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ABSTRACT

Qualitative research, although very frequently used in companies, is infrequently discussed in academic texts in its global context. Some exceptions are Godoy (1995 a, b, c) and Silva et al. (2006), to name a few. The approaches of qualitative researchers' articles and books often focus on specific methods or techniques used in those investigations, such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, case studies, ethnographies, grounded theory, etc. The objective of this essay is to discuss the characteristics, uses, and applications of qualitative research in the field of business. Thus, certain authors are compared and analyzed. First, there are considerations regarding the purpose of research studies; the differentiation between induction and deduction; methodology, methods, techniques and procedures; and positivism and interpretivism. Next, there is a discussion on the qualitative paradigm and the origin and field of qualitative research; explanation of validity and reliability in qualitative research; and triangulation. Some standard criticisms are mentioned at the end. The conclusion is that whereas qualitative research is seen as a broad term that covers many concepts, methods, techniques, and procedures that can obscure its understanding, it can also be very useful in generating new, creative, and efficient ways to conduct research work on business issues.

Key words: *Qualitative Research, Administration, Triangulation, Validity, Reliability.*

CONSIDERAÇÕES SOBRE PESQUISA QUALITATIVA EM ADMINISTRAÇÃO

RESUMO

A pesquisa qualitativa, apesar de bastante utilizada na prática executiva, é relativamente pouco discutida em textos acadêmicos em sua acepção geral, ainda que haja exceções como os estudos de Godoy (1995 a,b,c) e Silva *et al.* (2006), entre outros. Frequentemente, os artigos e livros sobre o assunto focam a descrição dos métodos e técnicas específicos utilizados nas investigações, tais como entrevistas em profundidade, discussão em grupo, estudo de casos, etnografia, teoria fundamentada e outros. O objetivo deste ensaio é fazer algumas considerações sobre as características, os usos e as aplicações da pesquisa qualitativa na área de Administração em seu contexto geral, reunindo e organizando temas relacionados. Para isso, são analisados e cotejados diversos pontos de vista dos autores. Inicialmente, são feitas considerações sobre o propósito da pesquisa e as diferenças entre indução e dedução; explicação dos termos metodologia, método, técnica e procedimentos; e comparação entre orientação positivista e interpretativista. Em seguida, centra-se na discussão do paradigma qualitativo. Para isso, são apresentadas as origens da pesquisa qualitativa; o campo, a validade e a confiabilidade; e a triangulação. Algumas críticas habituais são abordadas ao final. Conclui-se que a pesquisa qualitativa é um termo abrangente que cobre muitos conceitos, métodos, técnicas e procedimentos, o que pode obscurecer seu entendimento, mas proporciona caminhos novos, criativos e eficazes para estudos em Administração.

Palavras-chave: Pesquisa Qualitativa, Administração, Triangulação, Validade, Confiabilidade.

CONSIDERACIONES SOBRE INVESTIGACIÓN CUALITATIVA EN ADMINISTRACIÓN

RESUMEN

La investigación cualitativa, a pesar de utilizarse mucho en la práctica ejecutiva, es relativamente poco discutida en la literatura académica en su sentido general, aunque hay excepciones, como los estudios de Godoy (1995 a, b, c) y Silva et al. (2006), entre otros. A menudo, los artículos y libros sobre el tema se centran en la descripción de técnicas y métodos específicos utilizados en las investigaciones, tales como entrevistas en profundidad, grupos de discusión, estudios de caso, etnografía, teoría fundamentada en los datos y otros. El objetivo de este trabajo es discutir las características, usos y aplicaciones de la investigación cualitativa en la Administración en su contexto general, reuniendo y organizando temas relacionados. Para eso se presentan varios puntos de vista de los autores, cotejándolos y analizándolos. Inicialmente se hacen consideraciones sobre el propósito de la investigación y las diferencias entre la inducción y la deducción; explicación de los términos metodología, método, técnica y procedimientos; y la comparación entre la orientación positivista y interpretativista. A continuación, se centra en la discusión del paradigma cualitativo. Para tanto son presentadas las orígenes de la investigación cualitativa; el campo, la validez y la confiabilidad; y la triangulación. Al final se abordan algunas de las críticas habituales. Se concluye que la investigación cualitativa es un término amplio que abarca muchos conceptos, métodos, técnicas y procedimientos, lo que puede oscurecer su comprensión, pero ofrece nuevos caminos, creativos y eficaces para los estudios en Administración.

Palabras-clave: Investigación Cualitativa, Administración, Triangulación, Validez, Confiabilidad.

