QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN A NUTSHELL

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative study has gained popularity in medical and health research to gain in-depth understanding of individual’s experiences in going through illness and treatment within their contextual environment. This article provides an introduction and overview of qualitative study for basic understanding of this approach of research. It gives a description of the overall process of qualitative methodology in general which includes sampling, data collection, data analysis and writing.

Key Words: qualitative research, phenomena, life experiences

1.0 Introduction to qualitative research

Qualitative research is concerned with developing explanation of social phenomena. It aims at understanding the world in which we live and why things are the way they are. Human beings often have contradictory behaviours, unpredictable responses, and self-opinion. They response to happenings around them differently based on experiences, cultural values, beliefs, personal opinions, and their relationships to individuals involved. As Cresswell (2007) wrote:

“In this worldview, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meaning of their experiences … These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views … Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. In other words, they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individual’s lives.” (Cresswell, 2007; p. 20-21)

The research questions in qualitative studies aims at answering questions pertaining to what was the meaning of a phenomena to people, what are their perceptions, and how were their experiences in their natural setting. It analyses intangible factors such as social norms, gender roles, socioeconomic status, ethnicity and cultural practices. Hence, qualitative research is used when a researcher wants to explore in-depth, explore a rare phenomenon, understand people’s experience, the meaning of the experience to them, and their perceptions. The reality of a phenomena is studied in a holistic way in the reality of the individual’s contextual
situation. Most often it involves an inductive process with complex reasoning of a phenomenon.

As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) stated:

“Human experience is mediated by interpretation – objects, people, situations and events do not possess their own meaning; rather, meaning is conferred on them” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; p.27)

In qualitative research, the researcher is the key instrument. Hence, a qualitative researcher has to possess certain characteristics and competencies. This include having a questioning stance, a high tolerance of ambiguity, be a careful observer, able to ask well-chosen open-ended questions, able to think inductively, and willing to commit extensive time in field work and time-consuming data analysis (Cresswell, 2013).

2.0 Qualitative research designs

There are several qualitative research designs. Among them are basic qualitative study, narrative, case study, phenomenology and ethnography. The term basic qualitative research was introduced by Merriam (2009) to denote studies which use qualitative data and applies the characteristics of natural constructivism. In such studies, researchers seek to understand individuals construct of the meaning and reality of their experiences in relation to their interaction with the society. Narrative studies explore the life and experiences of individuals and relate these experiences in the form of stories (Cresswell, 2013). Case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its context whereby multiple data need to converge and triangulate. The case or the unit of analysis can be an individual, an event, a program, or a system, which is defined by the research question. This case can be a single case or multiple cases (Yin, 2009). Phenomenology seeks to understand the essence or meaning of experiencing a phenomenon. It provides rich description of lived experiences without judgement (Finlay, 2009). Ethnography describes and interprets practices and beliefs of a cultural or social group. It looks at the social interactions and actions of the social group base on their belief system and social setting (Reeves, Kuper, & Hodges, 2008).

Determining which design to use depends on the objective(s) and research questions of the study. The design will then determine the types of data, location, data analysis method, and data presentation. Each design has its own specific method throughout the study.

To ensure the validity and reliability of a qualitative study, researchers have to abide to several strategies of ensuring rigour in their methodology. Among the strategies to be taken are to carry out audit trail throughout the study, triangulate data, carry out member checks and peer reviews, acknowledgement of self or self-reflection (reflexivity) and ensure prolonged engagement in the field (Merriam, 2009). These procedures are important to establish and ensure trustworthiness of the data and authenticate the congruency of data with the interpretations.

3.0 Sampling

Qualitative studies often use purposive sampling method, with inclusion and exclusion criterion. Other types of purposive sampling method which are also used are snowball,
opportunistic and maximum variation (Cresswell, 2013). There are no sample size calculation formula in qualitative research. The sample size is determined by the attainment of saturation. Saturation point is considered to have been reached when there are no more new information emerging from the data. At this point, the researcher finds that the data obtained are redundant and no new themes are formed. Sufficiency and variety of the range of representing participants are therefore important to ensure that premature saturation does not happen (Ragin & Amoroso, 2011).

4.0 Data collection

The three main types of data in qualitative research are observations, documents and interviews. Observations can be in the form of participant observation and non-participant observation. Documents can be annual reports, archives, diaries and letters. Interviews include in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Other types of data which have also been used are web-based materials, graffiti, telephone conversations, photovoice and orbituaries. The determination of types of data to collect depends on the research design used. For instance, for phenomenological study, the main data is in-depth interviews (Cresswell, 2013).

Data collection involves an organised and systematic method starting at the planning stage. For semi-structured in-depth interview for instance, an interview schedule or protocol need to be prepared (Cresswell, 2013). The schedule involves questions pertaining to the research questions and sub-questions of probing questions to guide the researcher during the interviews. These questions however, only serve as a guide for the researcher. The questions will change accordingly, depending on the responses given by the participants. Certain methods of interviewing need to be abided to, to ensure that the data collected are rich and thick description. For instance, asking open-ended non-leading questions, use clear and appropriate non-offending language, and probes and pauses to encourage participants (Kvale, 2007). Hence, a good data is dependent on the researcher asking well-chosen open-ended questions. Probes are carried out to obtain more details. The interviews are audio-taped to enable the researcher to analyse them. After the interviews, the recorded sessions are transcribed word-by-word. These transcripts are then analysed to identify the emerging themes. Even for observations, they are conducted in a systematic process and not just as a casual occurrence.

5.0 Data analysis

Most commonly used data analysis method is thematic analysis. Other types of data analysis are such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2009) and constant comparative method (Fram, 2013). Thematic analysis is a systematic approach to analysis which involves identifying themes or patterns of cultural meaning (Lapadat, 2010). Data analysis involves several steps: read and re-reading, forming codes, categories and themes. The analysis moves from one case to another individual case. The pattern of codes, categories and themes are then observed and compared within the same case and across cases. Observations and comparing patterns include looking for commonalities, differences and relationships. The process is however not linear. It moves back and forth from one process to another.

Computer softwares are used mainly for organising, managing, storing, and cross analysis. It only assist in data analysis as the researcher is the main person who analyses the data. Some
softwares also assist in presentation of data. Some of the available softwares are Nvivo, Atlas.Ti, MaxQDA and Transana.

6.0 Writing qualitative research

Qualitative research can be presented in several ways. The most common method is in academic report form whereby it follows an organised format which consists of introduction, methodology, results, discussion and conclusion. There are however other forms of presenting qualitative research such as autobiography, narration, storytelling, theatre and poetry.

Declaration of conflict of interest

We, author(s) of the article, declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding publication of this article.

References:


