

Qualitative Methodologies: Which is the best approach for your Dissertation topic?

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Abstract: Research was conducted to assist in deciphering which of the three qualitative research methods are best fitting for a researcher seeking to perform a qualitative study for academic purposes. This study compared and contrasted the following qualitative research methods: case study, phenomenological, and grounded theory. Findings and the issues associated with sample selection, validity, and biases in such a study were analyzed and synthesized to determine which is best suited for a potential dissertation topic.

Keywords: Qualitative Methodology; Case Studies; Grounded Theory; Phenomenology; Dissertations; Higher Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research methods allow researchers to seek and establish the meaning of a phenomenon from the points of view of various participants (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research can be conducted through three forms of research methods: case studies, grounded theory, and phenomenology. These three approaches afford the researcher with the opportunity to examine participants' behaviors by engaging him or her with the activities under study. The three methods allow the researcher to focus on the participants' worldview perspectives by developing contextual understanding through data, which can be visual (images), spoken (recorded or live), or in written form (documents). To develop a better understanding of the three methods, this paper will compare and contrast the above noted research methods, integrate findings, which help determine the right study for a potential dissertation topic, and examine potential issues associated with the size of the sample, validity, and bias.

2. CASE STUDIES

Although the induction of case studies is not clearly stated in research, the approach has existed for quite some time. Case studies are used in various disciplines; for example, psychology, education, social sciences, and medical science to name a few. Case studies are also known as case histories, which are considered a methodology that combines individual and (sometimes) group interviews with record analysis and observation (Cooper & Schindler, 2011). Case studies are often used to understand events and their effects and processes by emphasizing on contextual analysis of the event(s) or conditions, and their interrelations when there is a need to obtain a comprehensive appreciation of a concern or event of interest in its natural every day setting (Crowe, Creswell, Robertson, Huby, Avery, and Sheikh (2011). Because the approach used in case studies is to examine situations as they occur; case studies are typically socially constructed and structured between the researcher, and the respondent (participant) to provide a deep understanding of a complex situation.

Case studies are typically used to focus on society and culture within a group, and for extensive research evaluation. Hence, in qualitative research, the case study approach is afforded the opportunity to determine the "how" and "why" through the use of a bounded systems. The bounded system approach allows the researcher to study an individual, a group of individuals, an organization, or multiple organizations with the added ability to choose the problem to be analyzed and the flexibility to ask problem specific questions when inquiring, and trying to understand a given phenomenon (Swanson & Holton, 2005). In addition, Swanson and Holton (2005) ascertain that case study research also exhibit embedded, multivariate, multi-method, multidisciplinary, and multisite characteristics.

Furthermore, such characteristics allow case study researchers the ability to use either qualitative or quantitative evidence because there is no limit to the use of one particular form of data collection method in a case study. Yin (1994) posits that case studies represent a research strategy. Hence, as a research strategy, the distinguishing characteristic of the case study is that it attempts to examine: (a) a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context, especially when (b) the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clear (Yin, 1994, p.59).

Research on case study reflects a consensus among various definitions and descriptions of the intent of case studies. Hence, most researchers alike Crowe et al., (2011), believe that the purpose of a case study is to create a comprehensive understanding of the complicated issue (phenomena) while focusing on key guidelines that help the researcher yield an appreciation of the phenomena whether it be a program, an event, a place, a person, or an organization (Bernard & Ryan, 2010).

3. GROUNDED THEORY

Grounded theory was introduced by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967, through their book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* the researcher's defined grounded theory as a specific methodology, which promotes detailed data collecting to produce a multivariate abstract theory. Through grounded theory a researcher develops a general strategy of analysis supported by the theoretical opinions of its participants (Creswell, 2009). Generally, when researchers use grounded theory to conduct studies he or she is afforded with the opportunity to use an Individual Depth Interview (IDI) technique. IDI is a technique in which analysis of the data takes place simultaneously with its collection, the purpose of this technique is to develop a general concept or theory that allows in-depth analysis of data (Cooper & Schindler, 2011).