1. INTRODUCTION

When one imagines an archeologist conducting research work, one often thinks about digs, paint brushes and other artifacts. An anthropologist brings to mind living among peoples and specific ethnic groups. Research methods and techniques in research studies on business are not predominant. There is a wide range of alternatives, making it a challenge to understand the situations in which a specific method or technique can be used. For example, although qualitative research has flourished in many fields of the social sciences, at the same time its use has become fragmented and incoherent (ATKINSON, 2006). On one hand, the proliferation of qualitative research methods can be confusing; on the other hand, it can unveil new and different forms of conducting research. There are so many ways of conducting research that the researcher must carefully analyze the conditions and the resources to extract as much useful information as possible for the purpose of acquiring knowledge.

This paper focuses on an initial discussion on qualitative research by exploring and discussing its main aspects. This is done by means of a bibliography, weighting and collating the points of view of different authors. The paper is divided into two main parts: the first part analyzes research in the general context of business: the purpose of research; discussion on induction and deduction; differences between methodology, method, technique and procedure; and the differences between positivism and interpretivism. The second part focuses on the qualitative paradigm, and contains a discussion on the origins of qualitative research, on the field of qualitative research, validity and reliability, and on triangulation. Finally, there is mention of several critiques regarding qualitative research.

2. RESEARCH IN THE FIELD OF BUSINESS

This part examines research in the field of business by focusing on the following aspects: purpose; induction and deduction; methodology, method, technique and procedure; and positivism versus interpretivism.

2.1. The purpose of a research study

All business management professionals will resort to research as a source of information at one time or another in the course of their professional career. Research results can be a precious source of information to improve the decision-making process. Research studies do not actually solve problems or make the decisions. They generate information that can guide management decisions and actions. Research has different meanings, depending on the public. However, among several definitions, there seems to be a consensus that research (MILIKEN, 2001): (i) is an investigation and inquiry process; (ii) is systematic and methodical; (iii) increases knowledge. Remenyi (1996) emphasizes that there are some leading questions to be asked at the beginning of a research study: (i) Why conduct research? This is linked to the fact that there are many issues and subjects on which knowledge is incomplete; (ii) What to research? (and where)? These two questions are closely related. The objective is to find the specific topic and interest, considering time and money constraints; (iii) How to conduct a research study? There are several appropriate techniques and methodologies for each topic. The technique must be aligned with the issue and the skill of the researcher; (iv) When to research? When it is timely to conduct the research. Ethics in research is another issue. How should one conduct a research project without affecting the principles of the researcher and his/her research object? In the business field, many issues remain unanswered because of the constantly changing nature of the business environment. Hussey and Hussey (1997) state that the purpose of research can be summarized as follows:

- Revise and synthesize existing knowledge,
- Investigate an existing situation or problem,
- Provide solutions to a problem,
- Explore and analyze general issues,
- Build or create a new system or procedure,
- Explain a phenomenon,
- Generate new knowledge, and
- Any combination of the above.

It is necessary to clarify that one can unfold these items into others, for example: understand a

problem more thoroughly; help decision-making; acquire in-depth knowledge about a topic; or broaden existing knowledge. To achieve a result, the researcher has different options, both in terms of a project and in terms of methods and techniques. The research project can be of an academic nature, and can be developed, for example, by means of monographs, master's degree dissertations, doctoral theses, scientific or commercial books, and articles (prepared by research or consulting firms). The objectives, methodology, time, and cost have to be aligned to make the project feasible. According to Remenyi (1996), most academic research projects comprise five general phases: revision of the literature, formalization of the research topic, gathering of evidence (qualitative and/or quantitative), analysis of the evidence, and development of the conclusions. The researcher must choose a set of research tools that will help him/her collect evidence, analyze it and produce important findings to increase knowledge about a specific topic. The initial point of any research study is to focus clearly on the fact that its purpose is to add something valuable to the existing knowledge of the topic. This means that an

unanswered question or an unresolved problem will be identified and studied and the researcher will try to produce a suitable answer to the question or an appropriate solution for the problem. Hussey and Hussey (1997) emphasize that it is important to consider the researcher's experience and skills in developing research. Indeed, it is common to come across studies that contain errors and omissions, mainly because of the author's lack of knowledge. Statistical errors are common in quantitative research and lack of depth and analytical competency are common in qualitative research, to name just a few examples.

As stated by Amaratunga et al. (2002), research must be conducted in a spirit of investigation that is based on facts, experience and data, concepts and constructions, hypotheses and conjectures, principles and laws.

