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ON THE USE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY IN THE MILITARY ORGANIZATION

Ștefania BUMBUC

"Nicolae Bălcescu" Land Forces Academy, Sibiu, Romania
stefanabumbuc@gmail.com

Abstract: *The paper identifies and analyse some features of qualitative social studies that, in the context of the military organization, could create difficulties in data collection process and could have a negative impact on the validity and reliability of the results. There are presented the main aspects of qualitative research and methodology, and highlighted how the main characteristics of the military organization could influence the conduct of this type of scientific research.*

Keywords: qualitative research, data collection, data interpretation, military organization

1. Introduction

In the social sciences, it is common for authors to specify at the end of empirical studies the limitations of the approach and the fact that some further studies are needed for a deeper understanding of the subject. This is more the case with scientific research that has used quantitative methods than for those that used qualitative methods. The limitations of the methods make it difficult to draw conclusions with a high degree of generality and make it necessary to complete the investigations with additional data. Therefore, qualitative researches are taking place to clarify some of the psychological or sociological aspects already found or to identify new ones.

The importance of the qualitative methods in the scientific research is supported by Mucchielli as following: „the human behaviour can be understood and explained only in relation with the meaning that people give to their things and actions" [1]. The researcher's attention is focused on the depths of human behaviour (perception, thoughts, motivation, emotion, feelings, etc.), which causes people to act in certain specific ways. These internal processes cannot be revealed by quantitative methods. The qualitative research is any empirical study in the social field which has the following characteristics [2]: the research is generally carried out from a comprehensive perspective; the subject is approached in an open and comprehensive way; the data collected do not require on-site quantification, but recording; it gives the possibility of an analysis of words by other words, without numerical quantification; the conclusion is a narrative text, a story or a theory, not a demonstration.

2. The aim

The paper aims to identify and analyse some features of qualitative social studies that, applied in the context of the military organization, could create some difficulties in data collection and could have a negative impact on the validity and reliability of the results. We will first briefly present the

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main aspects of qualitative research, and then we will highlight how the characteristics of the military organization influence the conduct of this type of scientific research.

3. Qualitative methods as ways of enriching and deepening the meaning of data

Although there are concerns related to the objectivity of data collection [3] and also of the scientific rigor of its processing [4],[5],[6], more and more scholars agree that the qualitative methods of research provide valuable information about the profound aspects of the psycho-social mechanisms of human life. Using data gathered from interviews, focus groups, observations, case studies or other qualitative methods, researchers can figure out the main idea about: the personal point of view of the investigated persons regarding the events in various fields; the way people who belong to a certain group think; how they internalize different life experiences; the way they act towards another person, towards a product, an event, an experience; life stories or how people end up in a certain life situation etc. [7]

For a long time, the qualitative research was considered as a „stepsister" of the scientific research and it was not recognized as reliable. The scientific value of qualitative research in the social field is still disputed and the application of the criteria of positivism of a qualitative research would not lead to the consideration of the results as "scientific results". In fact, in the science communities, the qualitative methodology has its own evaluation criteria and if they are met, the results are "scientific". Regarding the qualitative methodology, Florentina Scârneci stated that "the qualitative criteria may be poor, but it is better and more honest to acknowledge the limitations of the research (showing only what you could get), instead of hiding the flaws (claiming that you obtained something it was not even touched)" [8]. If qualitative research is evaluated on the basis of criteria that reflect the research objectives, then the results can be validated. The following is a comparative inventory of certain characteristics of the two types of scientific research methods.

Table 1 Characteristics of quantitative and qualitative research (adaptation after Iluţ [9], Paillé & Mucchielli [10])

Criteria	Quantitative research	Qualitative research
Epistemological orientation	Positivist, explicative, nomothetic	Phenomenological, hermeneutic, comprehensive, idiographic
The level of reality	Macro-social, global, formal	Micro-social, contextual, real, natural
Key words	Control and quantity	Comprehension and depth
The explanation of reality	From the researcher's point of view: *ethic* approach – coming from the general view to the particular knowledge	From the subject's point of view: *emic* approach – starting from the investigation of singularity to principles and generalization
The reflection of reality	Static and coming from outside, the researcher stands aside, diminishes the interaction with the subjects	Dynamic and coming from inside, the researcher interacts directly with individuals or groups of subjects
Centre of interest (what kind of data are sought)	It is known from the beginning, quite accurately, what data will be significant	It is assumed that everything and anything can be significant

Criteria	Quantitative research	Qualitative research
The researcher-subjects relationship	Distance, the researcher is positioned "outside"	Close, the researcher is positioned "inside"
Relationship with theory	Verification of the existing theory. All the information that will be collected is known in advance.	The emergence of the theory. The continuous addition of variables and ideas to the outlined theoretical model is expected.
The logic of the approach	Verification	Discovery, emergence
The diagnose	Researchers diagnose the population bringing their own categories	The people diagnose themselves
The selection of the subjects	Mostly statistical sampling, representativeness	Entire population, theoretical sampling, focused (fewer) subjects
Methods and techniques of data collection	Controlled experiment, standardized questionnaire, structured observation, structured interview	Observation of participants, case studies, individual interviews, group interviews, study of documents, texts, images or video recordings, analysis of discourse, researcher's notes and impressions
Data organization and processing	Pre-codification and post-codification. Processing numbers, using statistic software	Theoretical codification. Analyzing words/phrases (who, how come, why, when?)
The nature of the acquired data	Robust, valid, high fidelity	Complex, numerous, deep
The appearance of the research report	Numbers, formulas, tables, graphs, comments, specialized language	Natural language, even metaphorical, few statistical data and graphics