In grounded theory, the development of new theory is allowed and encouraged to grow through the appropriate data collection channels. New theory growth is fortified through the use of numerous stages of data collection that allows modification, and connection of sets of information (Swanson & Holton, 2005). Linking of information (the sets) allows the researcher to analyze and compare groups of data, and principles in a repetitive manner with the intention of building theory from the data collected.

In addition, to build theory data is analyzed through coding, which is used to interpret data. Furthermore, grounded theory applies two types of coding methods to interpret data; the first method is an open coding process, which breaks down the data into substantive codes. Interviews, notes, and other transcribed data taken by the researcher is used to create these codes, the codes are then compared. The second process is a selective coding process, which helps yield the results of all categories sampled by the researcher. These categories are incorporated into an interrelated configuration by the evolving theoretical code (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Hernandez (2009) advises that numerous theoretical codes may appear but only one is chosen as the theoretical code for a study. Through the coding process researchers can recognize and associate ideas from the data obtained, which addresses questions that guide the researcher to a theory. Additionally, theoretical coding can occur at any time throughout a given study. Hunter, Murphy, Grealish, Casey, and Keady (2011) advise that grounded theory research through the use of coding produces an ongoing conceptual theory through the development of new concepts and new theories obtained from the data itself (Creswell, 2007).

4. PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology was introduced by Franz Brentano (1838–1917) a German philosopher and psychologist who employed the phrase “descriptive psychology or descriptive phenomenology,” in his research (Rollinger, 1999, p. 31). Through his approach and studies, Brentano established the foundation of phenomenology. Phenomenology has since secured a pronounced position in modern philosophy (Dowling, 2007). However, because of phenomenology's scientific merit Edmund Husserl was inspired to undertake and develop a more defined perception of phenomenology.

Husserl (1970) argued that the methods used in studying physical phenomena were inappropriate for the study of human thought and action (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Hence, Husserl's intention was to analysis things as they appear to arrive at an understanding of human “lived” experience. In retrospect, phenomenology is described as the process of comprehending how things are perceived and lived (experienced) by individuals. Moustakas (1994) suggests that when a

researcher examines the "lived" experiences of participants; small groups are advisable. Smaller groups of subjects (10-20 participants) allow researchers to probe deeper and retrieve extensive details of experiences lived. Smaller groups also allow the researcher to establish rapport and develop not only patterns of content and meaning but also common themes. Meanwhile, Creswell (2009) asserts that phenomenological research attracts and encourages the genuine essence of human experience as it is experienced by the individual. Through phenomenology the researcher can identify the key elements that took place, such as emotions, thoughts, and feelings. The concept is to allow individuals to present how they perceive, describe, feel, judge, remember, understand, and refer to an experience (Patton, 2002).

The key elements noted above can be gathered from participants by use of either of two phenomenological approaches. The two approaches are hermeneutic phenomenology and empirical phenomenological. Hermeneutic Phenomenology examines the meaning of narratives by interpreting the content; the narrative is used as a vehicle for understanding the cultural and historical context in which stories are told (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Meanwhile, empirical phenomenological intends to produce accurate descriptions of human experience (Giorgio, Fischer, & von Eckartsberg, 1971). Both approaches include: (a) description, (b) reduction, (c) essences and intentionality, and (d) focus on the phenomenon (e.g., studying in subjects the object of their lived experience) (Ehrlich, 2005).

5. CASE STUDY, GROUNDED THEORY, AND PHENOMENOLOGY COMPARISON

There are particular differences among case study, grounded theory, and phenomenology. These differences are regularly exposed in their individual research purpose structures and how each methodology approaches their intended purpose. McCaslin and Scott (2003), suggest that researchers equipped with detailed questions on prominent issues are afforded the ability to use anyone of the approaches in an efficient and detailed manner. The use of case studies generates the understanding of how and why issues take place. Whereas, grounded theory stresses on creating a logical theory that describes and explains a phenomenon through the joining of groups (categories) of data through use of continual comparison, and development of a context-specific theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Unlike the phenomenological approach which seeks to describe one or more individual experiences of a phenomenon by understanding the significance of the original description of the experience and through assessment of the perspective of the situation (Moustakas, 1994). Each approach allows the researcher ample accessibility to systematically examine relevant phenomena concerns.

