



Qualitative Research in Nursing and Healthcare

Immy Holloway
Stephanie Wheeler

Third Edition

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Preface

In this, the third edition of our book, we consider some of the changes that have taken place since the last edition. All chapters, and most of the examples within them, have been updated. In the light of developments in qualitative health research, a mixed methods research chapter was added.

The reference lists at the end of each chapter are still long and include significant and foundational texts as well as less important references. We aimed to give qualitative health researchers a variety of articles and books which they can follow up themselves depending on their choice of approach. The references provide guidance for further and more detailed reading.

The book addresses a somewhat wider readership than before. Nurses, midwives and health visitors are still the main professions which will use the text; however, it could also be helpful for other health researchers such as doctors and professions allied to medicine, for instance physio- and occupational therapists. The groups for whom this book is intended are thus

1. professionals in the healthcare field who wish to carry out qualitative research in clinical or educational settings;
2. undergraduates, especially mature students who already have some research experience;
3. pre-registration students with an appreciation of research who wish to learn about qualitative perspectives;
4. postgraduates who undertake a qualitative research project and want to revise qualitative research strategies and procedures before proceeding to more sophisticated texts.

We have attempted to provide researchers with theoretical understanding and practical knowledge. Novice researchers might find some of the issues rather complex, and we tried to make abstract ideas more understandable and explained practical procedures in some detail but, we hope, without too much simplification.

How to read this book

Researchers need not read this book from start to finish, although it would help them understand the nature of qualitative research. In particular, they can be selective about part three, depending on the approach they choose.

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xiii</i>
 Part One: Introduction to Qualitative Research: Initial Stages	 I
1 The Nature and Utility of Qualitative Research	3
What is qualitative research?	3
The main features of qualitative research	3
The place of theory in qualitative research	11
The usefulness of qualitative research in healthcare	11
Choosing an approach for health research	13
Problematic issues in qualitative research	14
Conclusion	17
Summary	17
References	18
Further reading	19
 2 The Paradigm Debate: The Place of Qualitative Research	 21
Theoretical frameworks and ontological position	21
The paradigm debate	23
Conflicting or complementary perspectives?	27
Final comment	28
References	29
Further reading	30
 3 Initial Steps in the Research Process	 31
Selecting and formulating the research question	31
The literature review	35
Writing a research proposal	39
Access and entry to the setting	46
Summary	49

References	50
Further reading	51
4 Ethical Considerations	53
The basic ethical framework for research	53
Ethics in qualitative research	56
Researching one's peers	63
The research relationship	64
Research in the researcher's workplace	65
The role of research ethics committees	66
Summary	71
References	71
Further reading	72
5 The Issue of Supervision	75
The responsibilities of supervisor and student	76
Writing and relationships	77
Practical aspects of supervision	78
Single or joint supervision	79
Problems with supervision	81
Summary	83
References	83
Further reading	84
 Part Two: Data Collection	 85
6 Interviewing	87
Interviews as sources of data	87
The interview process	88
Types of interview	88
Probing, prompting and summarising	92
The social context of the interview	93
Unexpected outcomes: qualitative interviewing and therapy	94
Length and timing of interviews	95
Recording interview data	95
The interviewer–participant relationship	97
Problematic issues and challenges in interviewing	98
Interviewing through electronic media	98
Ethical issues in interviewing	102
Strengths and weaknesses of interviewing	102
Summary	104
References	104
Further reading	105

7 Participant Observation and Documents as Sources of Data	107
Participant observation	107
The origins of participant observation	108
Immersion in culture and setting	108
Documentary sources of data	117
Images as sources of data	120
Summary	121
References	121
Further reading	122
8 Focus Groups as Qualitative Research	125
What is a focus group?	125
The origin and purpose of focus groups	125
Sample size and composition	127
Conducting focus group interviews	129
Analysing and reporting focus group data	131
Advantages and limitations of focus groups	133
Critical comments on focus group interviews in healthcare	134
Summary	135
References	135
Further reading	136
9 Sampling and Site Selection	137
Purposeful (or purposive) sampling	137
Sampling types	139
Sampling decisions	143
How shall we name them?	147
Summary	148
References	148
Part Three: Approaches to Qualitative Research	151
10 Ethnography	153
The historical perspective	153
A focus on culture	154
Ethnographic methods	155
Ethnography in healthcare	156
The main features of ethnography	158
Fieldwork	162
Doing and writing ethnography	164
Pitfalls and problems	167
Summary	168

References	169
Further reading	170
11 Grounded Theory	173
History and origin	173
The main features of grounded theory	175
Data collection, theoretical sampling and analysis	176
Pitfalls and problems	185
Glaser's critique and further development	186
Constructivist grounded theory	188
Which approach for the health researcher?	188
Summary	188
References	189
Further reading	190
12 Narrative Inquiry	193
The nature of narrative and story	193
Narrative research	194
Types of narrative	197
Illness narratives	200
Narrative interviewing	203
Narrative analysis	204
Problematic issues	206
Conclusion	208
Summary	208
References	208
Further reading	210
13 Phenomenology	213
Intentionality and the early stages of phenomenology	214
Schools of phenomenology	218
The phenomenological research process: doing phenomenology	219
Procedures for data collection and analysis	222
Phenomenology and health research	225
Choice of approach: descriptive or interpretive phenomenology	227
Summary	228
References	229
Further reading	231
14 Action Research	233
What is action research?	233
The origins of action research	235
Action research in healthcare	236

The main features of action research	237
Practical steps	241
Trustworthiness in AR	243
Problems and critique	244
Summary	245
References	246
Further reading	247
15 Additional Approaches	249
Case study research	249
Conversation analysis	251
Critical incident technique	253
Discourse analysis	255
Feminist research	258
Performative social science	261
Conclusion	263
References	263
Further reading	267
16 Mixed Methods: Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Research	269
The nature of mixed methods studies	269
Doing mixed methods research	271
Types of mixed methods research	271
The place and purpose of the literature	274
Triangulation	275
Critique of MMR	275
Conclusion	276
Summary	277
References	277
Further reading	278
Part Four: Data Analysis and Completion	279
17 Data Analysis: Procedures, Practices and Computers	281
The process of data analysis	281
Coding and categorising	286
Problems of QDA	288
Computer-aided analysis of qualitative data	289
Problems and critique	293
Summary	294
References	295
Further reading	296

18 Establishing Quality: Trustworthiness or Validity	297
Quality	297
An alternative perspective: trustworthiness	302
Trustworthiness	302
Strategies to ensure trustworthiness	304
Quality and creativity	311
Summary	312
References	312
Further reading	314
19 Writing up Qualitative Research	315
The research account	315
Use of the first person	316
The format of the report	317
Critical assessment and evaluation	329
Guide to appraisal	329
Publishing and presenting the research	331
Summary	334
References	334
Further reading	336
<i>Glossary</i>	337
<i>Index</i>	343

PART ONE

Introduction to Qualitative Research: Initial Stages

CHAPTER 1

The Nature and Utility of Qualitative Research

What is qualitative research?

Qualitative research is a form of social inquiry that focuses on the way people make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live. A number of different approaches exist within the wider framework of this type of research, and many of these share the same aim – to understand, describe and interpret social phenomena as perceived by individuals, groups and cultures. Researchers use qualitative approaches to explore the behaviour, feelings and experiences of people and what lies at the core of their lives. For example, ethnographers focus on culture and customs; grounded theorists investigate social processes and interaction, while phenomenologists consider and illuminate a phenomenon and describe the ‘life world’ or *Lebenswelt*. Qualitative approaches are useful in the exploration of change or conflict. The basis of qualitative research lies in the interpretive approach to social reality and in the description of the lived experience of human beings.

The main features of qualitative research

Different types of qualitative research share common characteristics and use similar procedures though differences in data collection and analysis do exist.

The following elements are part of most qualitative approaches:

- The data have primacy (priority); the theoretical framework is not predetermined but derives directly from the data.
- Qualitative research is context-bound and researchers must be context sensitive.
- Researchers immerse themselves in the natural setting of the people whose behaviour and thoughts they wish to explore.
- Qualitative researchers focus on the ‘emic’ perspective, the views of the people involved in the research and their perceptions, meanings and interpretations.

