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## Applying Qualitative Methods in Organizations: A Note for Industrial/Organizational Psychologists

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### Abstract

Early approach to research in industrial and organizational (I/O) psychology was oriented towards quantitative techniques as a result of influences from the social sciences. As the focus of I/O psychology expands from psychological test development to other personnel functions, there has been an inclusion of qualitative methods in I/O psychology practice. The present paper therefore examines how qualitative methods like observation, interviews, ethnography, focus group discussion, nominal group technique, Delphi method, and projective techniques can be used by I/O psychologists in organizational studies. It is believed that knowledge gained on the applications of these qualitative methods would enhance understanding of workers' behaviors in organizations and facilitate management decisions. Empirical studies are also presented, on how these qualitative methods have successfully been used in organization

### Keywords

Industrial/Organizational Psychology, Observation, Interview, Focus Group Discussion, Nominal Group Technique, Delphi Method, and Projective Techniques

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# Applying Qualitative Methods in Organizations: A Note for Industrial/Organizational Psychologists

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*Early approach to research in industrial and organizational (I/O) psychology was oriented towards quantitative techniques as a result of influences from the social sciences. As the focus of I/O psychology expands from psychological test development to other personnel functions, there has been an inclusion of qualitative methods in I/O psychology practice. The present paper therefore examines how qualitative methods like observation, interviews, ethnography, focus group discussion, nominal group technique, Delphi method, and projective techniques can be used by I/O psychologists in organizational studies. It is believed that knowledge gained on the applications of these qualitative methods would enhance understanding of workers' behaviors in organizations and facilitate management decisions. Empirical studies are also presented, on how these qualitative methods have successfully been used in organizations. Key Words: Industrial/Organizational Psychology, Observation, Interview, Focus Group Discussion, Nominal Group Technique, Delphi Method, and Projective Techniques*

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## Introduction

Qualitative research is a class of research methods in which the investigator takes an active role in interacting with the participants he or she wishes to study (Muchinsky, 2003). Shaughnessy, Zechmeister, and Zechmeister (2003) see qualitative research as that which produces verbal summaries of research findings with no statistical summaries or analysis. Quantitative methods, on the other hand, rely heavily on tests, rating scales, questionnaires, and physiological measures (Stone-Romero, 2002). Thus, while quantitative research produces results in numbers, qualitative research produces flow diagrams and narrative descriptions of events or processes (Landy & Conte, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Analyses of behavior in qualitative studies involve discussions of how people experience and feel events in their lives (Beins, 2004), and can be a good means of generating hypotheses and theories of what happens in organizational settings (Spector, 2005).

The phrase, qualitative research, came into wide use in the early 1970s and heralded the beginning of the interdisciplinary approach (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The use of qualitative methods is growing because researchers want additional methods to better understand their research topics (Lee, Mitchell, & Sablinski, 1999). Qualitative researchers are interested in answering those "why" questions and are not simply carried away by the quantitative answers. What is important with qualitative research, as opposed to quantitative research methods, is that it requires the researcher to become more

personally immersed in the entire research process, as opposed to being just a detached, objective researcher (Spector, 2005). Although qualitative research is used extensively by sociologists and anthropologists (Seale, 1999), it has not been emphasized much by the industrial/organizational psychologists in the study of workers' behaviors in organizations. Many people who first embraced qualitative research in the 1980s had been trained in quantitative approaches (Taylor & Bogdan). This probably explains why the quantitative method has dominated organizational management researches.

There is peculiarity of less use of qualitative techniques among industrial and organizational psychologists because the history of this field of study is traced to the contributions of scientists like Hugo Munsterberg, an experimental psychologist (Munsterberg, 1913); Walter Dill Scott, an experimental psychologist (Scott, 1908); and Fredrick W. Taylor (Taylor, 1911), an engineer. The orientations of these early industrial/organizational psychologists tailored the discipline towards quantitative research methods. However, with dynamism in the field of study and expansion in the areas of coverage for the discipline, studies now focus on job analysis and description, personnel specifications, performance evaluation, employee motivation and job satisfaction, stress management, and human factor at workplace. With this development, it is apparent that I/O psychologists need a movement towards using qualitative means to study organizations. Therefore, it would be helpful to present a guide to a number of qualitative research methodologies and methods amenable to the study of organizations, especially as clinical psychologists have found great utility in qualitative research. (Camic, Rhodes, & Yadley, 2003).

