

# Exploratory Research: Purpose And Process

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**Abstract:**-Exploratory research (qualitative research) is employed to develop initial ideas and insights and to provide direction for any further research needed (Churchill & Iacobucci, 2005 ; Aaker et. Al. 2007). An exploratory study is essential when a researcher needs to identify problems, defines the problem more precisely and identifies any specific objectives or data requirements to be addressed through additional research (Kinnear & Taylor, 1996). The exploratory research is highly flexible, unstructured and qualitative (Aaker et. al. 2007). Exploratory research is when a study is undertaken with the objective either to explore an area where little is known or to investigate the possibilities of undertaking a particular research study.

**Key Words:**-Exploratory research, qualitative research, hypothesis, social phenomena, Experience survey

**Introduction:**-Exploratory research is preliminary study of an unfamiliar problem about which the researcher has little or no knowledge. It is similar to a doctor's initial investigation of a patient suffering from an unfamiliar malady for getting some clues for identifying it. It is ill-structured and much less focused on predetermined objectives. It usually takes the form of a pilot study.

Exploratory research is characterized by its flexibility. When a problem is broad and not specifically defined, the researchers use exploratory research as a beginning step. Exploratory studies are a valuable means of understanding what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomenon in a new light (Yin, 1994).

Exploratory research has the goal of formulating problems more precisely, clarifying concepts, gathering explanations, gaining insight, eliminating impractical ideas and forming hypotheses. Literature research, survey, focus group and case studies are usually used to carry out exploratory

research. An exploratory research may develop hypotheses, but it does not seek to test them.

Though it is a separate type of research, it is appropriate to consider it as the first stage of a three-stage process of exploration, description and experimentation. The purpose of an exploratory study may be:

1. To generate new ideas or
2. To increase the researcher's familiarity with the problem or
3. To make a precise formulation of the problem or
4. To gather information for clarifying concepts or
5. To determine whether it is feasible to attempt the study.

Sometimes, a scientist may find, after spending a tremendous amount of energy and time on a research project, that it is not possible to secure the required data. A preliminary exploration could help avoiding such dismay. For example, a research student of the author wanted to study the pattern of marketing strategies of large manufacturing enterprises. A critical pre-requisite to this study was to know whether marketing executives would divulge adequate information about their marketing strategies. An exploration determined that they would not. An exploratory study does not aim at testing hypothesis.

According to Daniel Katz(1953), it just attempts "to see what is there rather than to predict the relationships that will be founded. But it should be so designed as to provide as definite information as possible for a set of research objectives."

## Objectives of the Paper:

1. To discuss two levels of exploratory research.
2. To find the need for exploratory research in social sciences.
3. To discuss process of exploratory research.
4. To find limitations of exploratory research.

**Levels of Exploratory Studies:**-Daniel Katz (1953) conceptualizes two levels of exploratory studies. "At the first level is the discovery of the significant variables in the situation; at the second, the discovery of relationship between variables." It is necessary to delimit the area to be studied even at the first level. Katz warns that it is a mistake to believe

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that one study is going to be able to account for all the variance in complex social phenomena. He advises that “It is much more effective to take one central set of variables and investigate them as thoroughly as possible as to try to study the universe in one piece of research.”

**The Need for Exploratory Studies:-**A strong rationale for choosing an exploratory research design is that exploratory social science has the potential to be more insightful than confirmatory research by applying dialectical thinking. Dialectics, explains Theodor W. Adorno (1973), means to achieve something positive by means of negation (Adorno, 1973).

Social sciences are relatively young. Researches in them are scarce. Many of them inevitably have to be exploratory ones. Few well-trodden paths exist to follow for the investigators of social life. Most existing theories in social sciences are either too general or too specific to provide clear guidance for empirical research. Hence, exploratory research is necessary to get initial insight into the problems for the purpose of formulating them for more precise investigation. Hence, it is also known as formulative research.

**Process of Exploratory Research:-**About the steps in exploration, Selltitz and others (1959) have suggested the following three steps/methods for the exploratory study:

- a) A review of pertinent literature
- b) An experience survey
- c) An analysis of “insight stimulating” cases.

**Literature survey:** A study of related and pertinent books, articles and reports turns up a number of leads clues for further investigation that will advance the research. A workable hypothesis may be formulated; important variables may be identified.

**Experience survey:** Informal interviews with persons experience in the area of study will help the researcher in securing insight into the subject and its various facts. In selecting the person for this survey, representation to different facts of experience should be given. For example, in an exploratory study of the problem of rural development, it is profitable to interview researchers familiar with rural studies, rural development administrators, social workers, rural financial institutions and village leaders. The researcher should prepare an interview guide

so as to have an idea of issues and aspects of the problem on which questions may be posed. Of course, this interview guide should be flexible enough to explore various avenues that emerge during the interviews. This survey may yield a new hypothesis and information on the various dimensions of the study, facilities and cooperation available for the study, and the factors to be controlled.

**Analysis of insight-stimulating cases:** In an unexplored area of study, an intensive study of some selected cases can yield stimulating insight. For example, the extraordinary theoretical insights of Sigmund Freud on human psyche were the result of his intensive study of patients. Profound insights into the relationships between the individual and society have been brought out by anthropological case studies of primitive cultures. The types of people who provide “insight-stimulating” information could include the following:

1. New comers related to research.
2. Marginal or peripheral individuals who are placed on the margin between contending groups. For example, in an organizational hierarchy, foremen are neither managers nor workers but something in between.
3. Individuals in transition, e.g., recently promoted or transferred employees.
4. Deviants and isolates in a group who hold a different view from the majority.
5. “Pure” cases or cases that should be extreme examples of the conditions under study, e.g., the most dissatisfied beneficiary of a rural development scheme.
6. Those who fit well and those who do not both.
7. Those that represent different categories in the system. The end of an exploratory study comes when the researcher finds that further research is not presently possible on the problem or succeeds in identifying the major dimensions of the problem. In the latter case, he has to plan the formal research design.

**Limitations of Exploratory research:**

1. The main disadvantage of exploratory research is that they provide qualitative data. Interpretation of such information can be judgmental and biased.

2. Even though exploratory research can lead researcher in right direction however the answer provided by it is usually inconclusive.
3. Many of the times, exploratory research involves a smaller sample size, therefore, the results cannot be accurately interpreted for a generalized population.

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