. Due to its complexity, it is sometimes mistakenly regarded as a research method. However, this is incorrect, as observation is a fundamental approach to understanding that includes various supplementary techniques. It remains one of the most versatile yet historically and essentially original ways of conducting research. Observation is both a straightforward, spontaneous recording of facts and events and a complex, controlled process involving systematic observation aided by other techniques, such as questionnaires and video or audio recording (Kirk, Miller, 1986).

Through observation, a researcher can gather highly 'natural' and authentic information about the studied community. The most common form of observation is open or free observation, which is particularly valuable in the initial stages of a research project. It helps collect general information about the research subject, which in turn allows for more precise planning of later research stages and the formulation of preliminary issues and working hypotheses.

Another type of observation is systematic direct or indirect observation, which is a more structured and scientific approach. This method involves collecting planned observations over a specific time frame to understand the connections and relationships between phenomena, and to identify the directions and types of processes occurring within social groups or institutions.

Systematic observation requires supporting techniques, and several factors need to be planned, including problematic aspects, timing, and methods of data collection. Problematic aspects involve determining what issues should be observed within the sample population, including the quantity and quality of these observations. For example, processes, traits, reactions, or attitudes may be observed. In cases where processes or transformations are studied, it is important to focus on factors such as the determinants, speed of progression, or intensity of changes under particular conditions. When observing reactions and attitudes, the variables that cause specific reactions and the role of motivation are key. To accurately identify attitudes, it is essential to determine their prevalence and evaluation measures. When scheduling the timing of the observation, the scale of the subject and object being observed must be taken into account. It is critical to avoid conducting observations during extraordinary periods unrepresentative of the usual dynamics of the group or institution.

Participant observation (either overt or covert) (Wikipedia contributors. Obserwacja (nauki społeczne, n.d.) is a specific form of systematic observation, wherein the researcher becomes a member of the observed group in order to observe from within (Altkorn, 1998). This method aims to capture the genuine behaviours and actions of individuals in their 'natural environment.' In overt participant observation, the group is aware that the researcher is observing them, but they are not necessarily informed about the research objectives, which can alter their behaviour (Frankfort-Nachmias, Nachmias, 2001). In covert participant observation, the group is unaware of the researcher's dual role. This method is frequently used in

pedagogical or sociological research to study individual behaviours, where the researcher seeks to observe, record, and interpret the social significance of these behaviours.

In this form of participant observation, the researcher accompanies the subject during everyday tasks and activities over a period of time. The researcher does not only passively observe and take notes but also asks context-based questions to better understand the process or the individual's motives. They may also record observations using photographs, films, or audio recordings. The goal of participant observation is to study the respondents' behaviour within real settings, focusing on situations and events that are natural, rather than artificially created. The researcher assesses the presence of smart organisation principles within the study subjects. To achieve optimal results, the researcher tries to establish direct contact with the subjects, participates in events and situations, and indirectly influences actions or reactions, without directly altering their behaviour.

Participant observation requires the acceptance of the researcher by the group, whether overtly or covertly, as a member with a particular function. Membership within the group allows the researcher to collect richer data compared to other types of observation. However, the researcher risks unconsciously adopting the behaviours, opinions, and reactions of the observed group, which may compromise the objectivity necessary for research.

The main strength of direct observation as a research method lies in its naturalness, expressed in two key aspects:

Observation is a fundamental and natural way for humans to learn about the world.

It allows events to be observed in their undisturbed course, especially when studying human interactions and relationships.

When discussing observation, it is important to recognise its strong connection to the individual characteristics of the observer, including their research intuition and unique ability to understand the world or their subjective worldview. Challenges in this method can be grouped into three categories (Silverman, 2008):

- Perceptual limitations, as human senses can only perceive a limited range of stimuli.
- The emotional attitude of the observer, which may be influenced by personal relationships with the subjects, potentially skewing the freshness and accuracy of observations.
- The observer's cognitive stereotypes, affecting how they interpret phenomena, facts, or relationships.

Unstructured observation, also referred to as non-standardised observation, allows the researcher to observe freely, noticing events, facts, and phenomena in a way that aligns with the overall research aim. Although it offers flexibility, unstructured observation still meets the requirements of scientific observation and is often used in the early stages of educational research, particularly for topics that are little known or previously unexplored (Silverman, 2008).

