Exploring Participants' Experiences Using Case Study

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Abstract

A case study enables social researchers to examine the experiences of participants within a specific context in detail. It involves a study of a particular case from which general principles and rules can be drawn while relying on the analysis of the social context that reflects everyday experience. This article provides practical guidance on how to conduct a qualitative research involving a case studyto develop a theoretical explanation of a social phenomenon while paying sufficient attention to potential criticisms. It is founded on my personal experience of a service-learning programme referred to as the 'Apostolate'.The argument is broad, including an appropriately high proportion of application.

Keywords: service-learning, apostolate, qualitative research, case study, data collection, ethical consideration

1. Introduction

A commonly cited definition of service-learning is given by Bringle& Hatcher (1995:112) who contend that:

Service-learning involves educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.

A qualitative study involving a case study of Arrupe College[1] and its service-learning programme was undertaken to better understand how learning takes place in the context of community service and higher education in Zimbabwe.The guiding research question was: "How does participation in the 'Apostolate' affect students?"Identifying an appropriate research question is a prerequisite to addressing a research problem and is important for guiding the choice of methodology.A critical analysis of how the study was conductedis presented in the ensuing discussion.

2. The Qualitative Research Method

Leedy&Ormrod (2005:12) define a research methodology as the general approach the researcher takes in carrying out the research project. The study employed the qualitative research methodincorporating case study as the research design. Qualitative approach was chosen for this study because it attempts to make sense of people's experience, perception, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour in a given cultural context (Clissett, 2008). This has the advantage of obtaining the views of participants in a specified time and context.

Qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study because it is "typically used to answer questions about the complex nature of phenomena, often with the purpose of describing and understanding the phenomena from the participants' point of view" (Leedy&Ormrod, 2005:94). The purpose of qualitative researchers is to seek a better understanding of complex situations, and their work is often exploratory in nature. Qualitative research is also empirical, inductive and interpretative of a situation within a specific context. It involves examination of particular cases from which general principles and rules are drawn while relying on the analysis of the social experience that reflects everyday experience. Lindlof&Taylor (2011) contend that qualitative research methods are sensitive to social construction of meaning and rely on the interpretation and analysis of what people do and say, without making heavy use of measurement or numerical analysis.

[1]Arrupe College is a Catholic Jesuit School of Philosophy and Humanities located in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Qualitative researchers have one great advantage over quantitative researchers, as new pieces can be added to the research puzzle or entire new puzzles conjured while we gather data, and this can even occur late in the analysis. The flexibility of qualitative research permits you to follow leads that emerge (Charmaz, 2006:14). Despite the fact that qualitative approach tends to be in the situation of the subjects of study, the research is quite cumbersome. The researcher must devote a great chunk of time and energy in order to carry out field observations and record findings afterwards. Qualitative research tends to be more expensive and time consuming because of the time it takes to read, categorize, and code transcripts that result from interviews, observations, and open-ended questions (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010; Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009). In addition, qualitative researchers suffer from the limited sample sizes and this may compromise the generalizability of the data beyond the sample selected for a particular study (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Yet, in some cases, qualitative research presents the preliminary steps to further investigation.

3. Case Study

A case study is a research design that entails the detailed and intensive analysis of a single case (Bryman, 2008). A case study method was applicable for this study because it represents an intensive analysis of a single unit with an aim to generalise across a larger set of units (Gerring, 2004). It is rich in detail, so it allowed an in-depth analysis of the 'Apostolate'. Even though the term case study may be extended to include the study of just two or three cases for comparative purposes (Bryman, 2008), working on two or more cases can significantly add to the complexity of a study and can prevent the researcher from examining the experiences of participants in detail. This study focused on a detailed analysis of a range of issues in the Arrupe College service-learning programme rather than a more shallow comparison of a number of cases.

The purpose of a case study is to understand one situation in great depth; a particular individual, programme, or event is studied in depth for a defined period of time. The researcher collects extensive data on the individual(s), program(s), or event(s) on which the investigation is focused. These data often include observations, interviews, documents, past record, and so on. The researcher also records details about the context surrounding the case, including information about the physical environment and any historical, economic and social factors that have bearing on the situation (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:94).