- Qualitative researchers use ‘thick description’: they describe, analyse and interpret but also go beyond the constructions of the participants.
- The relationship between the researcher and the researched is close and based on a position of equality as human beings.
- Reflexivity in the research makes explicit the stance of the researcher, who is the main research tool.

The primacy of data

Researchers usually approach people with the aim of finding out about their concerns; they go to the participants to collect the rich and in-depth data that can then become the basis for theorising. The interaction between the researcher and the participants leads to an understanding of experience and the generation of concepts. The data themselves have primacy, generate new theoretical ideas, and they help modify already existing theories or uncover the essence of phenomena. It means that the research design cannot be predefined before the start of the research. In other types of research, assumptions and ideas lead to hypotheses which are tested (though this is not true for all quantitative research); sampling frames are imposed; in qualitative research, however, the data have priority. The theoretical framework of the research project is not predetermined but based on the incoming data. Although the researchers do have knowledge of some of the theories involved, the incoming data might confirm or contradict existing assumptions and theory.

This approach to social science is, initially at least, inductive. Researchers move from the specific to the general, from the data to theory or analytic description. They do not impose ideas or follow up assumptions but give accounts of reality as seen by the participants. Researchers must be open-minded – though they cannot help having some ‘hunches’ about what they may find, especially if they are familiar with the setting and some of the literature on the topic.

While some qualitative inquiry is concerned with the generation of theory such as grounded theory, many researchers do not achieve this; others, such as phenomenologists, focus on a particular phenomenon to illuminate it. All approaches usually provide descriptions or interpretation of participants’ experiences and the phenomenon to be studied but go to a more abstract and theoretical level in their written work, especially when they carry out postgraduate research. Qualitative inquiry is not static but developmental and dynamic in character; the focus is on process as well as outcomes.

Contextualisation

Researchers must be sensitive to the context of the research and immerse themselves in the setting and situation. Both personal and social context is important. The context of participants’ lives or work affects their behaviour,

and therefore researchers have to realise that the participants are grounded in their history and temporality. Researchers take into account the total context of people's lives and the broader political and social framework of the culture in which it takes place. The conditions in which they gather the data, the locality, time and history are all involved. Events and actions are studied as they occur in everyday 'real life settings'. Koro-Ljungberg (2008) states that participants not only have personal values and beliefs but are also connected with their environment, and this influences their interactions with the researcher. It is important to respect the context and culture in which the study takes place. If researchers understand the context, they can locate the actions and perceptions of individuals and grasp the meanings that they communicate. The interest in context and contextualisation goes beyond that which influences the research; it also affects its outcomes and applications in the clinical situation. Scott *et al.* (2008) add that organisational context, group membership and other factors are also important in the applications and use of the research in healthcare settings.

Immersion in the setting

Qualitative researchers use the strategies of observing, questioning and listening, immersing themselves in the 'real' world of the participants. Observing, listening and asking questions will lead to rich data. Involvement in the setting also assists in focusing on the interactions between people and the way they construct or change rules and situations. Qualitative inquiry can trace progress and development over time, as perceived by the participants.

For the understanding of participants' experiences, it is necessary to become familiar with their world. When professionals do research, they are often part of the setting they investigate and know it intimately. This might mean that they could miss important issues or considerations. To better be able to examine the world of the participant, researchers must not take this world for granted but should question their own assumptions and act like strangers to the setting or as 'naïve' observers. They 'make the familiar strange' (Delamont and Atkinson (1995) called their book *Fighting Familiarity*). Immersion might mean attending meetings with or about informants, becoming familiar with other similar situations, reading documents or observing interaction in the setting. This can even start before the formal data collection phase.

Most qualitative inquiry investigates patterns of interaction, seeks knowledge about a group or a culture or explores the life world of individuals. In clinical, social care or educational settings, this may be interaction between professionals and clients or relatives, or interaction with colleagues. It also means listening to people and attempting to see the world from their point of view. The research can be a macro- or micro-study – for instance, it may take place in a hospital ward, a classroom, a residential home, a reception area or indeed the community.