It is important to emphasize that a research study often has both quantitative and qualitative characteristics. Parry (1998) gives some examples of this interconnection between qualitative and quantitative data and analyses, illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Examples of the relationship between qualitative and quantitative data and analyses

	Análise Qualitativa	Análise Quantitativa
Dados Quantitativos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Análise qualitativa de retórica quantitativa ● Etnoestatística (argumentos baseados em dados quantitativos) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Surveys ● Experimentos ● Entrevistas estruturadas ● Observação estruturada
Dados Qualitativos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Observação participante ● História de vida ● Grounded Theory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Análise de conteúdo
	<i>Qualitative Analysis</i>	<i>Quantitative Analysis</i>
<i>Quantitative Data</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Qualitative analysis of the quantitative rhetoric ▪ Ethno-statistics (arguments based on quantitative data) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Surveys ▪ Experiments ▪ Structured interviews ▪ Structured observation
<i>Qualitative Data</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participating observation ▪ Life story ▪ Grounded Theory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Content analysis

Source: Based on PARRY, 1998.

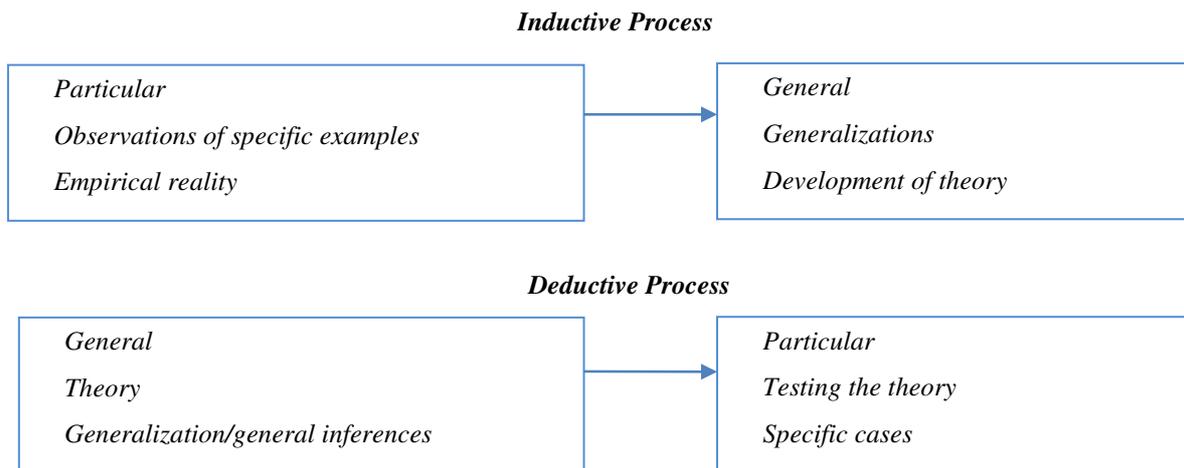
The analytical focus of this paper is qualitative research in the academic field rather than commercial research, although this discussion is also useful for the latter. Kekäle (2001) states that science is basically pursued in two ways: by induction or deduction, the subjects of the next item's analysis.

2.2. Induction and deduction

Andréani and Conchon (2005) emphasize that the induction-deduction debate is important for qualitative studies because it is the essence of the scientific method. Inductive reasoning involves the development process of a theory. It begins with observations of specific examples and seeks to establish generalizations on the phenomenon being investigated; in other words, it moves from the particular to the general. Inductive research is a

study in which the theory is developed from the observation of empirical reality; thus, general inferences are induced on the basis of specific examples (HUSSEY; HUSSEY, 1997). In contrast, the deductive process involves the testing of the theory, i.e., it begins with a theory or generalization and seeks to verify whether the theory is applicable to specific cases (HYDE, 2000). Thus, specific cases are deducted from general inferences. The deductive method is often described as moving from the general to the particular. Those who favor the inductive approach want qualitative research to assure the comings and goings between data collection and analysis, between the field and the theory. In their opinion, the inductive method responds to scientific rules and is able to generate theories (Glaser, Strauss, 1967). Figure 2 summarizes and illustrates this reasoning.

Figure 2: Inductive process versus deductive process



Source: Based on HUSSEY; HUSSEY, 1997.

Andréani and Conchon (2005) illustrate inductive and deductive methodology during the several phases of a research study (Chart 1). While inductive methodology works best with qualitative research techniques, deductive methodology works

best with quantitative research techniques because it requires statistics to test the hypotheses.

Chart 1: Inductive and deductive methodology

Methods	Inductive (understanding new ways)	Deductive (testing the hypotheses)
Phase 1 Design of research project	Define the situation and the case to be studied empirically.	Establish the research structure on the basis of existing theories and concepts.
Phase 2 Preparation of the research instrument	Prepare the research instrument according to an adaptive and creative methodology.	Prepare theoretical hypotheses to be tested before going to the field.
Phase 3 Gathering of information	Explore the situation and learn about the client through interview or by observation.	Test the hypotheses by means of field interviews.
Phase 4 Analyses	Analysis of ideas, research of new information, study of cause/effect relationships, generation of hypotheses.	Verification of the hypotheses by means of the statistical analysis of the research findings.
Phase 5 Validation	Confrontation of information from different sources, cross-reference research on interviews, validation by means of triangulation.	Statistical analysis of margins of error. Empirical demonstration of the validity of the results.