David Silverman [11] points out that qualitative researchers want to understand human behaviour rather than describe it, trying to see the world from the perspective of subjects. Especially when it is necessary to approach a totally new aspect of the social reality, the qualitative research is the best choice. Dependability of the results and the possibility (or the lack of possibility) to generalize them are still being disputed. Strauss and Corbin explain the concept of dependability thus: „starting from the same theoretical perspective with one researcher, following the same rules for collecting data, using the same process, another researcher should come to the same or similar theoretical explanation" [12]. They consider that in qualitative research it is sufficient to have consistency in terms of theory and final results, and it is not necessary to obtain exactly the same observations or results. With this in mind, researchers can ensure generalization based on a theoretical model, and not related to the population or situations studied. More than that, Krueger and Casey [13] emphasize the importance and explanatory power of details, rather than generalization.
We will further limit the context of social studies to the military organization, in order to highlight some of the challenges facing researchers, both in terms of data collection and in terms of establishing the validity and significance of them.

4. Peculiarities of conducting qualitative research in the military organization

Michael Quin Patton [14] made a wonderful paraphrase of the famous urge of innovators ("think outside the box!"), meant to describe the principles of qualitative researches: "Study the box! Observe it. Inside. Outside. From inside to outside and from outside to inside. Where is it? How did it get there? What's around it? Who say it's a box? What do they mean? Why does it matter? Or doesn't it? What is not a box? Ask the box questions. Question others about the box. What is the perspective from inside? From outside? Study diagrams of the box. Find documents related to the box. What does thinking have to do with the box anyway? Understand this box".

This metaphor of the box largely fits the military organization, seen as a closed environment, which cannot be fully understood unless external perception and information are corroborated with data collected from within. "More than other organizations, the military is a world on its own, an island within society-at-large on which its inhabitants work and live together" [15]. Research into the military social environment is very important for society, because this organization, by its nature, use the organized violence (to maintain national security), keeps people for a long time in situations of risk, physical and psychological deprivation, and even endangers their lives. The scientific investigation of the psychosocial phenomena that take place inside is necessary and can be of great interest, especially since the army is financed from public funds and has missions of maximum importance for the very existence of society.

However, researchers have a big problem collecting data within the military organization, whereas it operates mostly in an atmosphere of secrecy, and with a lot of rules and regulations. There is a strict control over the information transmitted and the aim is to manage a good public image. The army closely monitors the timing of approval of a social research and, occasionally, when the results of a study are not flattering, delays or even stops the public reporting of results [16].

In conducting research, certain difficult-to-manage problems also arise in connection with the characteristics of the researcher, namely: whether he is a man or a woman, whether he/she is a scholar, whether or not he/she was part of the army [17]. The attitude of the military subjects is influenced by these aspects that trigger their prejudices and biases, distorting the answers and attitudes, and implicitly reducing the validity of the collected data.

The reflection of researcher upon the distortion sources is extremely important. Even if more people report the same facts, it is possible to not have the accurate information about what actually think or what really happened. Social sciences have proven over time that the communities can build their „own truth" as a result of social influence and organizational culture.

It is possible that individuals not to be „willing to share" and not to be open to voice their opinion and ideas. The researcher does not have to be content with that, should persist and look further for more relevant data. It may also depend on the person's position in the military hierarchy, as the military career system shapes their viewed to the world and life. The success of any methods (observation, interview, focus group etc.) depends on how the researcher chooses the words and creates a favourable environment to observe and interview the subjects (individual or in group), making them feel comfortable and open to speak. It was found that the military is talking more openly and honestly with the veterans, who are now in the role of investigators [18]. A good researcher has to position himself alternatively as the „good cop" and the „bad cop" in order to provoke ideas, opinions, feelings, being known that a conversation when everybody agrees will not bring something new. However, it is obvious that the need to maintain military

secrecy and to protect oneself and the group will always limit the information that a military person will reveal to a researcher.

At this point, more methods and techniques should be added to obtain more data, the triangulation being recommended. This approach not only helps to gather more information, but is also a good tool for validating data, by comparing information obtained from various sources, by different researchers, using different techniques. Uwe Flick explains the triangulation as „a combination of different methods, study groups, time frames, procedures, and theoretical perspectives in the study of a certain case" [19]. There are several types of triangulation to collect better data: *triangulation of methods* (using different methods for the same purpose); *triangulation of data* (using different data sources - in time, space or level); *triangulation of investigators* (the participation of more researchers); *triangulation of theories* („the analysis of data is starting from different theories and their combination will force the researcher to consider more than one view of interpretation" [20]).

In social field it is not possible to make a qualitative research without the impact of the reflective attitude of the researcher [21], therefore the role of the researcher remains critical.

5. Conclusion

Sources of data distortion are coming from two sides: from the subjects who participate in the study (their profession, their experience, their role in the group, their interest to participate, the social, professional and cultural environment) and from the researcher (their research experience, the theoretical perspective, and even some personal characteristics). Identifying the bias in the studies, avoiding the distortions if it's possible, explaining them when presenting the results in the final report give more credibility to the research and offer necessary conditions to a proper interpretation of data.

Career practices and organizational culture shape the opinions, attitudes and expertise of the subjects and the way in which there are revealed in the military profession. The use of qualitative research methods (which require one-on-one approach and do not allow the anonymous loss of subjects in the crowd) can be difficult and only partially reliable for studying social issues in the military organization. The complementary use of qualitative and quantitative data is needed to increase the accuracy of research.

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