### **Use of Qualitative Research Methods in Organizations**

Some qualitative research methods reported in the literature (e.g., Landy & Conte, 2004; McBride & Schostak, 2004; Muchinsky, 2003; Spector, 2005) that are adaptable to organizational research include observation, ethnography, interview, focus group discussions, and projective techniques.. These research methods are useful in answering questions on why employees behave the way they do in organizations.

#### **Observational Method**

Observation is a type of research method in which the researcher observes participants for the purpose of understanding their behaviors and culture. By this research method, researchers are not expected to talk to the employees during the research, because such interferes with the normal work schedule of the worker. Instead, the researcher may use cameras, audiotape, or videotape equipment to facilitate the observation, and a transcript is subsequently prepared to conceptualize relevant personnel issues. Such a transcript is qualitative because it is expressed in non-numerical terms, using language and images. In the organizational setting, personnel who could use the observational method include supervisors, human resources experts, or consultants. By the nature of their responsibilities of these personnel, they are expected to observe workers' behaviors on the job (Krumm, 2001). However, the literature reports (e.g., Muchinsky, 2003; Sackett & Larsen, 1990) that observation is not frequently used in industrial/organizational psychology primarily because it requires substantial amounts of

time and energy. More essentially, existing laws require a researcher to seek the consent of participants, in most instances, to get a participant to sign a consent document before conducting an observational research (Esterberg, 2002). By this arrangement, the obtrusive observational method becomes inevitable and this could lead to a “Hawthorne effect”, as participants alter behavior simply because they are aware of being studied (Orcher, 2005).

Jex (2002) identified three observational methods, which are simple observation, participant observation, and archival data sources. Simple observation involves observing and recording behavior in its natural context. This is quite practicable in organizational settings. Komaki (1986), for example, used observational technique to identify the behaviors that differentiate effective and ineffective work supervisors. Trained observers recorded the behaviors of 12 adjudged effective managers and 12 adjudged ineffective managers on how they motivate their subordinates. Simple observations can be conducted in obtrusive or unobtrusive form (Riggio, 2003). In obtrusive observation the presence of the researcher is known to the participants, while in unobtrusive form the presence of the observer is not known. It is important to note that simple observation technique is best for routine jobs that involve obvious behaviors, such as typing materials. Simple observation might not be quite ideal for jobs that require more of a mental or cognitive processing, such as planning and decision making. For instance, how objective would it be to observe a manager who is often engaged in mental processes for decision making? To circumvent this latter case, simple observation can also be conducted in the form of self-observation, in which the employees observe themselves on the job and keep a diary or log of work activities. Thus, what other observers would not notice is also accounted for.

Participant observation is similar to simple observation, but in this case the observer is also a participant in the event he or she is studying. In studying the decision making or planning tasks faced by members of boards of directors, for example, the researcher could also be a member of the board being studied. This technique is used a great deal in job analysis, but restricted to jobs that the researcher can ethically perform. Van Maanen (1975), for instance, studied police recruits as they made the transition from training academy to regular police work by participating in the police academy training as a recruit.

The third observational method, archival data sources, utilizes any form of data or records that exist, independent of a research being conducted. The use of archival data allows researchers to study issues that could not be studied in any other way: It thus, serves as a valuable supplement to more traditional data collection methods (Cozby, 2004). Such records could be on employee behaviors such as job performance, absenteeism, lateness, turnover, accident, etc. Psychological tests are usually validated using such available data like job performance information. A database has been used in several investigations of behaviors in organizations as archival data (e.g., Russell, Mattson, Devlin, & Atwater, 1990; Schaubroeck, Ganster, & Kemmerer, 1994; Spector & Jex, 1991). Photographs and other visual data that are designed to yield a picture of a range of settings, situations, or people can provide excellent sources for qualitative analysis (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Such photographs can be analyzed the same way as any other kind of personal document or archival material. Using this technique of qualitative research, job applicants may be requested to present their work samples for analysis. Work samples could consist of written samples (e.g., a report or document) like

published articles by university professors, work products or samples from artists, architects, and software developers. Research suggests that work samples are valuable in predicting future job performance (Jackson, Harris, Ashton, McCarthy, & Tremblay, 2000; Lance, Johnson, Douthitt, Bennett, & Harville, 2000). These existing documents are systematically analyzed in the form of content analysis, which requires a coding system that raters can use to quantify the information in the documents, and categories for coding the information must be devised by the researcher.