One of the primary advantages of a case study method for this study is the depth of analysis that it offers. For this reason, Gerring (2004:348) states:

One may think of depth as referring to the detail, richness, completeness, wholeness, or degree of variance that is accounted for by an explanation. The case study researcher's complaint about the thinness of cross-unit analysis is well taken; such studies often have little to say about individual cases. Otherwise stated, cross-unit studies are likely to explain only a small portion of the variance with respect to a given outcome or to approach that outcome at a very general level.

The narrow focus of a case study can promote understanding or inform practice for similar situations. It is particularly suitable for learning more about a little known or poorly understood situation, making it "useful for generating or providing preliminary support for hypotheses" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:135). This enabled the identification and examination of a wide variety of factors that could contribute to a theoretical explanation of the 'Apostolate' and contributed to developing new directions for understanding the situation and for future research. The strength of a case study may also suggest a corresponding weakness. Single-unit research designs often fall short in their representativeness since the degree to which causal relationships evidenced by that single unit may be assumed to be true for a larger set of (unstudied) units (Gerring, 2004).A case study rarely permits the establishment of generalised rules applying to a variety of situations; "we can't be sure that the findings are generalizable to other situations" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:135).

4. The Research Participants, Sampling Technique and Ethical Consideration

Stringer (2007) suggests that the number and type of individuals participating in the research should be explicitly identified. The total number of participants who informed this study was 29; in-depth interviews (n = 17), focus group (n = 7) and e-mail correspondence (n = 5). The majority of participants who informed this study were students (n = 14) and alumni (n = 8) who participated directly in the 'Apostolate'. The administrators (n = 2), faculty members (n = 2) and community leaders (n = 3) were involved as secondary informants to the study.

Their perceptions provided baseline data which helped in gaining a deeper understanding of the 'Apostolate' and provided insight into the students' experiences.

Involving community leaders was important for this study in order to incorporate feedback from the perspective of those on the receiving end of the 'Apostolate'. Although many studies have been conducted to assess the effectiveness of community service-learning for college students, relatively few have researched the community members involved in community service-learning (Cooks &Scharrer, 2006). The use of varied participants in this study increased both the richness and diversity of data, and led to what Latham et al. (2005:80) call "a 360 degree or multisource feedback". These provided a more broad understanding of the 'Apostolate' and contributed to triangulation of informants.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling in which "people or other units are chosen, as the name implies, for a particular *purpose*" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005: 206).Leedy&Ormrod (2005) define sampling as the process of selecting a portion of the population which will be a representation of the whole population in a study. The entities selected for study by researchers comprise their sample. Bryman (2008) posits that a sample refers to the segment of a population that is selected for research and is a subset of the population. Different sampling techniques are more or less appropriate in different situations. Common to all qualitative studies is a need to identify an appropriate sample from which to acquire data. Coyne (1997:630) asserts that "there is no perfect 'way' of sampling, as it is a process that continues to evolve with the methodology". Therefore, "the researcher should find out what information is most needed and most useful in a given situation, and then employ the most suitable methods" (ibid.).

Qualitative samples are often purposive samples chosen for a particular purpose (Cohen et al., 2007; Coyne, 1997). The sampling procedure involved the deliberate choice of an informant due to the qualities the informant possessed. Therefore, the researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who are willing to provide the information by virtue of their knowledge or experience (Bernard, 2006; Tongco, 2007) so that sampling proceeds according to the relevance of cases instead of their representativeness (Flick, 2009). Glaser (1978:45) makes the point that:

Researchers will go to the groups which they believe will maximize the possibilities of obtaining data and leads for more data on their question. They will also begin by talking to the most knowledgeable people to get a line on relevancies and leads to track down more data and where and how to locate oneself for a rich supply of data.

Purposive sampling was used to select 'knowledgeable people'; those who had in-depth knowledge about the 'Apostolate' service-learning programme by virtue of their professional role, expertise or experience. There is little benefit in seeking a random sample when most of the random sample may be largely ignorant and unable to comment on matters of interest to the study, in which case, a purposive sample is appropriate (Cohen et al., 2007). A sample size of 29 participants comprising students (n= 14), alumni (n = 8), college administrators (n = 2), faculty members (n = 2) and community leaders (n = 3)were deliberately selected for this study based on their involvement and experience in the 'Apostolate' programme. These were 'typical' of a group who represent diverse perspectives on the subject (Leedy&Ormrod, 2005:206).

