

# Qualitative methods: a research approach worth considering

Qualitative research forms part of the classical cycle of research. A researcher notices a phenomenon that he/she has no explanation for. He/she observes the phenomenon and collects data about it to describe it-this is qualitative research. With enough information about the phenomenon the researcher can now formulate a hypothesis or hypotheses that can be tested through quantitative research. Qualitative research developed in the 1940's in Chicago (when anthropology students were requested to observe a certain street for a week to ascertain if any repeating patterns of behaviour took place) and since then it has become an established research approach in both the human as well as the natural sciences.

The purpose of qualitative research is to obtain understanding and knowledge about a specific phenomenon. Usually there is little or no knowledge available about this phenomenon. A researcher then explores and describes the phenomenon. Qualitative research is both theory and hypothesis generating.

## Basic assumptions about qualitative research include the following:

- It is naturalistic; the research takes place in the natural setting of the participants.
- The researcher is in a position of humbleness, that is "not knowing" while the participants are knowledgeable about the phenomenon.
- The researcher enters the field of research without any preconceived ideas. The researcher utilises "bracketing"- putting aside any preconceived ideas and "intuiting"- focusing on the specific phenomenon that is being investigated.
- Purposive sampling or judgmental sampling is utilised by the researcher. Information rich participants are included in the research.
- Language is utilised as the major vehicle of research.
- There are multiple realities in the field of research based on the participants lived experiences, perceptions and views.
- The researcher continues till data-saturation is achieved, that is, no new information is obtained.
- The researcher is the research instrument. The researcher obtains data by observing, experiencing and conversing.
- The research is contextual. A specific phenomenon is explored and described. The researcher makes no attempt to generalise findings to other contexts. The researcher provides a dense description of the whole research process.

Ethical principles of autonomy, privacy, dignity, beneficence and communication with the scientific community are adhered to right through the research process.

Data collection involves interviews, observation and field notes as well as document analysis and projective techniques such as art work. Data is captured on videotapes, audiotapes, photographs, film, essays and diaries. Several strategies can be utilised in qualitative research which include phenomenological research, case studies, narratives, discourse analysis, ethnography, auto-ethnography and visual arts research. Analysis of data involves "open coding" whereby units of analysis are identified in the raw data and clustered together to form themes, categories and subcategories. The results are written up in narrative format and include direct quotations and other data like photographs and drawings to support the description of the results. These results are then recontextualised in relation to the existing literature to show commonalities, differences and new contributions.

## Measures of trustworthiness are applied to provide rigour. These are truth value, applicability, consistency and neutrality.

- Truth value refers to the fact that the data is rich and reflects participants' knowledge. Credibility is the strategy that is implemented to provide truth value to qualitative research. This entails the researcher's prolonged engagement with the field-the researcher should be able to say "I was there". The researcher keeps a reflexive journal to avoid influencing the research process. Triangulation, which is looking at the data from different angles, is also applied. Different methods of data collection, different data sources, more than one researcher and opposing theories are utilized in triangulation. Peers are utilized throughout the research process to monitor the researcher's decision making. After data-analysis the researcher returns to participants to do member-checking, that is to make sure that the results reflect what participants have shared.
- Applicability as measure refers to being able to utilize results of the research in similar contexts with similar participants. For other researchers to utilize the results a clear description of the demographics of the participants should be provided. There should also be a dense description of the results with supporting direct quotations from the participants.
- Consistency refers to being able to follow the research methodology of an original research and come to similar conclusions. To be able to do this a dense description

must be given of the research methodology utilised. There must be a step-by-step replication of the research methodology. Evidence should be available of code-recording of the data-analysis. A dependability audit can be done.

- Neutrality refers to the research being free from researcher bias. Confirmability is the strategy implemented. There should be a chain of evidence in the whole research process when a confirmability audit is carried out.

Qualitative research is valuable in exploring and describing a phenomenon where there is little or no knowledge available

to provide understanding as well as generate both theory and hypotheses. Whilst not necessarily familiar to those in the medical sciences, awareness of what it entails may render qualitative research an approach to be considered.

**C Myburgh<sup>1</sup>, M Poggenpoel<sup>2</sup>**

*<sup>1</sup>Professor: Education*

*<sup>2</sup>Professor: Nursing Science*

*University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa*

*Chris Myburgh - chrism@uj.ac.za*

*Marie Poggenpoel - mariep@uj.ac.za*

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