Differentiation is also made between naturalistic observation and systematic observation (Cozby, 2004). In naturalistic observation, the researcher makes observation in a particular natural setting or field, over a period of time. In systematic observation, the researcher carefully conducts observations on one or more specific behaviors in a work setting. For example, Glick, Jenkins, and Gupta (1986) asked observers to watch employees for about two hours and estimate how much they liked their jobs. Systematic observation is much less general than naturalistic observation

To secure a comprehensive record of behavior using the observational research technique, narrative records should be obtained. Narratives are open-ended, written descriptions of behavior. The record should be a summary description of behaviors that are recorded, and should be made during or soon after behavior is observed. It is important that observers are carefully trained to record behaviors according to established criteria. The criteria set serves as a guide or frame of reference for recording observation. This makes provision for inter-observer reliability of data obtained, and could allow for comparative analysis, even when more than one observer is engaged for data collection. One method of conducting performance evaluations of employees, which is qualitative in nature, is the use of narratives following observations of employee behavior or listings of specific examples of performance strengths and weaknesses. By this technique, appraisers have the freedom to describe performance in their own words and could emphasize issues that they judge as important. After narrative records are created, the researcher (most often in the personnel unit) can study, classify, and organize the records for management decisions.

However, decisions regarding what should be included in a narrative record must be made prior to observing behavior. It is expedient that the narrative records capture the information that will be needed for management decisions. Thus, once the content of narrative records are decided, observers must be trained to record behaviors based on the criteria set. Before data are collected for the main study, it may be necessary for practice observations to be conducted, and records be critiqued by other experts in qualitative research. The principal researcher must ensure that trained observers are familiar with the data collection guide before the main research is conducted. After narrative records are obtained, the information is analyzed and the content is summarized into reduced data. Data reduction is the process of abstracting and summarizing work behavioral data, and it occurs when researchers verbally summarize information and record their own observations about the narrative records. Data reduction involves the process of coding, in which the researcher identifies units of behaviors or particular events according to specific criteria. Coders use the coding schemes to classify these behavioral patterns while they watch the videotape recordings, for instance, of the observations. Coding is often based on units of behaviors or events that are related to the goals of the study. Data reduction, using coding, allows researchers to determine relationships between specific

types of behavior and the events that are the antecedents of these behaviors. Using qualitative data analysis, researchers seek to provide a verbal summary of their observations and to develop a theory that explains behavior in the narrative records (Orcher, 2005; Shaughnessy et al., 2003).

The observational technique can be used to study employees' work roles, and this is essential for job descriptions. Role conflict and role ambiguity can also be detected and knowledge of these can help to reduce both intra- and interpersonal conflict in organizations. Data obtained from scientific observation may be utilized in designing job evaluation in an organization. Personnel issues like conformity, group cohesiveness, cooperation, and competition in work groups can be easily and better studied by observational method. Observation, as a research tool, is used in assessment centers (see Lievens, 2001; Schleicher, Day, Mayes, & Riggio, 2002; Tziner, Ronen, & Hachon, 1993) for employment screening and selection of applicants on a range of job-related knowledge, skills, and abilities.

### **Ethnography**

Ethnography is a research method that utilizes qualitative, field observation methods of assessing behavior to study a society's culture. Fetterman (1998) describes it as the art and science of describing a group or culture. Such a group can be a work group, team, or an organization, and the culture could be the organizational culture. Researchers conducting ethnographic assessment of organizational culture do so by observing and recording behaviors in an organization, for an extended period of time (Jex, 2002). Ethnographers detail the routine daily lives of people in the group, focusing on the more predictable patterns of behavior. They try to keep an open mind about the group under study because preconceived ideas about group members' behaviors and thoughts can severely bias research findings.

