

Overview of qualitative research and qualitative methods.

Qualitative research is an approach to developing knowledge that uses holistic, inductive and interactive methods of inquiry. It is an approach to research that is derived from the “naturalistic” paradigm. Reality is viewed as continuously constructed by participants rather than as a fixed entity.

Qualitative methods are selected when research questions focus on largely unexplored phenomena, or on phenomena which are complex and contextual in nature. Qualitative methods examine phenomena in depth and with a probing nature. Subjects are purposively selected because of their knowledge of the subject matter of the study rather than through random or convenience sampling.

Data analysis often begins with the collection of the first data and continues as data is collected.

To the extent possible, the results are presented from the viewpoint of the subjects (emic perspective.) The voices and interpretations of the subjects being studied are considered key to understanding.

Qualitative methods include phenomenology, ethnography and grounded theory.

Phenomenology attempts to derive the “essence” of an experience from the person(s) who has/have experienced it and describe the “lived experience.” This method is rooted in the works of Husserl and Heidegger. Researchers “bracket” personal assumptions, knowledge, and expectations. Data are gathered through in-depth audiotaped interviews. Results are descriptive, reflective and interpretive. Results might include in-depth descriptions of a phenomenon from the viewpoint of the person(s) experiencing it, or a description of patterns and themes the researcher views within the data.

Ethnography describes and interprets a cultural group or social system. Such groups may include, for example, the culture or social system of a staff of health providers. Learned patterns of behaviors, customs and artifacts are examined. Immersion in the day-to-day lives of subjects is key to gathering ethnographic data. The researcher completes a prolonged observation of the group, i.e., “fieldwork,” and gathers data through participant-observation. Interviews with “key informants” and reviews of artifacts and records are also used to gather the data. Data focus on meanings of behavior, language

and interactions. Results are narratives richly describing all or selected features of the culture or social system.

Grounded Theory is focused on processes. This approach assumes that reality is constantly evolving and the researcher commits to identifying how the participants construct their reality. Originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), data are collected through observations and interviews. The researcher seeks to create a theory and works with data to identify concepts and linkages between them.

References

- Creswell, J.W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among the five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Morse, J.M. & Richards, L. (2002). *Readme First for a user's guide to qualitative methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Polit, D.F., & Hungler, B.P. (1999). *Nursing research: Principles and methods*. (6th ed.). Philadelphia: Lippincott.

Submitted by Elaine Parker, PhD, RN, CNAA