EDITORIAL FOREWORD

Qualitative research as a methodological choice

We process a number of manuscripts for consideration to publish in our journal. A vast majority of these are from the areas of crop science, food science, soil science, livestock production and allied fields that have predominantly chosen a quantitative methodological approach using experiments as the research strategy. A minority of manuscripts that fall into the areas of agribusiness, agricultural economics and extension have used the survey strategy largely using quantitative methods. There is a lack of research utilizing other methods such as qualitative approach, or mixed methods. This paper emphases on qualitative research. The basic aim of this paper is to briefly explain what qualitative research is, and to outline the important components of qualitative research with the view to motivate social researchers to embark on qualitative research.

The nature of a qualitative inquiry

The term qualitative research can be defined in many ways. Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding, based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social problem. The researcher builds a complex and a holistic picture of the research concept, analyses words, reports comprehensive views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative research can also be defined as an inquiry of a multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive yet naturalistic approach to its subject (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, qualitative research is carried-out with subjects or phenomena in their natural settings to interpret them in terms of how society take or understand them. Strauss and Corbin (1990) state that qualitative research findings are not arrived at by means of statistical or quantification procedures.

Basis for the use of qualitative methodology

Several considerations need to be taken into account before embarking on qualitative research. Qualitative methodology can be used to better understand any (social) phenomena that are not already known at all (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) or partially known. Therefore, they can also be used to provide new insights on partially known phenomena. Quantitative research is done on variables that are quantifiable for the purpose of analysis. Thus, qualitative research is also appropriate to firstly the variables that may later be subjected to a quantitative analysis. They can be used to prove or refute hypotheses. Moreover, qualitative research is ideal when in-depth information is needed to explain a phenomenon that may be difficult to be elucidated using quantitative research. Quantitative methodology is deemed inadequate to describe or interpret some social and behavioural phenomena. Qualitative methodology is also ideal in a behavioural study which has a small sample which is not appropriate for a quantitative inquiry.

Sampling strategies in qualitative research

In quantitative research, the most common sampling strategy is probability sampling where elements are randomly selected from a population to form the sample. The data from a sample are supposed to reflect the whole population (Yin, 2003). Therefore, conclusions drawn from such a sample can be generalized to a population. Qualitative research is ideal to analyse entities (such

as individuals, organizations, partnerships, communities, relationships, decisions, projects etc.) in their entirety, rather than variables. Therefore, the above sampling logic is difficult to be applied to qualitative research. In qualitative research, purposive sampling is the dominant sampling strategy. Purposeful sampling in a qualitative study chooses subjects that can provide rich and detailed data for a comprehensive analysis. Therefore, findings of qualitative studies are generalizable to theory, but not to populations (Yin, 2013). Types of purposeful sampling would include case sampling and snowball or chain sampling among other types (Patton, 1990; Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). Yin (2003) explains that taking more than one entity (known as cases in qualitative research) to analyse in comparison (known as the replication logic) is an ideal method used in qualitative research. However, the researcher should pay attention to maintain a sufficient breadth (select the cases that can supply rich data) in sampling.

Data collection techniques

Data are the basic foundation of research. There exists a key difference between quantitative and qualitative data; Quantitative data tends to be numerical and can be categorized, ranked and measured, whereas qualitative data is descriptive and can be used to explain a context. The qualitative data collection techniques include (structured or unstructured) one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions, (field) observations (including physical artefacts) and secondary data (including historical records). A well-prepared data collection protocol will always serve handy when maintaining the quality of the data collection process. Another important concern in qualitative research is the human subjectivity which the researcher should take great care to avoid.

Analysis of qualitative data

Qualitative data analysis aims to make sense of the mostly non-numeric forms of data available in abundance that ensued during an investigation. This analysis involves the reflection of data per se as well as an integrated package that is able to explain the research subject holistically. Qualitative data analysis involves the transcription, preparation, organization and summarization of data; examination, review and exploration of data; identification, combination and interpretation of patterns and themes in textual data and determination of how these patterns and themes help to answer the relevant research questions; and presentation of patterns and themes in a cohesive manner. Qualitative data analysis can be divided into categories viz. content analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, framework analysis and grounded theory.

The quality of qualitative research and the role of the researcher as a quality controller

The quality of qualitative research and their outputs is always an important concern. More than a theoretical validation, qualitative research is expected to have a pragmatic validation in a sense that qualitative research output is judged in terms of its relevance and usefulness. Their outputs should be coherent and be in accordance with the natural setting in which the inquiry was carried-out. Therefore, the qualitative research design should allow an adequate triangulation to produce credible and dependable results as these two elements are analogous to quantitative elements of validity and reliability.

In a qualitative inquiry, the quality of data collection plays a more important role than the method of data collection. Therefore, the researcher which is the instrument of data collection plays a critical role in qualitative research. Qualitative studies lack standardized procedures, unlike in quantitative

studies - Yin (2003). The data collection protocols should be clearly defined and they should be designed to probe into the phenomena under investigation because the quality of data collected has important implications on the research findings. Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) discuss about the theoretical sensitivity of the researcher which can be moulded by the literature and his personal and professional experience determines his personal quality, ability to give meaning, and the capacity of understanding. Therefore, it is important for a qualitative researcher to enhance his knowledge on research designing and the necessary skills because the credibility of a qualitative study depends heavily on the researcher's ability to be sensitive to the data and to make prudent decisions in the field.

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Professor H.S.R. Rosairo
Editor-In Chief

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Professor in Agribusiness Management
Department of Agribusiness Management
Faculty of Agricultural Sciences
Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka
Belihuloya, Sri Lanka.

rosairo@agri.sab.ac.lk