Two concepts: "emic" and "etic" are used to describe this research method. Emic is an approach to research phenomenon that emphasizes knowledge derived from the participants' understanding of their own culture, while etic emphasizes knowledge derived from the objective perspective of the researcher in understanding a culture. The assumption behind the use of ethnography is that both the group members' perspective and the external researcher's perspective of what is happening can be put together to present a more informed picture of the group. In some cases ethnographers may actually become members of the organization under study. An example of this is the analysis of police culture in which Van Maanen had to pass through a police academy as a recruit and recorded his observations (Van Maanen, 1975). In organizational settings, consultants could serve as ethnographers in studying the culture of an organization, with the aim of presenting an objective view of the organizational culture to the management for review. Consultants may, thus, temporarily become participant observers in the organization.

Work groups are usually comprised of different members and different thoughts and behavior. Therefore, there are multiple emic views from a group, which certainly help a researcher to understand a group better. As organizations are presently turning towards the use of work teams, ethnography becomes an important research method in understanding the complex interactions within work teams (see Brett, Tinsley, Janssens,

Barsness, & Lytle, 1997). Muchinsky (2003) argues that high-quality ethnographic research requires both the emic and etic perspectives, although Jex (2002) advocates that ethnography does not require the researcher to ask employees about the culture of the organization. Most ethnographers thus begin their research process from the emic perspective and later try to understand their data from the scientific or etic perspective.

Ethnographic research could focus on the “artifacts” of the organization’s culture (Ashkanasy & Jackson, 2001). An artifact is a material object that is created by people, specifically to facilitate culturally expressive activities. Artifacts are readily found in the physical environments of organizations. For example, in the hospital every nurse wears a uniform, and this serves as a powerful artifact to remind them of their profession. Commonly held beliefs about a company, its founders, or heroes also serve as artifacts for qualitative research investigations. Organizational symbols also provide information on the nature of the culture (Jex, 2002). An example is the physical layout in which employees work. Other important symbols that carry meaning for organizational members are job titles, status symbols, language and communication (Van Maanen, 1975), slogans, motto, stories and legends (Trice & Beyer, 1984), etc. Ethnography can be adopted to study the norms of a work group, as was observed in the Hawthorne experiment (Mayo, 1933). It could help to understand the process of socialization in an organization in terms of rites and rituals (Trice & Beyer), which can be utilized to develop better socialization programs for an organization.

Apart from direct observation, ethnographic studies also use people (Johnson, 1990) who possess detailed knowledge of the organization under study. It is advisable to use long-tenured employees who would be very helpful in providing a historical context for understanding much of what goes on in the organization. However, “first impressions” of a relatively new employee may also provide as much (or more) insight into an organization’s true culture. It is therefore best to have informants that cut across a variety of tenure levels. Informants help by making sense out of what the ethnographer has observed in the organization.

Ethnographic research has aided human-computer interaction research by focusing on the user during system development. User-centered design is accomplished through usability engineering, which is an iterative process in which a basic system is designed and then redesigned with input from users (Carroll, 1997; Craiger, 2000). An example is a word-processing system in which actual secretaries are involved in both the initial and redesign teams (Carroll). There is even a branch of user-centre design, referred to as ethnographically informed design (Bentley, Hughes, Randall, Rodden, Sawyer, Shapiro, & Sommerville, 1992), which considers power relationships, tacit knowledge of the organization and its procedures, and organizational climate and culture (Landy & Conte, 2004). The research of Buchanan and Boddy (1983), that described the introduction of a computer into the process of cookie making, influenced this move towards a greater recognition of the importance of social-organizational issues in systems design.



## **The In-Depth Interview**

Generally, an interview is described as the “favored digging tool” of social sciences (Kvale, 1996). Interviewing in organizational settings simply requires verbal accounts to learn about the social life of workers. Interviewing could be structured, unstructured, or semi-structured. In most cases, however, these are combined for more informative data gathering. For qualitative research, interviewing is flexible and dynamic, and is therefore described as in-depth interviewing (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). In-depth interviewing is thus explained as repeated face-to-face encounters between the researcher and participants, directed towards understanding informants’ perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations as expressed in their own words. Taylor and Bogdan referred to qualitative interviewing as nondirective, unstructured, nonstandardized, and open-ended. The in-depth interview is usually designed as a conversation between equals rather than a formal question-and-answer exchange. Unlike the case with interviewing in quantitative research where structured questions and response alternatives are made available for participants, the interviewer is not just an impersonal data collector but is more of the research tool for data collection. This is based on the fact that the interviewer does not just obtain answers generated by respondents, but reasons as to what questions to ask and how to present them to specific respondents so as to obtain reliable answers. Thus, the in-depth interview is a semi-structured interview that is very much related to the participant observation, but with some differences.

