

Relevance of Qualitative Research in Disability

Introduction

In order to believe anything around us, we have been asking 'Is there a scientific evidence for it'. The scientific evidence for natural phenomenon is based on observable and measurable variables. From nineteenth century onwards, the traditional approach to social and behavioral research has been quantitative research. In fact, social research is based on several assumptions and these assumptions are often referred to as positivist and interpretivist (Bryman, 2001).

Positivism is an approach to science which is based on universal law and neutrality (Thompson, 1995). The effort here is to obtain objective evidence in order to avoid bias and the researchers have very limited role in manipulating the findings. The focus in this approach has been on numerical measurements, statistical analysis and search for cause and effect. It is believed that the findings would be generalizable to all similar situations. However, Pepper (1959) has criticized positivist approach to research and stated that researchers formulate hypothesis- an expected outcome- and test it. Scientists refute or falsify hypothesis when a deviant case is found. The danger of this approach is that researchers treat perception of the social world as objective or absolute and ignore everyday subjective interpretations. Holeman (1993) points out that 'the almost sole recognition given to quantitative methods has trained students inadequately, established flawed standards of practice and research, and delayed the development of essential medical knowledge'.

In the interpretive or descriptive research, methodology focuses on the way in which human beings make sense of their surroundings and attach meaning to their perceived stimuli. The interpretive research derives its roots from philosophy and human sciences. In this approach, human beings are not perceived as living beings who exist in vacuum, but they are viewed as human beings who explore their world and give meaning to their observations. The researchers here believe that understanding of human experiences is as important as focusing on explanation, prediction and control. Thus, qualitative research embraces the view that as far as peoples' perceptions are concerned, there is no one single truth and different people in different places at different points of time might interpret things differently.

Quantitative Vs Qualitative Research

The belief that quantitative research based on sound methodology is superior, is not supported by available literature (Cresswell, 2002 & Rogers et al. 1997). Cresswell (2002) and Rogers et al (1997) argue that qualitative research approaches are better for

investigating subjective meanings, understanding attitudes and beliefs; Whereas quantitative methods have their strengths in identifying universalities and making statistical or probabilistic generalizations, or in determining the correlation between two measurable phenomena. Unfortunately, the general perception that quantitative research is a superior research approach has influenced the funding agencies and researchers working on qualitative research have been finding it difficult to secure funding.

Scope of Qualitative Research in Disability

Would over, there is very limited research in the field of disability (Wirz 1996) and whatever research is available; it has come from quantitative approach (Mitchell, 1999). In fact, the research from developing countries including India is almost negligible. The reasons of poor research in the field of disability from India could be that the field of disability has been operating on the charity model and has been looked after by NGOs and religious organizations with very little support from the government. The funding agencies never found disability as a priority area to invest and with limited role of medication, even the pharmaceutical industry, which has largely spearheaded research in India, showed reluctance to invest in disability research.

Till recently, the medical model has dominated the field of disability and most of the research has been based on this model and attempted to look at the impairment due to medical or neurological problems. In the medical model, the focus is on the treatment of medical illness for improving dysfunction. Thus, the focus of intervention has been the individual and outside world has not been given any relevance. Thus, majority of the studies in the past have focused on impairment and its correction. On the other hand, the social model of disability focuses on the world around and the disability is supposed to be caused due to beliefs, attitude and restrictions imposed by the society. The intervention here focuses on removal of barriers, both physical and psychological. According to the International Classification of Functioning and Disability (ICF WHO, 2001), the disability results from complex interactions between the health condition of the person, his personal factors and the external environment where this person lives and works. In fact ICF provides a framework where medical, social and rights models can be combined, which is also called universal model (Bickenbach et al, 1999) and it gives a comprehensive picture of disability

Accepting the ICF framework for disability as the most convincing and comprehensive, it becomes mandatory to

understand how a person with disability is perceived by the society, what are their attitudes and beliefs towards him and considering the complex nature of human behavior in different cultures, it will not be possible to measure these variables in quantifiable terms. Thus, qualitative research has much higher relevance in the field of disability than in any other field.

Limitation of Qualitative Research

Kierman (1999) stated that qualitative research has many limitations. In this type of research, the investigator and the funding agency are placed at an adversarial position as the research not only decides the research question but gathers information, analyze and interpret the observations. It has been argued that the research should be 'cooperative experiential inquiry' where subjects become co-researchers. Swain, et al (1998) argued that the research is entirely political in order to exploit the vulnerable people with disability. Barnes (1996) argues that research is either on the side of persons with disability or on the side of oppressors depending on the underlying motive to carry out that particular research. Since the qualitative research is on the experiences, beliefs and attitude of persons with disability, persons with intellectual disability/ communication difficulty will have serious limitation to express themselves and the findings will be flawed. Another major challenge to qualitative research is to develop an ethically sound protocol. Since the persons with intellectual disability will have serious limitation to understand intricacies in the research, the ethical clearance is either decided by the caregivers or they are excluded from the research. Indeed Tuffrey-Wijne et al. (2008) argue that it would be 'unethical to exclude people with more severe learning disabilities from studies that could provide insight into their experiences and help to shape better care in the future. In order to overcome these obstacles, the researchers must attempt to develop rapport with the subjects and attempt should be on 'engagement' rather than exclusion from the research. The researchers must learn to understand their language, both verbal and non-verbal. The local leaders and caregivers can assist the researchers to understand them better. To conclude, both quantitative and qualitative

research has its merits and demerits and the choice will depend upon the focus of research.

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