Qualitative Research

Introduction
Qualitative research is becoming more widely valued and recognised in the health care research field. The importance of qualitative research was established in the early 20th Century as a form of inquiry for the study of human group life, particularly in the fields of sociology and anthropology.

Qualitative research aims to generate further research and theories rather than to verify them. It relies on transforming information from observations, reports and recordings into data into the written word (rather than into numeric data in quantitative research). Qualitative research is useful for finding out information in areas where little information is known, or to study a particular concept in more detail.

A qualitative research study usually involves fewer people or events in comparison to a quantitative research study. Qualitative research is about ‘discovery of facts’ and not necessarily hard evidence. Some studies, particularly anthropological studies, are located in a time and place and the findings may not be seen as generalisable but the findings may be transferable.

Types of Qualitative Research
There are several different methods used in qualitative research.

Phenomenological research is a method used to establish the meaning of an event for people (e.g. pain, bereavement). Its main purpose is to find out what the essence of the experience was. Data is usually collected via interviews, focus groups or written diaries.

Grounded theory is the generation of theory from data. The researcher starts with a general research subject and builds their research question as they collect data allowing the research question to emerge and develop with the collection of the data at the same time as developing theory. Data collection maybe in the form of interviews, participant observation and documentation review.

Ethnographic research involves placing specific encounters, events and understanding into fuller and more meaningful context. It combines research design fieldwork and various other methods of inquiry to produce accounts, descriptions interpretations and representations of human lives, cultures and sub-cultures set in a specific time and place. Ethnographic researchers are required to observe the participants without prejudice or prior assumptions. Its main methods of data collection are in participant observation, unstructured interviews and examination of documents. The data is presented in the form of ‘thick description’ (transcriptions from field notes and quotations from interviews) and is presented in the form of ethnography (a text).

Action research can be described as a family of research methodologies that pursue action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time. It does this by using a cyclic or spiral process which alternates between action and critical reflection and in the later cycles, continuously refining methods, data and interpretation in the light of the understanding developed in the earlier cycles.

Historical research method is a procedure used to establish the facts about an event/conditions of interest, which happened in the past. Data can be collected in the form of observations, interviews e.g. people who were part of that history i.e. World War Two veterans, and examination of documents e.g. Archaeological research, research into historical events, artefacts, and old documents.
Narrative – Based on the perspective that we construct narratives or stories (an organised interpretation of a sequence of events with a beginning a middle and an end) to make sense of and to organise an ever changing and unorganised world. By telling stories about our lives to others this develops our sense of self and our life. The primary source of data for narrative research is the interview describing a particular experience which could be supported by photos, diaries or home videos.

Sample Size

There is no set sample size for qualitative studies but generally they involve around 6-8 people or events due the large amount of data generated and the complexity of analysing qualitative data. Data from more than 10 people is usually only used to validate the findings identified from the initial 8-10 participants.

Reliability and Validity

Any data collected as part of a research project has to be able to answer the research question. Reliability is the measure by which the research instrument used (the researcher collecting the data) is neutral in its effect and would measure the same effect on future occasions to ensure consistency.

Validity can be split into internal (Credibility) and external (Transferability). Internal validity involves the process of finding out whether the results are credible or believable. This would involve the participants, as they will be the best judges of the research’s credibility as it was borne from them. External validity involves the transferability to other contexts or environments. This may or may not be the case.

Ethics Committee Approval

Qualitative research can be more difficult to clarify for Ethics approval than Quantitative research methods. The role of a NHS Research Ethics Committee in reviewing the proposed study is ‘to protect the dignity, rights, safety and well-being of all actual or potential research participants’ (Governance arrangements for NHS Research Ethics Committees 2001). There are three main ethical considerations that need to be addressed for all research relating to the individual research participants. These are:

Confidentiality
Anonymity
Informed consent

In some qualitative studies it may be difficult to gain informed consent especially if the researcher plans to use a method such as grounded theory when the research question is generated through the research itself or if the researcher is not able to define who their research population is until the start the study (participant observation). It may be necessary for the researcher to maintain ongoing communication with the ethics committee throughout the duration of the study to explain the research methodology in depth and to update the committee as the study questions become clearer or the research population changes to ensure ongoing approval during the life of the project.

Methods of Analysis

Qualitative data can be analysed either manually or using computer software packages designed for the task (such as ethnography, Nudist, Max QDA etc..). There are different
approaches to analysing transcripts from interviews or focus groups. You should decide on which method you want to use before you start the study to ensure you collect that data that you need. The analysis of textual data is handled differently to numeric data. The content of the data is examined to look for recurring themes. This process is called content, conceptual or thematic analysis and has been defined as a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding and allows inferences to be made from the data collected.

**Phenomenological / Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)** – This is used for understanding the meanings people have for events and to understand how people make sense of the world. Meaning units or themes are identified from the transcripts to identify the main themes and subunits of these themes.

**Grounded Theory Analysis** – This method emphasises the building of a research question and theory through data analysis. It starts with individual cases then extends the data collection out to more abstract categories to explain what the data indicates and patterns emerging in the data. This is particularly useful to study local interactions and meanings relating to their specific social context.

**Narrative Analysis** – This focuses on the structure and key messages emerging from the narrative. It helps to initially write a short summary of the narrative to identify the structure of the narrative, i.e. the beginning middle and the end. Then the key issues and links in the narrative can be highlighted. These can then compared to theories to understand the people’s interpretations and way of making sense of events.

**Conversation / Discourse Analysis** This is used for describing the linguistic resources participants use during conversations, the patterns conversations take and the social networks established.

**Writing up your Research**

The process of research is not complete until the findings have written up. Research is all about sharing your findings with others so that they can benefit from the new knowledge you have discovered. It also gives your project findings the opportunity to be critically evaluated, reproduced and thus gains validity.

**References:**


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