The in-depth interview is used to explore or probe in detail the latent attitudes and feelings of respondents. In-depth interviews can be conducted in person or through telephone and e-mails. In conducting oral interviews, audio tapes and video-tapes may be used, with the permission of the respondent in order to facilitate record keeping. It is encouraged to prepare an interview guide ahead of time to assist the interviewer to cover all relevant topics. However, the interviewer has significant freedom to encourage the interviewee to elaborate or explain answers provided. It is also encouraged, if possible, to digress from the outline if considered needful: This, therefore, makes the interview a semi-structured type.

The interviewer must be very experienced or skilled, as it is expected that he or she establishes rapport with the respondent and therefore adapt quickly to the personality and mood of the person being interviewed. The interviewer must be knowledgeable about the topic, and be able to relate to the participants in terms of language; using vocabulary normally used within the sector being studied. The interviewer must also know when it is necessary to probe deeper, get the interviewee to elaborate, or broaden the topic of discussion. Since an interview last from 20 to 120 minutes, it gives room for a very detailed picture about what to obtain from the research. One variant is the situational interview where interviewees are asked how they would deal with specific job-related, hypothetical situations (Motowidlo, Dunnette, & Carter, 1990). This technique can be used for personnel selection, placement, and promotions, as the level of ingenuity of the applicant can be assessed by this means.

Two types of qualitative interviews are distinguished (Joppe, 2004). One is the life history or sociological autobiography. By this technique, the researcher attempts to capture the salient experiences in a person’s life and the person’s definitions of those experiences. People present their views of their lives in their own words and the

researcher could request for certain aspects to be amplified. The researcher takes steps to ensure that the life history reported covers everything expected to be known, that no important fact or life event is distorted or given dishonestly. The difference between life history and popular autobiographies is that the researcher actively solicits the person's experiences and views, and constructs the life history as a final product. An example of life history reports can be read from application letters, forms, and resumes of job applicants.

Information in application forms and resumes could provide data on biographical information such as education, work experience, and outstanding school or work accomplishments. Researchers have argued that work experience, for example, can be measured in both quantitative (e.g., amount of time in a position; number of times performing a task) and qualitative (e.g., level of complexity or challenge in a job) terms (Quinones, Ford, & Teachout, 1995; Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998). Where application forms are administered to job applicants, questions could be open-ended and should be job-related. Macan and Dipboye (1994) found that impressions of qualifications from written applications influenced impressions of applicants in their subsequent interviews. Such information can be screened and used to detect lies or dishonesty at the selection interview. Thus, information from applicants' written materials about oneself constitutes the first contact a potential employer has with a job candidate and therefore forms the first impressions in the selection process. This reveals that good qualitative analyses of life history or sociological autobiographic data can improve employee selection. Data on biographical information are believed to be among the best predictors of future job performance (Feldman & Klich, 1991; Knouse, 1994). In a study conducted by Russell et al. (1990) autobiographical essays written by U.S. Naval Academy cadets were used to generate biodata items, which were later used with entering cadets to predict their success at the academy. The emergent biodata inventory was found to be a good predictor of military and academic performance as well as leadership.

The second type of in-depth interview is focused on learning about events and activities that the researcher cannot observe directly. The people interviewed act as, or have been, observers in the field of the observed. According to Zikmund (1997), such respondents are not selected randomly nor are they representatives of the organization or department being studied; They are rather experts who are knowledgeable, articulate, and thoughtful, and are familiar with the persons being investigated. The role of such experts is not to reveal personal views, but to describe exactly a participant's behavior and how they think about the participant. For example, references and letters of recommendation are qualitatively used in this dimension to assess job applicants for employment or candidates for promotion. Job applicants' supervisors, mentors, professors, and the like are requested to write reference reports on candidates based on past experiences with the participant. Thus, the descriptions are not necessarily just the personal views of the persons writing the references on the candidate, which might be subjective, but also how they think others will describe them.