However, like other types of non-probability sampling, the researcher has no way of forecasting or guaranteeing that each element of the population will be represented in the sample when using purposive sampling (Leedy&Ormrod, 2005). Moreover, some members of the population have little or no chance of being sampled since purposive sampling "is deliberately and unashamedly selective and biased" (Cohen et al., 2007:115). Cohen and others continue to argue that though they may not be representative and their comments may not be generalizable, this is not the primary concern in such sampling; rather the concern is to acquire in-depth information from those who are in a position to give it.

In conducting social research, ethical issues must be addressed. Orb, Eisenhauer&Wynaden (2000) emphasise that ethical issues are present in any kind of research. Guidelines on research ethicswere observed throughout the implementation of various phases of this study. Particular attention was paid to the principles of confidentiality and voluntary participation. The principle of confidentiality requires that the data collected should be used for the study's purpose only and should not be accessed by a third party. Equally, the principle of voluntary participation requires that all human-subject research participants provide voluntary informed consent to participate in research (NIH Office of Extramural Research, 2008; Orb, Eisenhauer&Wynaden, 2000).

Bryman (2008:694) views informed consent as a key principle in social research ethics which implies that prospective research participants should be given as much information as might be needed to make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to participate in a study.

Each of the participantswas issued with a consent form and an information sheet concerning their consent and participation in the study before data collection. The information sheet clearly informed the participants of the purpose of the study, potential benefits, confidentiality protection, and conditions of participation including voluntary participation and the right to refuse or withdraw their participation without any penalty. Furthermore, in the final analysis, the anonymity of the research participants was guaranteed by the use of numbers with research instruments.

5. Data Collection Instruments

Data collection instruments refer to the methods researchers use to gather data for a study. Qualitative researchers often use multiple forms of data in any single study. They might use observations, interviews, written documents, audio-visual materials, electronic documents such as e-mail messages and websites, and anything else that can help them answer their research question (Leedy&Ormrod, 2005:143). Principal sources of data for this study included in-depth interviews, focus group and e-mail correspondence. Most of the primary data used in this study were collected using in-depth interviews. A total of 17 participants were interviewed comprising of the coordinator of the 'Apostolate', the dean of studies, 7 students, 3 alumni, 2 faculty members and 3 community leaders. In addition, one focus group (n = 7) comprising of Bachelor of Arts final-year students was carried out. Finally, 5 alumni participated in the study via e-mail correspondence.

Review of relevant documents provided by the participants, including academic programmes and calendars, brochures, minutes and reports were important sources of supplementary data for the study. Published texts formed secondary sources and provided a standard with which the collected primary data results were compared. In addition, participant observation, field notes and audio recording were also utilised during the process of data collection. A research diary was also keptto record activities of the research process.

5.1 Focus Group (FG)

Bryman (2008: 694) defines focus group as:

A form of group interview in which: there are several participants (in addition to the moderator/facilitator); there is an emphasis in the questioning on a particular fairly tightly defined topic; and the emphasis is upon interaction within the group and the joint construction of meaning.

It is a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher (Morgan, 1996). Stringer (2007) identifies FGs as a facilitated environment where people with similar interest or agenda discuss particular issues. It is generally composed of approximately six to twelve people who share similar characteristics or common interests, and are guided through a facilitated discussion on a clearly defined topic to gather information about the opinions of the group members (Leedy&Ormrod, 2005; Rennekamp&Nall, 2006). A facilitator guides the group based on a predetermined set of topics and creates an environment that encourages participants to share their perceptions and points of view (ETA, 2008). The discussion is often audio-recorded for later playback as suggested by Krueger & Casey (2000) andRennekamp & Nall (2006). FGs are useful for gathering subjective perspectives from key stakeholders (ETA, 2008). They are typically used to explore highly specific issues in order to get an initial sense of the dimensions that are of particular relevance to a topic and set of respondents (Sofaer, 1999; Basch, 1987)). FG was appropriate for obtaining data about feelings, opinions, experiences, service or other phenomenon from a small group of Arrupe College students who participated in the 'Apostolate' service-learning programme.