6. ASSUMPTIONS

The assumptions among case studies, grounded theory, and phenomenology are demonstrated through what each approach is trying to accomplish, and how each approach perceives the world. The three approaches use unique theoretical perspectives. With regard to the assumptions and case studies, case studies aim is to increase the researcher's understanding of a situation and find meaning for those involved. In case studies, the main purpose of the approach is to determine the "how" and "why" a situation takes place (Swanson & Holton, 2005). Additionally, the "how" and "why," affords the researcher with valuable insight for problem solving, evaluation, and strategizing of a situation.

Grounded theory holds two key assumptions: continuous comparison and theoretical sampling, which allow researchers to compare data continuously through the use of categories, codes, or coding's (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Comparison allows the researcher to benchmark varying cases (data) in search of a common result. Through comparison and theoretical sampling a researcher can generate, or discover, a theory. Furthermore, theoretical sampling allows a researcher to examine emerging cases throughout the research process; hence, data collection and analysis is conducted until theoretical saturation is met and grounded theory can be further extended.

Last with regard to the assumptions and phenomenology, this approach aims to depict the lived experiences of individuals through the use of one core assumption; bracketing. According to Husserl (1970), phenomenological research seeks essentially to describe rather than explain, and does so by starting from a perspective free from preconceptions. Hence, the use of bracketing disengages a researcher from incorporating predetermined influences and biases. Through bracketing a researcher can gain insight into the motivations and actions of his or her participants, and cut through any irrelevant assumptions.

7. COMPARISON OF PROCESSES

Data Collection Methods

The data collection methods for case studies, grounded theory, and phenomenology slightly vary. In case studies the data collection method is dependent on the nature of the research questions and overall research design. Much of the data in case studies is contingent on informed information provided through historical documents, indirect and direct observation, interviews, and tangible objects (Yin, 2003). In addition, case studies rely heavily on key constructs: questionnaires, frequent counts of observed phenomena, and surveys conducted on one or multiple cases for future comparison (Swanson & Holton, 2005).

In contrast, data collection methods for grounded theory are contingent of interviews with more than 25 individuals and through the use of observations, which are commonly used. Conversely, grounded theory is developed and validated through routine data collection measures. According to Strauss and Corbin (2008), in grounded theory; researchers do not begin with a theory, the research initiates when an area of study is allowed to materialize into a theory.

While, in comparison to how data collection takes place through case studies and grounded theory; the phenomenological data collection approach is more direct as it affords the researcher with face-to-face interview interactions or indirect contact with respondents through the use of online cyber-technology, or telephone interviews (Salmons, 2010). The researcher generally interviews 10 or more participants to attain their lived experiences on a particular phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) suggests that a small group setting provides a phenomenological study with effective and lengthy responses, which allows the researcher to develop patterns of meaning. Through phenomenology the researcher and participant experience more interaction time.

Furthermore, through phenomenology; interaction time affords the researcher with the ability to apply *epoche* and bracketing techniques throughout data collection. Whereas, with case studies and grounded theory; *epoche* and bracketing are not typically used. In a phenomenological study *epoche* allows the researcher to demonstrate empathy and connection during the interview process (Patton, 1990). Bracketing assists the researcher to set aside and suspend any judgment or bias during the interview process. Additionally, an important fact to take note of is Gearing's (2004) belief that phenomenologists who accept bracketing, see bracketing as an essential process that can benefit research through sole unbiased experiences.

Data Analysis Methods

The data analysis methods for case studies, grounded theory, and phenomenology vary somewhat as well. Although in case study data analysis, the researcher is slightly restricted in the approaches he or she can use to analysis data. Data analysis is dependent on the theory being used in the case study. Hence, analysis is guided by the stories that emerge from the data collected and grows throughout the case study. Oftentimes, case study analysis is overwhelming because its "purpose is to identify, sort through, and pattern relationships, dynamics, or other phenomena of interest in a bounded system" (Swanson & Holton, 2005, p. 341). This task is often tiresome and time consuming.

Conversely, grounded theory is more involved and applies coding when analyzing data. Coding assists in: (a) minimizing preconceived ideas about the research problem and the data, (b) promoting immediate data analysis, (c) allowing open access to varied explanations of the data, and (d) focusing the data analysis to construct middle range theories (Charmaz, 2008). Through the use of coding in grounded theory there is a constant "dialogue" that takes place among data, theory, and analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Therefore, the purpose of coding is to assist in developing a theory from the data being analyzed.