Source: ANDRÉANI; CONCHON, 2005.

More than four decades ago, Machlup (1963) already criticized the confusion and the misuse of words related to research, such as methodology, method and techniques. Thus, the next topic attempts to clarify and organize the meanings of such research.

2.3. Methodology, method, technique and procedure

Turato (2003) explains that methodology “is the discipline that seeks to study and organize (whenever possible) the many methods that we create - beyond their historical origins -, their paradigm-related grounds, their theoretical relations, their structural characteristics and the specificities of their targets” (p. 153). Hussey and Hussey (1997, p. 20) define methodology as “the approach to the entire process of a research study.” Thus, research methodology refers to the structure of procedures whereby research is conducted, and describes an approach to a problem that can be made operational in a research program, i.e., an operating structure in which the facts are placed in such as way that meanings can be seen more clearly. It contemplates a critical evaluation of alternative research strategies and methods (REMENYI et al., 1995). One must keep in mind that methodologies provide guidelines rather than

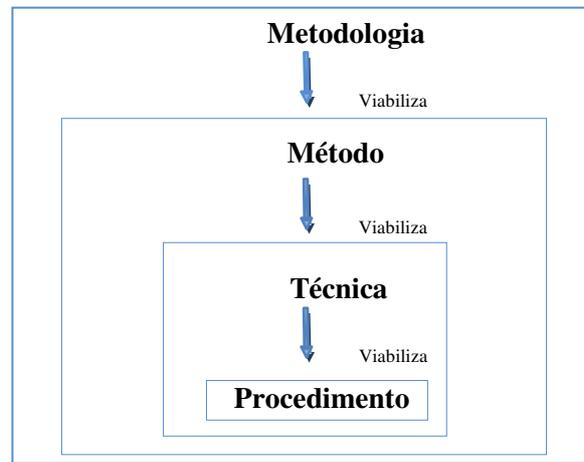
prescriptions on how research studies should be conducted.

Method, in turn, derives from the Latin *methodus* and from the Greek *methodos*, where the prefix *meta* means “by means of”, and *hodos* means “way, road”, thus etymologically expressing the way whereby one seeks to attain something or a way of doing something (WEBSTER, 1997). Jolivet (1975, p. 144) defines method as an “organized set of procedures to discover what one ignores or to prove what one already knows.” Alves (2000, p. 10) states that the scientific method belongs to the field of theory, it is an act of contemplation by the researcher, whereas technique is the transformation of contemplative knowledge into a recipe on how to make things by hand. Thus, technique in the field of research is the use of instruments that allow the researcher to make and observe the emergence of data to be registered in notes that will then be studied and organized in light of theoretical references.

The word procedure comes from the Latin *pro* “to the front”, and *cedere* “advance,” which implies the steps to be followed and the operating measures (TURATO, 2003). Hence, the method makes a research project feasible; the technique makes the method feasible; and the procedures make the technique feasible; this means that the scope also varies, as one can see in Figure 3.

However, it is important to emphasize that it is not always easy or possible to see the boundaries that separate these concepts and controversies, and questions about these terms will always persist.

Figure 3: The scope of the words used in research



Methodology makes



Method feasible



Method makes



Technique feasible

Technique makes



Procedure feasible

Source: Based on TURATO, 2003.

The 1980s and the 1990s witnessed the increasing application of qualitative methods in consumer behavior studies. This fact led to a split among researchers whose approach was based on methodological guidance and to a division between the positivism and interpretivism approaches. The next topic discusses and compares both views.

2.4. Positivism versus interpretivism

Scientific philosophers and researchers have engaged in long epistemological debates on how best to conduct research studies. This debate has been based fundamentally on two schools of thought. On one side are the logical positivists who use quantitative methods and experiments to test hypothetic-deductive generalizations. One of the

strongest implications of this approach is the need for the observer to be independent vis-à-vis the subject being observed, and the need to formulate hypotheses for subsequent verification or testing. The positivists seek cause/effect explanations and basic laws; they generally reduce everything to the utmost simplicity to facilitate analyses. On the other side are the interpretivists, who use qualitative and naturalistic approaches, based on an inductive and holistic form, to understand the human experience in a given context. The interpretivist approach seeks to understand and explain a phenomenon instead of looking for external reasons or basic laws. The interpretivist also rejects the belief that events are independent (AMARATUNGA et al., 2002).

