
Qualitative Research Methods

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In general, research is a planned course of action with the goal of understanding a phenomenon or finding answers to research questions. There are 2 broad types of research: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research may be more familiar and uses numerical data collection processes, research designs and statistical procedures. It is based on the assumptions that social facts have an objective reality, variables can be identified and relationships measured. Quantitative research seeks generalizability and causal explanations. Qualitative research, on the other hand, uses strategies to gather data and seeks to ensure objective analysis of subjective meanings. It is based on the assumptions that reality is socially constructed, and variables are complex and difficult to measure. Qualitative research seeks contextualization and interpretation. Both types of research certainly have a place and value in increasing human knowledge.

There are some major differences between quantitative and qualitative research. The role of the researcher in qualitative methods is quite different in that he or she serves as the data collection instrument. To gain the desired insight and understanding to answer the “why” questions, the researcher often is directly involved with the informants (called subjects in quantitative studies) or environment of the study itself. This can pose quite a challenge for the researcher, who must remain objective and unbiased in collecting data. In addition, researchers must be well trained and well versed in qualitative methods. The qualitative approach also seems opposite of quantitative research in that it ends with hypotheses and grounded theory. That is, once the data are collected, the researcher analyzes them, looking for patterns, meanings and explanations that are grounded in the data but lead to hypotheses that explain what was observed. Finally, the write-up

of purely qualitative studies is also different. It takes on a narrative form and is often quite lengthy. But there are also more concise qualitative studies. In fact, mixed methods designs (using both quantitative and qualitative elements) are becoming increasingly popular in health care disciplines. The following is a brief description of 4 common qualitative research designs.

Ethnography

An ethnographic study is anthropological research whereby the researcher seeks to learn about the culture of a society by immersing himself or herself in that society and directly participating in it. In this way, the researcher hopes to “see” things through the eyes of the members of that culture and understand from their perspective. Such studies take place over a period of time. The researcher develops a rapport within the culture, identifies informants and takes copious notes along the way. He or she works to develop understanding of the people and influences of the environment in which they live through long-term observations. These studies are not about making improvements in a society but understanding it.

Case Studies

Case studies can be either quantitative or qualitative. In the qualitative method, they are studies of “cases” in their real-life context using multiple sources of data collection. They tend to be narrow, focused investigations that are explanatory, exploratory or descriptive in nature. They can involve single cases or multiple cases (one subject or several subjects). The cases are selected based on characteristics that reflect the research focus or interests. Each case remains separate, and multiple data collection methods are used to gather information from each case, such as a review of records, interviews, observations, etc. Because case studies generate a large amount of

data from multiple sources, systematic organization of the data is critical. At the conclusion of data collection, the researcher examines the raw data, deliberately using many interpretations to find links between the research cases and the original research questions. A report of findings then is written. The researcher presents conclusions supported by sufficient evidence so that the reader may draw similar conclusions independent of the researcher.

Participant Observation

As the name implies, participant observation is a method of research in which the researcher participates directly in the events and/or environment being studied. The researcher may be covert or overt about his or her real reason for taking part in the events or environment being studied. This raises ethical issues that must be addressed during an institutional review board approval process. The researcher also should be sensitive to the subjects and have a good understanding of the language and environment. Otherwise, the differences he or she introduces into the environment could change the setting and the outcomes. Because of the nature of this type of research it creates a “role play” dynamic for the researcher. As such, the researcher must consider how he or she appears and his or her purpose for being there. This method also requires copious notes (another consideration for the “role”) and good organization. Disciplined note processing, coding and categorizing are critical. As with the other methods of qualitative research, a lengthy narrative of the results is written that interprets the data from an insider’s perspective.

Interviewing

Interviewing as a qualitative method is a process of gathering in-depth information about a research question from an informant. It is based on a set of interview questions that address the research question or questions. The interview can be conducted in either a structured or unstructured format. In the structured format, each informant is asked the same questions in the same order without elaboration or explanation. The unstructured format also asks the same questions but allows for a more conversational tone and the freedom to elaborate and ask follow-up questions. The researcher decides which format to use during the planning stage and sticks with it throughout the interviews. The researcher must be adept at conducting and guiding the interview while at the same time taking detailed and accurate notes of the informant’s responses. The

data from each interview are then analyzed, interpreted and reported in a detailed narrative form.

Conclusion

Qualitative research can provide valuable insight and meaning in many areas of study. It also can be quite challenging to conduct. Much of the quality, reliability and validity of the study will depend on the knowledge, planning and skill of the researcher. He or she often will serve as the data collection instrument and as such must be disciplined and well versed in the method. With the ever-increasing complexity of health care services, qualitative research may provide valuable meaning and help decipher key issues. ♦

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