In this study, one FG comprising of seven Bachelor of Arts final-year students was used to investigate the experiences of students who participated in the 'Apostolate'. This followed Krueger (2002) and Krueger & Casey (2001) recommendation that the number of participants for a FG should be between 6 and 8. Prior to the FG discussion, proposed questions were made available to the participants. The FG discussion was conducted at a pre-arranged informal setting and time, and lasted for about 90 minutes as suggested by Leedy & Ormrod (2005), Rennekamp & Nall (2006), and ETA (2008). In this environment, participants were engaged in a discussion by presenting broad open-ended questions. Since the FG was composed of a homogenous group, it allowed participants to communicate openly about their experiences of the 'Apostolate'.

The discussion was audio-recorded for later playback with the permission of the participants following Krueger & Casey (2000) and Rennekamp & Nall, (2006) recommendation. This provided an opportunity to quote direct passages from the discussion and take notes as supplementary data (Guion et al., 2011).

The use of FG was complemented by other methods including in-depth interviews, e-mail correspondences, participant observation, and document review since FGs are often used in combination with other methods. The use of FGs, for example, with individual interviews is the most straightforward, since both are qualitative techniques (Morgan, 1996; Longfield, 2004) and are sources for collecting rich, qualitative data (Russ-Eft &P reskill, 2009).

ETA (2008) and others identify both advantages and disadvantages of focus groups. Since a FG is composed of a homogenous group, it saves time and allows participants to communicate openly (Basch, 1987; ETA, 2008; Morgan, 1996; Sofaer, 1999). In addition, FGs are relatively easy to set up; the group dynamic can provide useful information that individual data collection does not provide; and they are useful in gaining insight into a topic that may be more difficult to gather through other data collection methods. On the contrary, FGs are susceptible to facilitator'sbias (ETA, 2008; Morgan, 1996). Furthermore, the FG discussion can be dominated or distracted by a few individuals; data analysis is time consuming; they do not provide valid information at the individual level; and the information is not representative of other groups.

5.2 In-depth Interviews

Boyce & Neale (2006) identify in-depth interviewing as a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, programme, or situation. For example, we might ask participants, staff and others associated with a programme about their experiences and expectations related to the programme, the thoughts they have concerning programme operations, processes, outcomes and about any changes they perceive in themselves as a result of their involvement in the programme (ibid.).

In-depth interviews can be used for a variety of purposes, including needs assessment, programme refinement, issue identification and strategic planning. They are most appropriate for situations in which the researcher wants to ask open-ended questions that elicit depth of information (Guionet al., 2011). Questions used in in-depth interviews need to be worded so that respondents expound on the topic, not just answer 'yes' or 'no' (Lisaet al., 2011). As opposed to closed questions, open questions do not present the respondent with a list of possible answers to choose from (Bryman, 2008). This gives respondents freedom to answer the questions using their own words and allows the interviewer to deeply explore the respondent's feelings and perspectives on a subject. In sum, in-depth interviews involve not only asking questions, but systematically recording and documenting the responses to probe for deeper meaning and understanding (Lisaet al., 2011). Longfield (2004) suggests that in-depth interviews should last 1 to 2 hours depending on the patience of participants and their interest in the interview.

In this study, in-depth interviews were the main method of data collection. Marshall &Rossman (2011) acknowledge that qualitative researchers rely quite extensively on in-depth interviewing. In-depth interviews are often conducted in conjunction with focus group discussions to obtain more detailed information than was obtained in focus group (Longfield, 2004). In addition to thefocus group discussion which was conducted in person, individual interviews were conductedwithseventeen participants to obtain details about their personal experiences about the 'Apostolate'. Those who were interviewed one-on-one included students (n = 7), alumni (n = 2), faculty members (n = 2), the coordinator of the 'Apostolate' (n = 1), the dean of studies (n = 1), and community leaders (n = 3).

Prior to the interview, proposed questions for the interview were made available to the participants. All the participants were asked similar guiding questions. As the interview progressed, some modifications were made on some interview questions to address specific issues that arose during the interview process. Each participant was interviewed individually for approximately one hour using mostly open-ended questions and semi-structured format as suggested byLeedy & Ormrod (2005). These gave an opportunity for probing and follow-up questions to be raised and enabled the participants to speak freely about their experiences ofthe Arrupe College service-learning programme while affording them achance to provide information that was not anticipated (Gonsalves, 2008).