According to Baker (2001), the distinction between the two approaches is based on the personal philosophy of each researcher on how to conduct the research. The positivists emphasize deductive or hypothetical-deductive procedures to establish and explain behavior patterns; in other words, this involves establishing a hypothesis and a conclusion based on the hypothesis, the collection of appropriate data to test the conclusion, and the rejection or assertion of this conclusion. The point is to identify patterns or relationships. The interpretivists seek to establish the reasons and

actions that lead to a given pattern of behavior. The selection of a research strategy is strongly influenced by the researcher's preference. The interpretivists argue that statistical patterns or correlations are not comprehensible in themselves. It is necessary to discover the meanings (reasons) that people give to the actions that lead to such patterns.

Although the confrontation between "positivism" and "interpretivism" is an exaggerated simplification, it is useful to notice the differences, some of which are shown on Chart 2.

Chart 2: Positivist and interpretivist approaches to research

	Positivist	Interpretivist
Reference Authors	Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) René Descartes (1596-1650) Auguste Comte (1798-1857) Claude Bernard (1813-1878) Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936) Émile Durkheim (1858-1912)	Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1912) Franz Brentano (1838-1917) Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) Margareth Mead (1901-1978) Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-)
Major field of study	Nature sciences	Human sciences
Concepts	Structure, social and natural facts.	Meanings and social developments Learned human phenomena
Methods	Quantitative Statistical Inference (hypotheses testing) Cause/effect relationships Measurement	Qualitative Generation of hypotheses, speculative Interactions Processes
Scope	Seeks explanations for things Context-free Generalizations, laws Considers reality as being objective, tangible and unique. Interest is focused on that which is general, average and representative so that statistical generalization and forecasting is possible.	Seeks to understand Man Context-dependent Discernment Socially constructed and multiplied reality. Interest is focused on that which is specific and unique
Researcher's role	Uninvolved observer. Researcher is objective analyst and interpreter of a tangible social reality.	Actively involved. Researcher is not independent from that which is being researched, but is intrinsically linked to it.
Analysis	Objective Abstract Fixed Value-free	Subjective Grounded Flexible Political

Source: Based on DECROP, 1999; SILVERMAN, 1998; TURATO, 2003.

Based on this setting, the next item will focus specifically on the qualitative paradigm, analyzing origins, field, validity, reliability and triangulation; and, finally, mention will be made of criticism.

3. THE QUALITATIVE PARADIGM

The enhancement of the nature of qualitative research has varied greatly throughout time. Qualitative research was quite popular at the

beginning of the century, then it became less popular as quantitative statistics and measurements were increasingly employed. Now quantitative research seems to have emerged with renewed strength, employing methods and techniques stemming from several fields, such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology, among others. Gummesson (2000) argues that qualitative methodologies are still not used to great extent, even though they provide powerful tools for research in the different fields of business. Universities and business schools are often resistant to qualitative research and classify it belonging to a lesser category. On the other hand, authors such as Belk (1995), Malhotra and Peterson (2001), Goulding (2005), and Levy (2005) point out that consumer behavior studies tend to use qualitative paradigms that recognize the wealth of information and detail in the universe of groups and individuals. Sutton (1997) also states that now, after much resistance, qualitative research is being widely acknowledged by organizational researchers as having broad legitimacy.

3.1. The origins of qualitative research

References on the origins of qualitative research are fairly recent. Hamilton (1994), according to Miliken (2001), argues that the book *Discourse on the Method* (1637) by Descartes (1596-1650) launched the field of qualitative research, with the discourse on the method of rightly conducting one's reason and of seeking the truth in science. This was followed by the work of Kant (1724-1804), *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), in which the philosopher revived the Aristotelian distinction between practical and theoretical knowledge. In the early twentieth century, the Chicago School had a strong influence in the 1920s and 1930s, seeking to develop an interpretative methodology. The "slice of life" approach viewed the city of Chicago as a social laboratory that contained a heterogeneous community with different characteristics. The objective was to conduct in-depth studies of specific groups that could provide a social kaleidoscope. This approach was quite popular for some time, yet it was overshadowed by quantitative approaches, as the US government needed statistical information with the advent of the Second World War.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) presented a historical analysis of qualitative research, covering the 20th century and the USA specifically. They referred to

this analysis as the seven moments of qualitative research.

The date on which qualitative research was born, however, is questionable because in fields such as anthropology, archeology, sociology and others, the essence of the research is qualitative, and this has existed since man began to seek knowledge. At any rate, the historical perspective of qualitative research shows that it had a strong influence on the progress of the field of business. The studies on times and movements of Frederick Taylor, the Gilberts, and the studies of Elton Mayo at Western Electric in Hawthorne, near Chicago, also resorted to qualitative techniques to achieve results that characterized the general management theory.

3.2. The field of qualitative research

Qualitative research is a field in itself; it cuts across disciplines, scopes and topics. It is surrounded by a complex family of interconnected terms, concepts and assumptions. It has separate and distinct histories in education, communication, social sciences, communications, psychology, medicine, anthropology, and sociology (DENZIN; LINCOLN, 2000). Any definition of qualitative research would be incomplete, because it operates in several contexts and moments. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggest a generic definition:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that places the observer in the world. It is a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They modify the world in a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memorandums. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive and natural approach to the world. This means that researchers study things in their natural places, attempting to provide meaning or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings that people attribute to them (p. 3).