3.2. Interview

Among the primary research methods used within the behavioural sciences, the interview holds a particularly prominent position. Despite its limitations and potential drawbacks, it remains one of the most commonly employed techniques. Compared to other methods, it allows for a more flexible adaptation to the issues at hand, as well as the abilities and needs of the respondents. It provides the opportunity to gain insight into individuals and their concerns, while also developing the researcher's sensitivity to the subjects, much like observation.

Interviews are particularly useful when it is not possible to obtain information or opinions, or to ascertain facts about a particular population through other research methods. This technique involves active engagement from both parties: the interviewer and the interviewee (as the research participant). It is a guided process in which the researcher collects data by asking a range of questions, from formal to informal, to selected respondents in order to gain insights into various issues, such as the participant's thoughts, actions, or emotions (Collis, Hussey, 2003). The interviewer interacts with the respondent, asking questions and encouraging them to discuss the topic under investigation. If there is no interviewer and participants complete the questionnaire themselves, this technique is known as a survey.

The interview can serve as the main method for understanding individuals or as a supplementary tool for data collection, depending on its objectives and the way it is conducted. When structured and executed effectively, interviews can yield valuable information that might be challenging to acquire through other means. This method can be used for various purposes, including:

- Uncovering unknown facts from a reliable source.
- Understanding the interviewee's views and beliefs.
- Learning about the context of described events.
- Collecting personal data about the respondent.

For optimal results, interviews should be combined with observing the respondent. This allows for a direct comparison between their spontaneous, natural behaviour and their verbal responses, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the individual. Such an approach also enables immediate (albeit partial) verification of the accuracy and reliability of the responses.

During interviews, the researcher must depend on the honesty, insight, and objectivity of the respondents. Major distortions in interview results often arise from:

- Poorly worded questions.
- A lack of interviewing skills, which can significantly limit the depth and quality of the information collected.
- Insufficient preparation or knowledge, coupled with the risk that the interviewer's questions may unintentionally impose their own worldview on the respondent.

The final outcome of the research is typically a report based on an analysis of the interview process, which includes answers to the research questions outlined prior to the study, as well as the development of a group discussion scenario. To illustrate findings, discussion group reports often feature direct quotes from participants.

The interpretation of responses is heavily influenced by the personality of the researcher, which may lead to the neglect of certain nuances in the attitudes and experiences of the respondents.

The quality of the research is largely determined by the reliability of the interview scripts (Silverman, 2008). For interviews to yield the necessary data, careful preparation is essential. This preparation should include:

- Clarifying the purpose and scope of the interview.
- Compiling a detailed list of questions that focus on the topic.
- Encouraging the respondent to feel motivated and open to engage in the interview process.

When framing questions, it is advisable to avoid beginning with "Whether?", as this may resemble a test scenario. Instead, start with "What?", "Which?", or "Why?". Responses should be received with genuine interest, empathy, and understanding. It is important not to correct the respondent, nor to display impatience or disregard for their knowledge. The interviewee should feel that their contributions are valued and align with the research objectives.

Standardising research tools is a fundamental requirement for creating a reliable questionnaire (Sztumski, 2005). The combined use of observation and interviews has numerous advantages—for instance, data gathered through one method can help clarify other findings (Hammersley, Atkinson, 2000).

The following types of interviews can be identified:

- Informal interview.
- Questionnaire-based interview.
- Structured (standardised) interview.

3.3.   Qualitative interview

In the behavioural sciences, one of the key research methods is the qualitative interview. It involves an interaction between the researcher and the interviewee, where the conversation is directed by the interviewer, who places emphasis on certain themes brought up by the respondent while guiding the overall flow of the dialogue. The interviewer is generally well-prepared, having a plan for the conversation, but it does not involve following a rigid set of pre-determined questions in a specific order. It is crucial for the qualitative interviewer (or survey interviewer) to be well-versed in the subject matter and familiar with the questions that will be asked. If the interviewer is sufficiently prepared, the conversation should progress naturally, resembling a smooth dialogue (Babbie, 2007).