At the end of the predetermined interview questions, each interviewee was asked to add any comments regarding what was discussed to ensure that the responses reflected their viewpoints.Interviews were conducted at pre-arranged times and places andwere audio-recorded with the permission of informants. This provided an opportunity to quote direct passages from the interviews and take notes as supplementary data (Guion et al., 2011).

Boyce & Neale (2006) identify both advantages and disadvantages for using in-depth interviews. The primary advantage of in-depth interviews is that they provide much more detailed information than what is available through other data collection methods, such as surveys. In-depth interviews also provide a more relaxed atmosphere in which to collect information as people may feel more comfortable having a conversation with you about their programme as opposed to other methods such as filling out a survey. There are also disadvantages associated with the use of in-depth interviews. First, responses from participants could be biased due to their stake in a programme. Second, interviews can be a time-intensive evaluation activity because of the time it takes to conduct them, transcribe them and analyse the results. In planning this study, care was taken to include time for transcription and analysis of the detailed data. Third, interviewer needs appropriate training in interviewing techniques. To provide the most detailed and rich data from the interviewees, a good rapport needs to be developed with them including showing interest in what they are saying. In addition, an appropriate body language should be adopted while avoiding the use of yes or no questions, as well as leading questions. Finally, when in-depth interviews are used, generalizations about the results may be difficult to achieve because small samples are often chosen and random sampling methods are hardly used. Nevertheless, in-depth interviews provide valuable information for programmes, particularly when supplemented by other methods of data collection. The general rule on sample size for interviews is that when the same stories, themes, issues, and topics are emerging from the interviewees, then a sufficient sample size has been reached (ibid.).

5.3 E-mail Correspondence

E-mail correspondence involves written communication between the researcher and the respondent (Parris, 2008). With the advent of e-mail, the contributions of both individuals and groups to public debate have been made much less expensive and less impracticable than they once were. “Thanks to the technology of hyperlinks, digital information may be accessed from anywhere in the world”, as Graham (1999: 69) puts it. Anyone, anywhere, at any time, even a person with relatively limited means, can generally put things on the web and download materials. Graham adds: “Individuals and groups with limited time, resources, and skills can avail themselves of the technology of the internet and, literally present themselves and their message to the world” (Graham 1999: 70; Pacho, 2013: 150-151).

Given the fact that digital information can be accessed anywhere, at any time, without being in physical contact, e-mail correspondence proved to be a convenient instrument for interacting with Arrupe College alumni who resided outside Zimbabwe. One of the benefits of e-mail correspondence was access to a wide geographical area. Five alumni of Arrupe College residing in different countries (n = 4) were involved in this study via e-mail correspondence. The purpose of the e-mail correspondence was to gather information about the alumni’s experiences of the‘Apostolate’ and change in their life since their participation in the programme.

To commence the research process, an opening e-mail was sent to each participant requesting their participation in the study. This was accompanied with a consent form and information sheet as attachments concerning their consent and participation in the study. Proposed open-ended questionswere later e-mailed to the participants upon consenting to participate in the study. In exploring responses to the questions, a dialogue ensued with each respondent. E-mail correspondence was important in responding to questions from the participants and for clarifying issues. Additionally, it was important in following up some of the responses that needed further clarification.

Parris (2008) identifies both advantages and disadvantages of e-mail correspondence. The advantage of e-mail correspondence, which the qualitative researcher in particular cannot help but be drawn by, is the potential time savings in transcription. Data collection and transcription occur at the same time, and the e-mail narratives can be copied and pasted directly to a new file for analysis. E-mail correspondence also provides the potential to access individuals whose time demands may inhibit their participation through more traditional data collection methods. Finally, it allows respondents the time to reflect on their responses while providing convenience both to the respondent and the researcher to have time to read and consider their exchanges.

However, one of the challenges of e-mail correspondence is that it can be time-consuming for respondents since they have to write down all their responses unlike in face-to-face interviews where it is the responsibility of the researcher to audio-record the interview and take supplementary notes.