The authors also point out that the word qualitative implies an emphasis on the qualities of the entities and processes and meanings that are not examined experimentally or measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency. The researchers reinforce the nature of the socially constructed reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and that which is being studied, and the situation-related restrictions that shape the investigation.

In Silverman's (1998) opinion, qualitative research:

- Is not defined as a set of loose techniques but is based on some analytically defined perspective;
- Its specific strong point is the ability to focus on real practice in situ by observing how organizations are represented;
- Exposes how people "do things" in a better way instead of how people "see things;"
- Is not only exploratory or a narrated story.

Bogdan and Biklen (1982) point out the main features of qualitative research: (i) the data is usually collected in a natural setting and the researcher is the key instruments of data gathering; (ii) it is descriptive; (iii) it is concerned about the process instead of being merely concerned with results or products; (iv) tends to analyze data inductively; (v) it emphasizes the "meaning." In addition, they use qualitative research as an "umbrella term" covering several research strategies that share certain characteristics. They state that the collected data is rich in terms of describing people, places and conversations and that it is difficult to submit it to statistical procedures. They add that research topics are not shaped by operating variables but rather formulated to investigate their full complexity, within a context.

Although researchers who conduct qualitative research may re-focus as they collect data, they do not approach research with specific issues to be answered or specific hypotheses to be tested. They are concerned about the comprehension of the behavior, based on the reference system of the individual himself. External causes are of secondary importance.

There is plenty of literature that deals with methods and approaches. Qualitative research is inherently multi-method, which ensures a better understanding of the phenomenon under analysis. Flick (2004) argues that the combination of multiple methodological practices in a study could be understood as a strategy that adds exactness, broadness, complexity, wealth and depth to any investigation.

According to Baker (2001), qualitative research is useful in the following situations:

- Traditional preliminary exploring;
- Choice and filtering of ideas;
- Exploring of complex behavior;
- Development of explanatory behavior models;
- To train the researcher to see the world from the point of view of the respondent;
- Identification of unfulfilled needs and the means to satisfy them.

Snow (1999) identifies three ways for the development of a theory within the context of qualitative research: (i) discovery of the theory, involving the total emergence of the theory as advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967); (ii) extension of the theory, instead of the development of a theory, to thus expand the existing theory or concept into new, different categories, contexts, processes or even to other levels of the given theory; and (iii) refining of the theory, which involves the modification of existing perspectives through the extension or inspection of the theory, or aspects of the theory, with new material.

In regard to two methodological traditions, Wilson (1982), according to Flick (2004), emphasizes that qualitative and quantitative approaches are complementary and should support each other instead of competing with each other or being mutually exclusive. The use of a specific method should be based on the nature of the research topic, i.e., "the topic guides the method and not the other way around." It is fair to state that qualitative research is no longer viewed as being "speculative" or "soft" as it was in the past. However, some of the criticism of qualitative research is not entirely groundless (GOULDING, 2005); the same holds true for quantitative studies, which are subject to many restrictions concerning statistical and project issues.

Sandelowski (1997) states that qualitative research is a term that designates a variety of practices that proclaim differences and make differences trivial at the same time. It is used to describe or mean: (i) certain investigation paradigms (such as naturalist, constructivist, phenomenological, or, usually, anything non-positivist); (ii) types and sources of data (such as stories, reports, field notes, behavior, photographs, artifacts, and documents); (iii) research methods (such as grounded theory, phenomenology and

ethnography); (iv) data gathering techniques (such as interviews and observation); (v) data analysis techniques (such as constant comparison, content, narrative, phenomenological theme, or, generally, any non-statistical analysis); and (vi) interpretation techniques (such as hermeneutics and the construction of grounded theory). Moreover, the term is also used to mean an alternative to or an auxiliary of quantitative research, as well as to define any non-quantitative thing and a remedy for all the evils of the investigations of the quantitative/positivist approach to research.

Gilgun (2006) refers to the four pillars of qualitative research as follows: (i) research findings, theory and methodological principles. They comprise a broad range of perspectives and information that are widely available to researchers who choose them selectively; (ii) the researcher's specialty. This is achieved through experience, education and formal training, the follow-up on and study of research projects, theories and methodologies; (iii) informants or respondents – preferences, desires, cultures, values, and any issue that is important to them. Knowing and understanding them makes research findings useful; and (iv) the researcher – personal values and experiences.