Traditionally, employers simply rely on just written reports on employees, but with the qualitative research technique it could be combined with in-depth interviews with the individuals that wrote the reference reports (possibly through telephone or e-mail), to clarify some aspects about a candidate. This will circumvent the short-comings associated with references and letters of recommendation as valid selection tools (see

Muchinsky, 1979). According to Cascio (1987), reference checks and letters of recommendation provide information related to employment and educational history, evaluations of the applicant's character, job performance, and the recommender's willingness to hire the applicant.

In-depth interview can be effectively employed in job analysis to enrich job information obtained from job incumbent, supervisory personnel, or other subject matter experts (SMEs). Information from these sources can be jointly used to produce detailed and accurate descriptions of jobs (Levine, Ash, & Bennett, 1980). Employee satisfaction is another organizational variable that could be researched qualitatively, using in-depth interview. Strategies for measuring job satisfaction include interviews, group meetings, and a variety of structured pencil-and-paper methods, like rating scales or questionnaires (Riggio, 2003). Interviews and group meetings provide richer information because the interviewer can ask follow-up questions or request further elaboration or clarification for an answer provided about job satisfaction: This is not feasible with the quantitative research where respondents are restricted to fixed response alternatives. The qualitative method could also encourage the use of in-house techniques to assess satisfaction, by concentrating on specific issues relevant to a company's employees. Interviews have also been used to assess customer satisfaction among bank customers (see Ehigie, in press).

Absenteeism is a major employee work problem in organizations, which could be voluntary (Dalton & Mesch, 1991) or involuntary (Goldberg & Waldman, 2000). One way that researchers have attempted to measure voluntary absenteeism is by absence frequency (the number of days absent), while absence length (the number of consecutive days absent) was used to measure involuntary absenteeism (Atkin & Goodman, 1984). Riggio (2003), however, describes these as very crude measures. The measures are simply quantitative analyses of absenteeism, as they only reveal the number of times an employee was absent from work. However, qualitative analyses go as far as knowing why the absences occurred; voluntary or involuntary. Absenteeism is one of the best predictors of employee turnover, particularly the rate of absences immediately before the employee leaves (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). In-depth interviews with absentee employees could reveal those who would resort to leaving the organization, and necessary management actions could be taken to manage such turnover intensions, especially if it concerns a valuable employee.

In-dept interviewing has some similarities with participant observation. Like observers, interviewers must try to establish rapport with informants, ask nondirective questions early in the research, and learn what is important to informants before focusing on the research interests. However, the main difference between the two is that participant observers conduct their studies in natural field situations whereas interviewers conduct their studies in situations that are specifically arranged for the purposes of the research. Thus, the participant observer gains firsthand knowledge of what people say and do in their everyday lives, while the interviewer relies extensively on verbal accounts of how people act and what they feel.

### **The Focus Group**

A focus group discussion (FGD) is a type of group in-depth interview. It involves interaction among a small group of people, of between 6 and 12, with common

identifiable characteristics, who respond to and build on what others in the group have said. The characteristics must be related to the topic of study, and can consist of demographic characteristics as well as knowledge based on familiarity with the topic of interest. Focus group discussions function better with certain type of participants, like extraverts (Steward & Shamdasani, 1990). The idea is that FGD encourages participants to give more candid answers and the approach generates more insightful information.

A focus group is characterized by a moderator who uses a discussion guide to stimulate discussions among the group members rather than interview individual members. Every participant is encouraged to express his or her views on each topic raised and also to respond to the views expressed by the other participants. To get the participants relaxed, the moderator starts by assuring everyone that there is no right or wrong answer, and that his or her feelings cannot be hurt by any views that are expressed. The moderator ensures that the group does not digress from the topic of discussion and that no member dominates the discussion. The researcher's personal attributes are critical in determining whether or not people cooperate with the research (Schaffir, 1991). The type of data that are needed certainly determines the extent to which the session is structured and directed by the moderator.