5.4 Participant Observation and Document Review

Bogdan& Taylor (1975) define participant observation as a period of intense social interaction between the researcher and the subjects, during which data are unobtrusively and systematically collected. During this period, social researchers immerse themselves in the lives and situations of the people they wish to understand; they share life with them and even empathize with them. Researchers, then record their findings soon after leaving the field. Participant observation has been used in a variety of disciplines as a tool for collecting data about people, processes, and cultures in qualitative research (Kawulich, 2005). The process enables researchers to learn about the activities of the people under study in their natural setting through observing and sometimes participating in those activities (DeWalt&DeWalt, 2002). The researcher attempts to get as close as possible to the group that he or she is studying to best understand it (Hong & Duff, 2002). Hong & Duff add that while a detached observer, by maintaining a distance, may have the advantages of greater objectivity, less reactivity, and a broader perspective, he or she is not likely to achieve the quality of observation of a full participant; the richness of the data is likely to suffer.

In this study, observations were made particularly during visits to communities where the students carry out their service activities. Three communities were visitedand in-depth interviews were conducted with the community leaders. These were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. Observations focused on the ways students and community members interact, what they do and what roles they take during the interaction. These providedan opportunity to document both the verbal and non-verbal ways that students and community members construct meaning in interaction and aided reflection on the service activities. Observations were complementedwith field notes (Kawulich, 2005).

Participant observation has several advantages as a tool both for data collection and analysis as identified by DeWalt&DeWalt (2002). First, it increases the validity of a study, as observations may help the researcher have a better understanding of the context and phenomenon under study. Second, it enhances the quality of the data obtained during fieldwork. Third, it enhances the quality of the interpretation of data. However, there are also some demerits involved in using participant observation. DeWalt&DeWalt (2002) note that participant observation is conducted by a biased human who serves as the instrument for data collection. In addition, a number of factors can affect whether the researcher is accepted in the community, including one's appearance, ethnicity, age, gender and class (Kawulich, 2005).

Lastly, document review was used as a technique of data collection. It is a way of collecting data by reviewing existing documents. These may be in form of hard copy or electronic, and may include reports, program logs, performance ratings, funding proposals, meeting minutes, newsletters, and marketing materials (ETA, 2009). In this study, analysis of documents provided by the participants including academic programmes and calendars, brochures, minutes and reports related to the 'Apostolate' provided important sources of supplementary data. These helped in the corroboration of data gathered from other sources and in understanding the history, mission and operation of the 'Apostolate'.

ETA (2009) identifies the following advantages and disadvantages of using document review. On the one hand, the method is relatively inexpensive, good source of background information, unobtrusive, provides a behind-the-scenes look at a programme that may not be directly observable, and it may bring up issues not noted by other means. On the other hand, information may be inapplicable, disorganised, unavailable, or out of date; the method could be biased because of selective survival of information, information may be incomplete or inaccurate, and it can be time consuming to collect, review, and analyse many documents.

6. Validity and Reliability

Validity is an important aspect to effective research. It is concerned with the integrity of the conclusions that are generated from a piece of research (Bryman, 2008). It is essentially a demonstration that a particular instrument in fact measures what it is intended to measure (Leedy&Ormrod, 2005; Postlethwaite, 2005). In qualitative data, validity can be addressed through the honesty, depth, richness and scope of the data achieved, the participants approached, the extent of triangulation and the disinterestedness or objectivity of the researcher (Cohen et al., 2007).

Conversely, reliability refers to the degree to which a procedure gives consistent results (Postlethwaite, 2005). In qualitative research, reliability can be regarded as a fit between what researchers record as data and what actually occurs in the natural setting that is being researched, that is, a degree of accuracy and comprehensiveness of coverage (Cohen et al., 2007). Cohen continues to postulate that we can measure something accurately only when we can also measure it consistently. Measuring something consistently, however, does not necessarily mean measuring it accurately; "reliability is a necessary but insufficient condition for validity" (Cohen et al., 2007:132; Leedy&Ormrod, 2005:29; Postlethwaite, 2005).

Cohen et al. (2007) suggest that validity and reliability are addressed using different instruments. In this study, bracketing, triangulation and thick description were used to strengthen the validity and reliability of findings. Tufford& Newman (2012) define bracketing as a method used in qualitative research to mitigate the potential damaging effects of preconceptions that may taint the research process and thereby to increase the rigour of the study.They further assert that:

While bracketing can mitigate adverse effects of the research endeavor, importantly it also facilitates the researcher reaching deeper levels of reflection across all stages of qualitative research: selecting a topic and population, designing the interview, collecting and interpreting data, and reporting findings. The opportunity for sustained in-depth reflection may enhance the acuity of the research and facilitate more profound and multifaceted analysis and results (81).