3.3. Validity and reliability in qualitative research

In quantitative terms, validity means “determining whether a measuring instrument actually measures what it is supposed to measure” or the “degree to which a measuring instrument measures what it intends to measure” (LONG; JOHNSON, 2000, p. 31). The root of the word comes from Latin, from the word *validus*, which means robust, and *valere*, which means being strong. Thus, Aldridge and Aldridge (1996) propose that the validity of qualitative research is based on strong, robust arguments. The power of such arguments is to establish the premises on which they are based, i.e., to show that the arguments are well supported, lead the premises that are being employed, develop a set of relevant interpretations and observations and make these interpretations credible. Validity is a term generally used in research to establish the veracity of the work. In qualitative projects, the word validity means credibility and authenticity (KOCH, 1994). According to Hammersley's views (1992, p. 69) “a

report is valid or true if it accurately represents the characteristics of a phenomenon that it intends to describe, explain or theorize.” He states that validity is the truth, interpreted as the extent to which the report accurately represents the social phenomenon being studied. Some authors, such as Guba and Lincoln (1989), insist on the use of terms that are alternative to validity in qualitative research; they suggest the use of the term credibility. They argue that validity refers to the naïve reality of positivism, which attempts to establish isomorphism between the findings and objective reality.

Validity is broader than credibility and, according to Andréani and Conchon (2005, p. 6), “a qualitative study is reliable if the methodology allows for the observation of a given reality;” they argue that reliability is the first step towards validity. The point is to know if the script of the interview is free of biases and errors and if the information is stable (will the same information be obtained if the study is repeated). Therefore, this depends on the respondents and on the data gathering methods. According to the same authors, the reliability of the qualitative research in the sense of comparative reproduction is always questioned, but the flexibility is a clear advantage of qualitative research and is much more important than reliability in the sense of reproduction. In the opinion of Hammersley (1992, p. 67) reliability “refers to the degree of consistency with which examples are classified under the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions.”

In the opinion of Stenbacka (2001), reliability, as traditionally used, i.e., the method's ability to repeatedly produce the results of a research study, is not important in qualitative research. As for validity, the power to generalize and carefulness have distinct meanings in this context:

- The understanding of the phenomenon is valid if the chosen informants are part of the area of the problem and if the interaction between the researcher and the informants provides the latter with the opportunity to speak freely according to their own knowledge structures.
- A full description of the entire process, making “conditional inter-subjectivity” possible, which indicates the good quality of the qualitative method being used.

- Analytical generalization is important in qualitative research; this is achieved through the strategic choice of informants important for the study and not through statistical samples.
- The systematic and careful description of the entire interaction process with the reality being studied is an indicator of the qualitative method's good quality (p. 555).

Validity in qualitative research is related to description and explanation and whether the explanation fits the description. Researchers in the field of qualitative research also agree that there is no single way to interpret an event and that there is no "correct" interpretation (JANESICK, 2000).

The next section analyzes the concept of triangulation. Many authors, including Jick (1979), Hall and Rist (1999), Kekäle (2001), Whittemore, Chase and Mandle (2001), and Andréani and Conchon (2005), state that validation in qualitative research is achieved through triangulation, which is often mentioned in literature.

3.4. Triangulation

The potential to know more about a phenomenon by means of research methods in an empirical investigation is frequently discussed under the item "triangulation." In such discussions, the method-related terms "integration," "combination" and "mixture" tend to be used interchangeably, suppressing the triangulation concept. According to Moran-Ellis (2006), this is problematic because it obscures an essential difference between the result of the combined methods (claimed from triangulation) and the process whereby different methods and data bases relate.

According to Decrop (1999), triangulation implies that a single point is considered, starting from three different, independent processes, and is based on an analogy with the triangle. It derives from topography and was initially used in navigation and military sciences, having then been adapted to social science investigations. The measurer uses two places as a point of reference to identify his site – the third position (HALL; RIST, 1999). Campbell and Fiske (1959) introduced this concept as a synonym of converging validity in the presentation of the Multitrait-Multimethod Matrix. Webb et al. (1966) and Jick (1979) refined the concept by defining it as a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, arguing that

they should be considered complementary rather than rivaling with each other. Subsequently, the triangulation concept was given more attention in qualitative research as a means of gaining acceptance.

Triangulation means looking at the same phenomenon, or research topic, from more than one source of data. Information coming from different angles can be used to corroborate, prepare or enlighten the research problem. Triangulation limits personal and methodological biases and increases the extent to which a study can be generalized (DECROP, 1999).

Denzin (1978) identifies four kinds of triangulation: data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, and methodological triangulation:

- Data triangulation means gathering data at different times and from different sources.
- Investigator triangulation is the use of several researchers to study the same research topic or the same structure, under the assumption that different researchers will provide different perspectives, reflections and analyses.
- Theory triangulation emphasizes that research must examine the phenomenon from different theoretical points of view, to see which would be the most robust to help clarify and explain what is being studied.
- Methodological triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods to obtain the most complete and detailed data on the phenomenon.

