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Introduction to qualitative research

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What is qualitative research?

- Small in scale, but **in-depth** studies
- Exploratory projects that focus on:
 - describing
 - understanding
 - explaining

What is qualitative research?

‘... concerned with understanding the **meanings** which people attach to actions, decisions, **beliefs**, **values** and the like within their social world, and understanding the mental mapping process that respondents use to **make sense of** and **interpret** the world around them’

(Ritchie and Lewis, 2003)

A quick comparison

Quantitative

- objectivity valued: understand from the outside
- report statistical analyses
- researcher seen as separate
- context free (minimise bias)
- test hypotheses
- typically probability-based sampling e.g. random
- generalisable

Qualitative

- subjectivity valued: understand from the inside
- report rich narrative
- researcher seen as part of the process
- context dependent (acknowledge and take into account 'bias')
- generate hypotheses
- (usually) non-probability-based sampling
- non-generalisable but transferable

Quantitative

Qualitative

When?

Where?

Who?

How
many?

How
often?



Why?

How?

What does
that mean?

Qualitative methods can be used to...

- **Stand alone** as a single research method
- **Stand alongside** quantitative approaches (mixed methods)
- **Support or shape** quantitative approaches

Qualitative research typically focuses on...

- Deeply-rooted personal experiences
- Complex processes:
 - behaviours
 - motivations
 - decisions
 - systems
- Delicate or intangible issues
- Specialist populations
- (sometimes very) Sensitive topics

So what exactly are the functions of qualitative research?

- To gain in-depth information difficult to convey using numbers alone e.g. *how and why did X happen?*
- To better understand phenomena about which little is known or knowledge incomplete
- To gain new perspectives on things about which much is already known
- Initial explorations to develop theories, generate hypotheses
- Offer explanations for unexpected findings generated by quantitative studies, e.g. in mixed methods research

Approaches to Qualitative Research

- There are many different theoretical approaches to qualitative research
- Your decision about which to use is shaped by your:
 - view of the world (ontology)
 - your interpretation of 'knowledge' (epistemology)
- These will in turn help you to decide what types of data to collect, and how to analyse and interpret it

**See: Bristowe, Selman and Murtagh
(2015). *Nephrology Dialysis
Transplantation.***

Different data collection techniques

- Interviews
- Open questions in questionnaires
- Focus groups
- Observation (participant or non-participant)

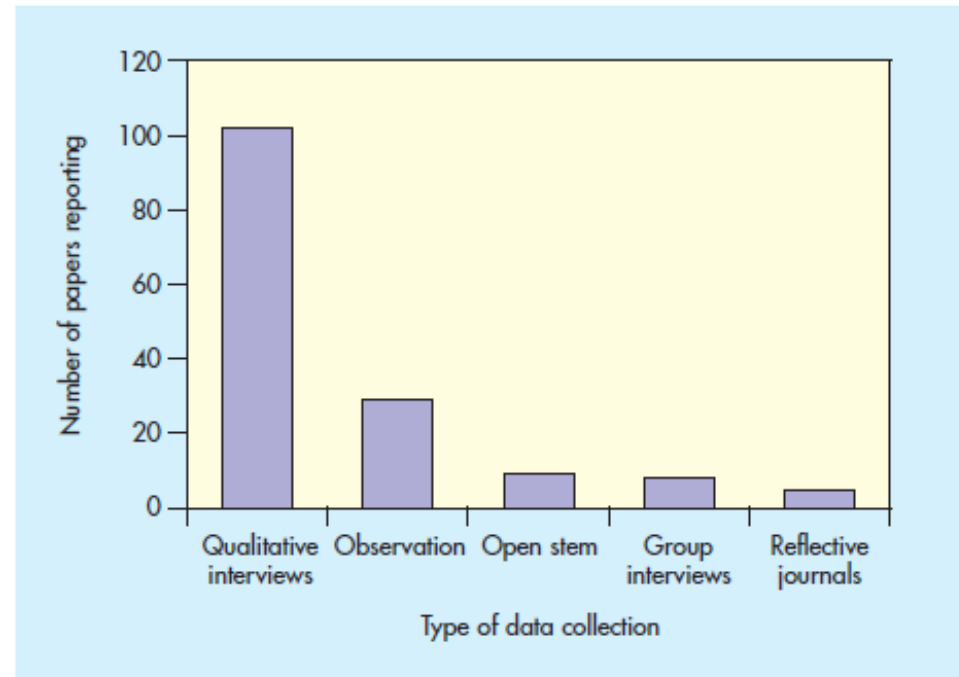


Figure 4. Data collection methods adopted.

- Also: reflective journals, policy documentation, medical records, audio/video recordings of interactions between patients and healthcare professionals, stories etc.

What is qualitative interviewing?

- Guided, in-depth conversation
- An 'obtrusive' type of qualitative research (not just observation)
- Aims to understand respondents' views and experiences
- Without imposing too much of a preconceived structure

Structured -
fixed questions
e.g. administering
a questionnaire

Semi-structured –
specific open
questions, flexible
e.g. patients' needs

Unstructured –
few specific questions
e.g. oral histories

Types of Research Interview

Telephone

Face-to-face

Focus group

How is it different to a survey?

- Uses open questions – hence less structure on the interviewee's response
- Field notes can be taken on context and relevant aspects of the interview, e.g. emotional state – and these become valuable data
- More commonly acknowledged that the researcher is not an external factor

Analysis

- This will be informed by the theoretical approach you are taking
- However the following approaches are common to most approaches:
 - Transcribing interviews
 - Familiarising yourself with the data
 - Line-by-line coding
 - Looking for patterns (similarities and differences) across your interviews
 - Using quotes to exemplify these findings
 - Using the findings to develop a theory about your area of interest

How does a research interview differ from a clinical interview?

- The purpose of clinical and research interviews are fundamentally different
- Clinical interviews:
 - seek to categorise patient experiences
 - aim to provide tangible support to the patient
 - begin broadly, then quickly becomes more focused
 - are directed by the clinician
- Research Interviews:
 - Seek to elicit experiences related to a phenomenon
 - view patient as expert in their experience
 - avoid overly directing the interview/conversation

See: Hunt, Chan & Mehta (2011). *Transitioning from clinical to qualitative research interviewing*. International journal of qualitative methods.