Focus group discussion is quite useful in organizational development (OD) programs. OD is the process of assisting organizations in preparing for and managing change. Riggio (2003) explains that many OD programs use team approaches to deal with problems at the group or organizational level, rather than focusing on problems associated with individual workers. The use of a well designed FGD program can enhance resolution of group or organizational problems. The OD consultant or change agent may serve as the moderator in a FGD program designed at solving such group or organizational problems. Such programs would help an organization become aware of its own operations and problems (Friedlander, 1980). This is made possible by the opening up of organizational communication channels and increasing members' involvement in the planning and execution of work activities (Monge, Cozzens, & Contractor, 1992) through FGD. The idea is that workers involved in FGD tend to have a better understanding of important organizational processes, and would likely become more committed to helping the organization achieve its goals. A critical evaluation of all the steps involved in OD (see Riggio) suggests the usefulness of FGD for an effective introduction and implementation of any organizational change.

### **The Nominal Group Technique**

According to Joppe (2004), this technique was originally developed by Delbecq, Van de Ven, and Gustafson in 1971 as an organizational planning technique. It is applied as a consensus planning tool that helps prioritize management issues in organizations. Participants are brought together for a discussion session that is led by a moderator, who presents the topic to the session participants. Participants have the opportunity to ask questions and briefly discuss the scope of the topic under discourse: Thereafter, they are asked to take a few minutes to think about the issues and write down their responses in narrative forms. Their responses are recorded on a flipchart. Once everyone has given a response, participants are asked for a second or third response until all their answers have been noted on flipchart sheets available around the room. Following this, the researcher

screens all responses provided by the participants to avoid duplications. Once duplications are eliminated, each response is assigned a letter or number. Session participants are then requested to choose up a given number of the screened responses, depending on the number of emerging responses, that they feel are the most important and rank them according to their relative importance. These rankings are collected from all participants and ranked

The results on response rankings could be given back to participants in order to stimulate further discussions that might eventually lead to readjustment in the overall rankings assigned to the various responses. This technique is especially relevant when group consensus is important, as regards the prioritization of certain management issues. The technique presents more structure than the focus group. Since the rankings are provided on an individual basis, the nominal group technique is only “nominally” a group (Joppe, 2004). This technique of qualitative research is also quite relevant at the pilot stage of developing research tools like psychological tests and scales, questionnaires, etc. for survey research (see Ehigie, 1999; Murphy & Davidshofer, 2001).

### **The Delphi Method**

The Delphi Method (Joppe, 2004) is a group decision process about the likelihood that certain events will occur. This research method requires the bringing together of a panel of experts, who are selected based on the areas of expertise required, for forecasting. The idea behind the use of this method is that well-informed individuals, with their insights and experiences, are better equipped to predict the future than theoretical approaches or extrapolating of trends. The panel members are presented with a management issue for discussion, and provided with a series of open-ended questionnaires for their anonymous responses. Before responding to subsequent questionnaires they are provided with a summary of opinions of panel members on previous responses made. By so doing, in each succeeding round of questionnaires the range of responses by the panelists will presumably decrease and the median will move toward what is deemed to be the “correct” answer. It is, therefore, believed that the group will converge toward the “best” response through this consensus process.

The Delphi technique is used as an alternative to board or management meetings that require the views of all members in decision making. Instead of getting all decision makers physically together, they could reside anywhere and make contributions. Since the responses are anonymous, the disadvantage of ego, domineering personalities, and a halo effect in responses are all avoided. The process also does not require complete agreement by all panelists, as majority opinion is represented by the median score. The contemporary age of technological development with internet use can facilitate the operation of this qualitative technique of research.

### **Projective Techniques**

Projective techniques are used to explore some deeply held attitudes and motivations that would often not be verbalized by respondents when questioned directly. Actually, respondents may not even be aware that they hold these particular attitudes. The projective techniques therefore allow respondents to project their subjective or true

opinions and beliefs onto other people or even objects. The respondent's real feelings are then inferred from what they say about others or things. Projective techniques are normally used during individual or small group interviews. The research methods incorporated in this technique include word association, sentence completion, Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), and third-person techniques.