Thus, researchers can improve the accuracy of their judgments by collecting different kinds of data, guided by the same phenomenon (JICK, 1979), "increasing the belief that the results are valid and not a methodological artifact" (BOUCHARD, 1976, p. 268). Studies that employ only one method are more vulnerable to errors linked to that specific method than studies that resort to multiple methods, in which different kinds of data allow for the investigation of cross data validity (PATTON, 1990). Triangulation provides a more comprehensive, general, and holistic view plus different angles and perspectives of the same phenomenon, thus improving the researcher's analysis and decision-making ability.

3.5. Criticism of qualitative research

Qualitative research has always been criticized, according to certain authors, who point out the following weaknesses: (i) lack of clarity; (ii) methodological restrictions; (iii) combination of methods with no clear justification and explanation of the “why” and the “how” (GOULDING, 1999); (iv) lack of exactness and validity (DECROP, 1999; SANTIAGO-DELEFOSSE, 2004); (v) lack of sampling exactness; (vi) little reliability and data constancy; (vii) impossibility of reproduction (SANTIAGO-DELEFOSSE, 2004).

Sharts-Hopko (2002) claims that since qualitative research respondents are less numerous and recruited according to convenience, or on purpose, rather than randomly, the possibility that the researcher’s personal values and attitudes will influence research results is great, and is one of the leading criticisms of any project of a qualitative research nature. According to Stern (1994), the methods are personal; people think differently and have their own methods of investigation. Choosing a method is time-consuming; it is a personal and reflexive process; it requires self-evaluation in terms of convictions, beliefs, and interests. It means being honest about what one believes in and about what one knows and what one imagines can be known, besides requiring commitment to the principles of a paradigm once a decision has been made or, in other words, the establishment of a relationship between individual paradigms, ontology, epistemology, and methodology (GOULDING, 1999).

Research methods are merely a means to an end. Researchers must be careful not to get entangled in details of methods to the point of losing control of their main objective. It is important to know the technical procedures; however, the selection and application of the correct method for the research topic at hand basically depends on the researcher’s intelligence, imagination, and creativity (LA SALLE, 1959).

4. FINAL COMMENTS

Undoubtedly, there are many methods and techniques to be developed in qualitative research, whether borrowed or not from other fields – which is already being done regarding anthropology, sociology, psychology and medicine. It does not

matter which technique or method is used; the important factors are the usefulness and the content of the information that will help the decision-making process or that will expand knowledge of a specific topic. Many researchers err when they pay more attention to the tool than to the usefulness of the information, because they get lost in the procedures.

Denzin and Lincoln, (2000) point out that the researcher that uses qualitative research is often referred to as bricoleur or “the patchwork maker,” because he or she borrows methods and procedures from various disciplines, in the manner of a film in which images are spliced together. As Hussey and Hussey (1997, p. 58) emphasize, “the phenomenology paradigm wants to capture the essence of the phenomenon and extract data full of explanations and analyses. The researcher’s objective is to have total access to knowledge and to the meaning of that which is involved in the phenomenon.”

Malhotra and Peterson (2001) believe that research studies centered on human aspects, such as ethnography, will be employed to gain a better understanding of behavioral issues, not as a substitute of quantitative techniques, but rather as their complement.

In light of what was discussed above, the conclusion is that qualitative research involves concepts, methods, techniques and procedures that are combined and become rather unclear to the researcher. On the other hand, qualitative research offers excellent opportunities to develop research for the business sector, especially in the area of behavior studies. Because of the nature of business problems, it seems clear that the potential of qualitative research is yet to be explored to its fullest extent, in terms of application and use and in terms of the discussion of its scope.

For the business environment, it is timely to expose the ideas of Partington (2002, p. 114-115), who lists the main reasons for conducting qualitative research:

Complex, confused situations; with ambiguous cause/effect relationships; unfamiliar situations.

- Normally, qualitative research is descriptive or comparative, but it can also be prescriptive.

- It is conducted from the point of view of the informant and the essence of success is the high level of rapport with the informant's world. Most of the data gathering provides a wealth of information.
- The consequences of this wealth of information are numerous interpretations resulting from several points of view.
- Qualitative data gathering and analysis rely on the development of skills to aid, extract and obtain in-depth information and revelations that are hidden in the data.

The author hopes that this paper will be useful to researchers, as it collates and organizes several qualitative research topics; its main limitations, however, are: it is based on existing work that has already been published; and the general nature of the topic prevents an in-depth exploration of specific aspects. These limitations could be reduced in future studies by interviewing specialists in this field and by the production of academic studies that investigate, in greater depth, topics such as triangulation; which fields of business resort to qualitative research more often or more appropriately; and qualitative research tendencies.

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