A qualitative interview can be described as a controlled and guided conversation. During this process, the interviewer draws attention to key issues raised by the respondent, while steering the direction of the discussion.

There are various types of interviews:

- Unstructured (free, open-ended) interviews: Here, the interviewer does not rely on a fixed set of questions but instead follows the respondent's lead.
- Semi-structured interviews: These have guidelines on which topics should be discussed, allowing flexibility.
- Structured (standardised) interviews: In this case, the interviewer follows a pre-prepared list of questions in a specific format and order, without deviation.

Interviews are typically recorded to allow for later transcription and analysis.

Semi-structured interviews combine elements of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. They are based on a set of pre-prepared questions, but the interviewer can alter the wording or order of the questions as necessary. This flexibility allows for a deeper exploration of specific topics (Moorhouse, 2000).

The sample used for the research is drawn from a small, defined population, making it appropriate for a qualitative approach that seeks to gather unique insights. The specific nature of the information being sought leads to the use of a semi-structured interview format, where respondents are asked the same questions in a consistent manner. These may be either closed questions (with predetermined answers) or open-ended questions (allowing for more detailed responses) (Narzędzia badawcze, n.d.).

Focused, free-form interviews are broader in scope, enabling the interviewer to pose new questions as they arise during the conversation. Conversely, questions that seem irrelevant to the interview's flow can be omitted. The language used by the researcher and the phrasing of the questions should always be appropriately tailored to the context (Babbie, 2004).

In a structured interview (with pre-set questions), the initial questions are typically designed to establish rapport before moving on to the core topics (such as education or work experience, in the case of a job interview). After the main discussion, any doubts the candidate might have are clarified, and their questions or comments are addressed. The interview concludes by explaining what will happen next (e.g., "we will contact you").

The essence of a structured interview lies in the fact that the interviewer knows exactly what topics to cover, what information to seek, and which specific questions to ask. This approach follows a set structure, hence the name.

One advantage of structured interviews is that they ensure the interviewer gathers the information they specifically aim to obtain. Additionally, since the structure is consistent, another person conducting the interview would likely receive similar responses, providing more objective data (i.e., not influenced by the interviewer's personal style). However, a drawback of this method is that important information could be missed, as the interview does not allow for deviations from the predetermined questions.

Structured interviews are commonly used in situations where the focus is not on understanding the individuality of the respondent, but rather on obtaining objective facts, such as in admissions or interrogation settings. However, this type of interview is not suitable for contexts such as psychotherapy.

Below are some types of interviews, categorised in different ways (Wikipedia contributors. Wywiad ustrukturyzowany, n.d.):

- By level of freedom in answering:
  - In-depth interviews: Respondents speak freely on a topic, sharing their thoughts, memories, and associations, while the researcher mainly listens, records, and takes notes.
  - Focused interviews: Responses are somewhat more restricted, as the researcher directs the respondent towards specific topics through their questions.
- By level of freedom in questioning:
  - Structured interviews: In these, the researcher uses a standardised questionnaire with pre-set response options and detailed instructions on how to conduct the interview.
  - Semi-structured interviews: A flexible approach, combining both pre-prepared questions and spontaneous follow-up questions.
  - Unstructured interviews: These take the form of an informal conversation, aimed at gaining deeper insight into the respondent's motivations.
- By interview location:
  - In-store interviews, street interviews, in-home interviews, etc.
- By the respondent's awareness of the study's purpose:
  - Public interviews, covert interviews, and informal overt interviews.
- By the mode of contact with the respondent:
  - Face-to-face interviews.
  - Telephone interviews.
- By the number of participants in a face-to-face interview:
  - Individual interviews.
  - Group interviews (focus groups).

3.4. Group interview

In research methodology, various terms are used to highlight different aspects of the method. The term "focused group interview" (Wikipedia contributors. Zogniskowany wywiad grupowy, n.d.), which originated in America in the 1940s, focuses on the role of the moderator, who directs the conversation by asking questions to multiple participants at once. The phrase 'focus group' suggests that the participants are concentrated on a particular subject. In contrast, the term 'group discussion', more common in Europe, emphasises the active involvement of the participants, their interaction, and the exchange of views.

