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Research essentials: An introduction to qualitative research for the novice children's nurse

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Title

What are the key features of qualitative research?

Aim

This article will demystify qualitative research and outline the key principles of sample selection, and data collection and analysis.

The essentials

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’ (Holloway 2013, 3). Qualitative methods are appropriate to explore complex issues where little is known, gaining new insights and a deep understanding of the individual perspective, and are invaluable when exploring the complexities of nursing and care delivery. Qualitative research is an umbrella term for a range of research approaches that are inductive, often generating theory, and flexible in design as opposed to quantitative methods which are deductive aiming to test hypotheses. Qualitative research answers how and why questions unlike quantitative research that answers questions about the best course of action (Figure 1). Nurses often situate their research within one of the three common methodologies associated with qualitative research; ethnography, grounded theory or phenomenology. However, generic sometimes referred to as descriptive approaches are gaining popularity (Smith et al, 2011). Figure 1 presents different research questions and designs using the example of Juvenile Myoclonic Epilepsy (JME), a common epilepsy syndrome typically diagnosed in adolescence. Seizures are managed using antiepileptic drugs such as sodium valproate, lamotrigine or clonazepam, often taken for the rest of the young person’s life.

Figure 1: Linking research questions to study designs

Question	Possible research design
What is the most effective antiepileptic drug for seizure control in JME?	Research design of choice is a randomised control trial comparing the effectiveness of antiepileptic drugs. Increasing RCT’s include a qualitative component, such as asking participants their experiences of taking medications.
How do young people and parents share decisions about the management of JME?	Generating a theory for transition of care from parent to child would be best achieved using a grounded theory approach.
Why is young peoples’ adherence to antiepileptic medication poor?	A phenomenological approach could be used to understand the unique meaning of taking antiepileptic medication for young people.
How do epilepsy nurse specialists share decision-making with young people in managing JME?	An ethnographical approach could be used to observe and explore the interactions between nurse and young people.

How is the sample selected in qualitative research?

Recruiting participants with the required experiences is central to achieving study aims. Purposive and theoretical sampling are common sampling strategies in qualitative research; in purposive

sampling criteria are pre-determined and participants are selected with broad topic knowledge (Coyne 1997). In theoretical sampling, usually associated with grounded theory, the sample criteria develop as the study progresses. Sample sizes are often small in qualitative research because the aim is to collect information rich data. This is not problematic because data collection and analysis occur simultaneously; data collection stops when no new information emerges guiding the final sample, known as data saturation.

How is qualitative research data collected and analysed?

Collecting and analysing data is different from quantitative methods because data in qualitative research is typically text based and unsuitable for statistical analysis. Data collection includes field notes, interviews, focus groups, conversations, photographs, video recordings and memos. Despite the diversity of data collection methods, data is often obtained through participant interviews. The subsequent analysis is based on a common set of principles: transcribing the interviews; reading and rereading transcripts to gain detailed insights of the phenomena; labelling segments of data (coding); developing a system to sort and store codes; linking codes together to form overarching categories/themes which may lead to the theory development (Smith and Firth 2011).

How is credibility in qualitative research achieved?

There are no accepted standards to judge the credibility of qualitative research and it is not possible to apply quantitative tests to establish the validity and reliability of study findings. Credibility can be achieved by ensuring the findings accurately reflect the data and the analytical procedures are undertaken robustly (Long and Johnson 2000). Potential bias relate to data construction ('influence' such as potential power dynamics between researcher and participants) and data interpretation ('immersion' such as accounting for researchers' personal beliefs that may influence the analytical processes).

Key messages

- Qualitative approaches can provide insight into the experiences of children and families.
- While quantitative approaches provide evidence about the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions, qualitative approaches provide valuable information about the appropriateness and acceptability of interventions, which may help when allocating resources, treatment adherence and ultimately the child's quality of life.

Geek speak

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory explores social processes with the principle aim of developing theory. The emergent theory is achieved by undertaking data collection and analysis systematically and sequentially so that the analysis moves beyond description but generating theory ground in the data.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology aims to understand the meaning of 'lived human experience', which is constructed through rigorous exploration with individuals with experience of the phenomena being investigated. In descriptive 'Husserl' phenomenology the researcher 'puts to one side' personal experiences and preconceptions to ensure an accurate description of participants accounts. In interpretative 'Heidegarian' phenomenology the aim is to interpret and explain the meaning and context of the experiences described.

Ethnography

Ethnography focuses on describing a social or culture group or system and understanding and interpreting the meaning of events and values, behaviours and beliefs of people by undertaking extensive observations of the group being studied.

Resources

Route map to support practitioners undertake qualitative research with children and young people:

https://www.rcn.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0012/451101/Planning_a_New_Qual_Study_with_CYP_and_Families_12May.pdf

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