In contrast, the researcher using a phenomenological method of study proceeds to analyze his or her data by reflectively examining the collected descriptions of the lived experiences and synthesizing the characteristics into themes, and "reading between the lines" to go beyond explicit meanings (Giorgi, 1983). By categorizing the themes the researcher can analyze the perceptions and experiences of the studied subjects (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

8. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHOD BEST SUITED FOR A POTENTIAL DISSERTATION

Qualitative research is intended to convey to the researcher how (process) and why (meaning) things happen. Upon thoroughly evaluating the process and structure of three prominent methods: case studies, grounded theory, and phenomenology. The researcher believes that the best suited research method to conduct a study on the impact of micromanagement on workers is through a phenomenological study.

Potential Dissertation Problem

The problem the researcher intends to address is the impact of micromanagement on employees. Many individuals do not know how to deal with the pressures they feel when they are scrutinized, and even belittled by micromanagers. Employees often complain of feeling self-conscious, distressed, and non-productive when under the watchful eye of a micromanager. Hence, employees begin to feel that nothing they do is ever good enough; they no longer have the option to take initiative; they have little or no input for how to achieve organizational goals (Bobinski, 2009), and they feel as though they are not good enough as human beings and as employees.

Potential Dissertation Objective

The objective of this potential dissertation topic is to explore the impact of micromanagement on employees. Because employees complain of experiencing tension, fear, and stress while at work because of overly controlling managers (micromanagers). According to Moustakas (1994), a phenomenological approach would allow participants to describe thoroughly their experiences with the phenomena (micromanagement). Additionally, through a phenomenological approach participants will be able to define what micromanagement means to them, to what degree he or she has experienced the phenomena, what his or her reactions were and are during and after the experience, and what emotions were experienced. This data will be addressed and analyzed to determine a consensus of the phenomenon's meaning, characteristics, and described essence of the phenomena as lived by those participating in the potential research.

Potential dissertation method overview

The potential dissertation topic; micromanagement would be best analyzed through a qualitative phenomenological approach. This researcher intends to use a phenomenological approach to investigate the impact that micromanagement has on employees. Through the use of a phenomenological approach the researcher can provide a description of what happened to the participants; this method of research attempts to measure behavior, knowledge, opinions, and attitudes of its participants (Cooper & Schindler, 2011). Concurrently, micromanagement is experienced differently by each individual; hence, Seamon (2000) posits that phenomenology is an interpretation of human experience, which seeks to explore and describe both the similarities and differences experienced in various situations, occasions, and incidents associated with micromanagement "as they spontaneously occur in the course of daily life" (von Eckartsberg, 1998, p. 3). Phenomenology favorably can investigate, define, and assess the meaning of different lived experiences by expressing how participants "perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others" (Patton, 2002, p. 104).

Potential dissertation method use rationale

The methodology and approach selected can be justified; using a phenomenological approach ensures that the beliefs of the phenomenon (micromanagement), present human actions and experience by conveying thoughts, feelings, leads, values, and assumptions of unwarranted behaviors. The study can yield valuable explanations of individual lived experiences. Furthermore, this type of approach supports the researchers need to include the participants' voices in the study while providing a framework that encourages multiple answers and flexible methods (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Additionally, it is appropriate to say that for the purpose of this study a phenomenological approach will provide diverse recollection of situations, emotions, and an ample overview of the impact that micromanagement has on its participants. According to Mishna (2004) a study using interviews needs a qualitative methodology to capture context, personal interpretation, and experience. With such approach and by use of direct and adequate worded interview questions; the key research questions will be properly addressed allowing insight into little-known phenomena.