#### *Word association*

Some ways of using word association tests include:

1. Presentation of a word, list of words, or phrases in random order to respondents who are requested to state or write the word or phrase that comes into their minds.
2. Similarly, respondents can be asked slogans and what they suggest.
3. Respondents are asked to associate descriptive adjectives for certain people or work settings.

#### *Sentence completion test*

This is a semi-structured or incomplete test, which consists of sentence items that must be developed into complete sentences. The sentences are usually in third person form and tend to be ambiguous. The underlying assumption is that examinees project their inner thoughts, wishes, desires, fears, and attitudes into the sentences that they create. For example, the following sentences would be responded to differently by employees, depending on their psychological states with the organization:

- The happiest time on this job is -----
- The fears of most employees concern -----
- The average worker considers -----
- Most employees of this organization like -----

This qualitative research method can be used to explore the inner, unconscious, and subconscious thoughts and intents of employees in organizations. A variant of this method is the story completion test in which a story, in words or pictures, is given to the respondent who is then asked to complete it in his/her own words.

#### *Thematic apperception test (TAT)*

In the TAT one or more pictures that serve as stimuli are shown to the respondents who are asked to create stories concerning relationships or social situations suggested by the pictures. They describe what is happening, what dialogue might be going on between characters, and/or how the "story" might continue. One of the cards in the set is made blank to provide a maximally ambiguous stimulus (Murphy & Davidshofer, 2001). The idea is that respondents would project information that concerns their needs, emotions, conflicts, attitudes, and emotional difficulties into their stories. While it is encouraged that the picture, illustration, drawing, or cartoon that is used must be interesting enough to encourage discussion, it should be vague enough not to immediately give away what the stimulus is about. This technique can be used greatly in

organizations to unveil many problems that employees would not want to reveal directly to the management of organizations.

### *The third-person technique*

This technique provides respondents the opportunity to talk about someone else, such as a neighbor, relative, friend, or co-worker (Joppe, 2004). The idea is that people can talk freely about others, which is what they would not admit about themselves but are reflections of their personal hidden emotions. Thus, they unconsciously elicit deep seated feelings and opinions that might be perceived as reflecting negatively upon them. The third-person technique can be rendered more dynamic by incorporating role playing or rehearsal in which the respondent is asked to act out the behaviors or express the feelings of the third person. Again, this technique is dynamic in exploring and discovering hidden employees' thoughts that might not readily be admissible. Responses received through this research technique can be informative for necessary management decisions.

## **Conclusion**

Although Spector (2005) argued that qualitative methods of research offer an alternative to the highly quantitative methods, it is opined that both quantitative and qualitative research methods can help researchers understand issues better than either of the two separately. Muchinsky (2003) thus opposed the idea of choosing between the two research methods, while Landy and Conte (2004) address the issue in terms of quantitative and qualitative research, and not quantitative versus qualitative research. Contemporary researchers (e.g., Dachler, 2000; Rogelberg, 2002) argue that the two are not mutually exclusive. The apparent preference of journal editors for quantitative research partly accounts for preference for quantitative over qualitative research (Hemingway, 2001).

However, a researcher is an explorer who tries to develop an understanding of the phenomenon he or she has chosen to investigate. To achieve this, it is advisable to use converging information from different sources, regardless of its form (Rogelberg & Brooks-Laber, 2002). What is important in management decisions is the ability to combine information from multiple sources, to develop the base for any management theory. McBride and Schostak (2004) argue that qualitative data make quantitative evidence become clearer and more powerful. In reality, researchers need not make "either/or" decisions in choosing between qualitative and quantitative research methods (Sackett & Larsen, 1990). For example, researchers could use closed-ended questionnaire items, but also include space at the end of the survey for employees to write comments that could be content analyzed for qualitative data information (Jex, 2002). Ehigie (2005) adopts this in the survey questionnaire used to study customer satisfaction with services offered to college students. By this technique, quantitative analysis of the closed-ended survey items are made possible, while participants can also express their individual opinions in words, which could provide very useful suggestions to organizational decision makers. Presently, the use of qualitative research methods is growing in the organizational management research (see Lee, Mitchell, & Sablynski, 1999) because researchers want additional methods to better understand research topics.

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