One of the key benefits of discussion groups, discovered in the 1970s, is their dynamic nature and the interaction that occurs among participants. Group settings often stimulate creativity, encourage the expression of emotions, and allow for the exploration of thoughts that go beyond rational discourse, tapping into areas that may be unconscious or difficult to articulate. Projection techniques are commonly employed in this type of research to explore content that is hard to verbalise.

Regardless of the terminology used, the essence remains the same: it refers to a research activity in which a moderator facilitates a discussion among pre-selected participants, chosen according to specific criteria based on the study's objectives. Typically, these groups consist of 6-8 people, though prior to the late 1980s, larger groups of 8 to 12 were common. A series of interviews, usually numbering 3-6, is conducted with different groups of respondents, with each session lasting around two hours. This approach mirrors natural meetings and discussions in everyday settings (Obserwator, n.d.).

In a focus group interview (Obserwator, n.d.), the moderator guides the conversation, prompting interaction and steering the discussion. Recruitment for such studies often occurs in public spaces. It's important to note that the findings from a focus group cannot be generalised to the entire population.

The discussion is structured according to a pre-prepared script that outlines the objectives for each stage of the study (i.e., what information needs to be gathered during each phase). The script may, but does not always, include the exact wording of the questions to be posed to participants. The discussion is typically recorded, either through audio or video, and may also be observed in real-time by others in a separate room through a one-way mirror, video feed, or via the Internet (Dźwigoł, 2018).

When designing qualitative research, researchers must decide whether to use group discussions or traditional in-depth interviews (one-to-one conversations). Group discussions offer the advantage of collecting data relatively quickly, as well as the ability to observe participant dynamics and interactions. On the other hand, individual interviews offer a more intimate setting, can be scheduled at a time and place convenient for the respondent, and allow for more in-depth responses. One-to-one interviews are particularly useful for discussing sensitive topics (although sensitivity may vary depending on the context), or when researching individuals with busy schedules, such as business professionals or politicians. They are also ideal for studies involving experts with complex knowledge on specialised subjects (e.g., teachers, journalists, analysts).

As with other qualitative methods, focus group interviews are not designed to produce representative samples. They have several uses (Dźwigoł, 2018):
- Firstly, they serve as a supplementary tool to gather initial data that helps define research problems and develop instruments for quantitative studies conducted on representative samples of a population. These instruments may take the form of questionnaires or interview scripts for surveys.

- Secondly, focus groups can be employed after quantitative research to deepen the interpretation of the results.
- Thirdly, focus groups hold value in their own right, particularly in research where statistical representativeness is not required. They are useful in reconstructing socially established meanings and patterns of perception, judgement, and behaviour, such as in brand image studies, social customs, or stereotypes. They are also an effective method for assessing consumer reactions to new ideas, products, or trends, and for understanding the everyday language of the target demographic.

Different types of focus group discussions exist (Dźwigoł, 2018):

- Prolonged or extended groups: These sessions last longer than two hours, sometimes even for an entire day.
- Mini-groups (Mini FGI): These consist of 4-6 participants, providing each person more time to contribute to the discussion.
- Expert (Delphi) groups: These are held with specialists or experts in a particular field.
- Clash groups: Here, the group is divided into opposing sides, with conflicting views being debated (e.g., "pro-life vs. pro-choice" or "smokers vs. non-smokers"). Sometimes, two moderators are required to manage the group.
- Creative groups: These participants are tasked with generating creative ideas or solutions. Projection techniques and brainstorming methods are often used in these groups.

The focus group interview process consists of several stages:

1. Defining the purpose of the interview.
2. Organising the logistics: selecting a date, preparing the venue, recruiting participants, and choosing a moderator.
3. Developing the discussion guide (instructions).
4. Conducting the discussion.
5. Analysing the interview data and compiling a report.

During group interviews, several effects may occur:

- The synergy effect.
- The snowball effect.
- The stimulation effect.
- The safety effect.
- The spontaneity effect.

