

What is qualitative research?

This issue of *Research Bites* provides introductory information about qualitative research. Qualitative methods have been used in areas such as psychology, sociology and education for many years and are gaining increasing acceptance in the health care field. Qualitative research studies real-world situations and aims to be non manipulative, unobtrusive and open to whatever emerges from the research situation without predetermined outcomes.

Qualitative methods explore a range of issues such as human behaviour, health care practices, experiences, beliefs and other social phenomena. These methods provide information that often cannot be obtained by quantitative means. They can also supplement and/or validate quantitative findings.

Qualitative methods

The method selected depends on:

- Research issue or question;
- Approach (tradition);
- Type of information required;
- Time frame; and
- Resources available.

Commonly used methods for obtaining qualitative data

- Focus groups and group interviews;
- One-on-one interviews (structured, semi-structured and unstructured);
- Participant observation;
- Documentary sources such as reports, texts and journal articles;
- Written material such as files, diaries and journals;
- Pictorial sources eg. photographs and drawings;
- Concept mapping and visualization exercises.

Focus groups

The interviewer usually asks a series of open-ended questions and encourages participants to

Useful resources

- Mays, N. & Pope, C. (Eds.), 2000, *Qualitative Research in Health Care* <http://www.bmjpg.com/qrhc/contents.html> (preview on line)
- Silverman, D., 1993, *Interpreting qualitative data: methods for analysing talk, text and interaction*, Sage, London.
- Kellaher, A., 1993, *The unobtrusive researcher: a guide to methods*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards.

explore the issues in their own words pursuing their own questions and priorities.

One-on-one interviews

Structured: Questions asked in a standardized manner. Data can sometimes be used quantitatively.
Semi-structured: A series of open-ended questions that define the area of interest.
Unstructured (in-depth): Fewer issues covered in greater detail. Interview might begin with a single open-ended question e.g. "Can you tell me about...?"

Observation

Often used for studies of social roles and formal organizations. People are studied in their natural environment with minimal interference from the researcher.

Researcher's tip – Choose your methodology and methods carefully!

Qualitative research is time consuming and requires considerable skill. Much of the criticism aimed at qualitative research should have been directed at unskilled researchers.

Some qualitative research traditions (or approaches which provide a framework to inform the research)

Phenomenology - Examines how individuals experience a particular phenomenon within their socio-cultural context. *E.g. What is the lived experience of being diagnosed with breast cancer?*

Ethnography - The descriptive study of the culture or subculture of a group of people (can be a particular situation within that culture). Explores the roles, rules and processes that influence behaviour. *E.g. What are the main health-related issues of elderly Vietnamese patients?*

Grounded theory - Can be both an approach and outcome of research. Usually applied to the study of processes. Uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory (outcome) about a phenomenon. *E.g. What are the processes doctors use to bring about medication compliance?*

Action research - Explores what happens when change is introduced into a system. Its focus is usually on finding solutions to practical problems. With the aid of the researcher, participants identify problems, work towards implementing solutions and evaluate the process and outcomes of the change. *E.g. How can practice nurses improve outcomes for patients with chronic respiratory disorders?*

Discourse analysis - Explores what can be learnt about something by the way people talk or write about it; focuses on the expressions they use. *E.g. What are some of the ways in which patients and doctors claim power in the medical encounter?*

Case studies - Not really a methodology, but a focus. Can be examined both qualitatively and quantitatively. Valuable where experimental designs are not practical e.g. for understanding where interventions succeed or fail. *E.g. How do GPs document practice for patients presenting with depression?*

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Next issue: Study design