Bracketing does not imply that the researcher must be a *tabula rasa*, or a blank slate. It would be naive to think this was possible and that the emphasis should be on the researcher's expected emergence or unveiling of a separate entity called data; locating the participant as a vessel containing a precious liquor in which the researchers will immerse themselves (Mills et al., 2006). Although bracketing may be difficult to attain, past experiencesand preconceptions aboutthe 'Apostolate' were suspended tentativelyby focusing more on what the participants were experiencing and saying. The participants' stories were presented without letting external voices get into their experiences. Furthermore, a researcher's diary, field notes and audio recordingswere stored to keep track of the data.

Secondly, the issues of validity and reliability were addressed through triangulation. Bryman (2008:700) defines triangulation as "the use of more than one method or source of data in the study of a social phenomenon so that findings may be cross-checked". Triangulation supports the strength of interpretations and conclusions in qualitative research. If different data sources and collection methods provide similar information, showing the same categories and linkages, then a greater confidence can be placed on the findings. In doing so, these sources and methods corroborate each other and contribute to a stronger explanation (Cohen et al., 2007; Mertens, 1998:354; Neuman, 1994). In this study, diverse participants and data collection instruments were used to achieve this form of validation. A total of 29 individuals participated in this study. These included Arrupe College students and alumni, administrators, faculty and community leaders. They provided a wide variety of information and viewpoints about the 'Apostolate' and led to triangulation of informants. Multiple data collection instruments were also employed. Data collected through in-depth interviews, for instance, was triangulated with data from focus group, e-mail correspondence, document review and vice versa. Triangulation between these different instruments strengthened the validity of the information, the rigour of the process and supported the final theoretical explanations.

Finally, thick description was used to enhance validity and reliability in this study. Thick description refers to the researcher's task of describing and interpreting observed social action or behaviour within its particular context (Ponterotto, 2006). It accurately describes observed social actions and assigns purpose and intentionality to these actions, by way of the researcher's understanding and clear description of the context under which the social actions took place. The context and the specifics of the social action are so well described that the reader experiences a sense of verisimilitude as they read the researcher's account. Verisimilitude implies 'truth-like' statements that produce for readers the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described (Ponterotto, 2006). By providing such thick description the validity and reliability of research findings are improved. While all raw data cannot be included in the findings of this study, some direct quotes from participants were included to enable readers to gain insight into the 'Apostolate' as experienced and perceived by the participants.

To conclude, Marshall & Rossman (1999) acknowledge that no research project is without challenges; there is no such thing as a perfectly designed study. It is important to outline challenges faced during fieldwork and data collection period in the course of this study. First, the interview appointments had to be changed from time to time due to participants' other commitments and lack of time. In one instance, one of the appointments had to be completely cancelled as the participant had no time throughout the data collection period. In addition, some participants took long to respond to the e-mail correspondences and they had to be reminded repeatedly. These interfered with the smooth progress of the data collection process as planned. Second, some participants were unwilling to participate in the study due to the political situation in Zimbabwe. In an environment, where fear is widespread, some participants, particularly, community leaders were afraid to provide information. These participants could not understand the intention of the study even after the purpose of the research was clearly explained to them including provision of the research information sheet as they thought that the study was meant for a political reason. Finally, some participants misunderstood some of the questions, particularly in the case of e-mail correspondences. These had to be clarified from time to time so that the participants could respond to the questions more accurately.

7. Conclusion

A good understanding of a research approach is necessary to enable researchers choose appropriate research design and techniques to adequately address a research problem. A qualitative methodology involving a case studyis relevant for investigating experiences of participants. Justification for the chosen research methodology, including an appropriately high proportion of application must be given.Questions of sampling, data collection, ethical issues, validation, analysis and presentationmust also be addressed to develop a theoretical explanation of a phenomenon under study while paying sufficient attention to potential criticisms. To ensure a balanced approach, it is also important for researchers to acknowledge challenges faced in the course of their study. In summary, while social scientists may employ various research designs to a study, a qualitative framework integrating a case studymethod can guarantee success in understanding one situation in great depth; it is rich in detail andso a particular individual, programme, or event can be studied in depth for a defined period of time (Leedy&Ormrod, 2005).

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