Depending on the purpose of the group interview, a variety of techniques and methods can be employed (Dźwigoł, 2018):

- To explore consumer emotions, opinions, and motivations:
  - Sorting.
  - Role-playing.
  - Projection.

   o Confrontation.

   o Deprivation questions.

  • For the development of new products:

   o Combining features.

   o Forced associations.

   o Morphological analysis (Zwicky method).

   o Brainstorming (Osborn technique).

   o Synectics (Gordon technique).

Group phenomena, such as groupthink or shifts in risk perception, can emerge during these interviews.

3.5. Situational interview (diagnosing behaviour in a specific situation) (Rymszewicz, 2022)

A situational interview closely resembles a behavioural interview, with the main distinction being that a situational interview evaluates a candidate's competence based on their previous work experiences. For this type of interview, specific 'case studies' are developed, representing real-life scenarios that may occur in the workplace. The candidate is asked to explain how they would handle a particular situation or what actions they would take in a given scenario.

In a situational interview, the questions focus on how the individual might respond to potential situations they could encounter on the job. This approach is often used to assess the candidate's knowledge and skills in a theoretical context, though it may not indicate whether they apply these competencies effectively in practice (Agencja Zatrudnienia Fundacji Fuga Mundi, n.d.).

4. Conclusion and Discussion

Qualitative research provides valuable insights into the underlying causes and mechanisms behind the emergence of various phenomena. Its primary aim is to understand and explain the motives, emotions, and often hidden beliefs that drive human behaviour and actions. Unlike quantitative approaches that focus on numerical data, qualitative methods delve into associations, offering a richer and more nuanced understanding of thought processes, judgements, and social consciousness. This approach allows researchers to reconstruct simplified, value-laden images of reality, as well as uncovering habits and motivations that may not be consciously acknowledged by individuals (Dźwigoł, 2018).

Moreover, qualitative methods excel in identifying the components of phenomena, understanding their interconnections, and revealing the structure and roles within these phenomena. They allow for an in-depth exploration of events, processes, and social dynamics

that are often too complex to capture through quantitative means. As noted by Dźwigoł (2020a), combining different research methods, such as triangulation, strengthens the credibility of research findings, as it enables a multi-faceted analysis of the subject under investigation.

An essential discussion point lies in the flexibility and depth that qualitative research offers, which is particularly beneficial in understanding human behaviours in specific contexts. For example, qualitative methods can explore consumer reactions to new products, social stereotypes, and corporate images, offering insights into societal values and beliefs (Dźwigoł, Trzeciak, 2023). However, while qualitative methods provide depth, their limitation is the lack of generalisability. Unlike quantitative studies, which can offer broad statistical conclusions, qualitative research findings are often specific to the context or population being studied.

Another critical discussion point is the role of qualitative research in supplementing quantitative studies. Often, qualitative methods are used to enhance the interpretation of quantitative results, adding context and understanding to the numerical data. As shown by Dźwigoł et al. (2021), qualitative methods help explain complex processes such as the implementation of green logistics or the dynamics within energy security strategies. However, the challenge remains in balancing both approaches, ensuring that the depth of qualitative insights does not overshadow the need for generalisable findings in broader research contexts (Kharazishvili et al., 2020).

Building on the findings of this study, future research should aim to explore the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods more comprehensively, particularly in areas such as environmental sustainability, digital transformation, and strategic management. For example, studies on the role of renewable energy, environmental regulations, and knowledge spillover have shown that combining methods provides a clearer understanding of complex issues (Dźwigoł et al., 2023a). Expanding research in this area could contribute to developing more robust models for green economic growth and digital transformation.

Furthermore, as digital technologies continue to evolve, qualitative research can offer unique insights into how these technologies affect human behaviour and societal structures. Future studies should investigate how digitalisation impacts sustainability, urbanisation, and innovation, with a particular focus on the emerging trends in green finance and smart grids (Kwilinski et al., 2023c). This research could help policymakers and businesses adapt to the challenges posed by technological advancements while promoting sustainable development goals.

In conclusion, qualitative research remains a crucial tool for understanding complex social phenomena, but its future lies in further integrating it with quantitative approaches. By combining these methods, researchers can produce more comprehensive and applicable results, contributing to the advancement of knowledge in both academic and practical fields.

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