9. POTENTIAL DISSERTATION SAMPLE SELECTION, VALIDITY, AND BIAS ISSUES

Sample Selection

There are two major concerns and issues that the researcher conducting this potential study must consider as they relate to sample selection. First, when conducting the sample selection for the potential dissertation topic of micromanagement the researcher must make sure that the individuals selected for this potential study have direct experience with the study phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Oftentimes, individuals interested in participating in a study may not necessarily be strongly engaged with the topic, so it is crucial that the researcher provide a detailed description of the topic; its definition and description. Furthermore, Copper and Schindler (2011) suggest that by administering a purposive sampling method researcher to can choose participants randomly for their unique experiences and perceptions on the phenomena being studied. Through purposive sampling the researcher can secure a favorable and authentic outcome.

Second, the researcher must consider that there may be some difficulty in obtaining the desired target audience for this potential topic. Currently, the researcher is aiming to recruit 10 manager and 10 non-managers; an equal amount of men and women currently employed in any industry that employs a manager- non-manager hierarchy. This may be an issue, which may affect time constraints; hence, the researcher's plan is to recruit individuals (participants) from the greater Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and Riverside Counties, California, area because the likelihood of obtaining and recruiting this type of sample may be more favorable in a broader geographic search. Additionally, for the sake of this potential dissertation study the industry is not of considerable importance, as the researcher's intention is to use a heterogeneous typology, which encompasses different experiences of the phenomena of interest through male and female perspectives (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

Validity

According to Cooper and Schindler (2005) validity and bias are dependent on one important consideration: accuracy. A crucial issue that may affect validity in this potential study on micromanagement may be related to the accuracy of the findings as understood and interpreted by the researcher (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Creswell (2007) suggests that proper and efficient verification of data recorded, noted thorough journaling, and transcriptions provide thoroughness in making meaning out of lived experiences. This can be conducted by way of credibility verification, which would help to establish if the results of the study are trustworthy and authentic from a participant's standpoint (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Credibility verification affords the participants with the opportunity to review all interview (communication) transcripts; the verification is used as an accurate and valid description method. Credibility verification also allows the participants to "confirm or alter the research data to correspond to her or his perception of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 110). By applying such a verification process the researcher can examine the soundness of the phenomenological research process while safeguarding accuracy and authenticity.

Bias

With regard to bias, a crucial issue that may arise is unintentional bias from the researcher conducting the research/study. If the researcher has experienced the phenomena firsthand; he or she may have developed his or her own perception of what the effects of micromanagement should or could be. This could affect the research altogether. To yield a robust and creditable examination the researcher needs to set aside all biases and assumptions (and personal experiences) to focus entirely on the participants' experiences (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004).

The researcher intends to approach the research with a fresh outlook; by applying what phenomenological researchers call *epoche* and bracketing. *Epoche* will allow the researcher to approach the analysis with a clear mind and set biases aside so that he or she can view the study participants' views without judgments. By applying *epoche*, the researcher can also continually examine his or her own perceptions and be cognizant that the information acquired are solely the perceptions, options, and lived experiences of others (Rubin & Rubin, 1994), and that his or her responsibility is solely to interpret such in an honest and nonbiased manner.

The bracketing method allows the researcher to suspend his or her beliefs (judgments) completely. Tufford and Newman (2010) suggest that using bracketing can mitigate adverse effects of the research endeavor as it facilitates the researcher to reach a deeper level of reflection across all stages of his or her research. This permits the researcher to gather and examine

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various perspectives of the phenomenon (the impact of micromanagement). By applying either of the methods the researcher can enter into the phenomenological reduction right away (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2009). Consequently, either method allows the researcher to use “self” as a starting point but relies mainly on others for data, and allows the researcher to follow a strict method of data collection and data analysis, which is essential in obtaining thorough, reliable, and unbiased information from participants (Ehrich, 2005).

10. CONCLUSION

In summary, qualitative research methods allow researchers to find and determine the meaning of a phenomenon. Through case studies researchers are afforded the ability to capture in-depth analysis of single or multiple cases. Grounded theory facilitates researchers the ability to create theory through data retrieved from the field, and phenomenology provides researchers the essence behind a lived experience. Whether a researcher is looking to make a comparison among cases, develop findings based on theory, or understand human behavior, and experience when developing an overall awareness of a given situation, qualitative research methods offer a systematic examination of relevant concerns. Hence, regardless of which qualitative research method a researcher deems fit for his or her study, the use of qualitative methodology will yield rich descriptions of context, behavior, and experience.

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