

Theoretical Approaches to Qualitative Research

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ABSTRACT

Background: Qualitative research is a comparatively new approach to research, and more so in the field of medical science in particular. There is a common myth that this type of research is not very scientifically approved or reliable. Also, it is particularly applicable in the field of social sciences, and not so much in a pure scientific arena, particularly, one like medical science. This article is written, therefore, to elaborate on the scientific background and the theoretical approaches to qualitative research.

Descriptive design: Descriptive or exploratory design is a very commonly used approach to research, in which the researcher simply wants to explore or identify what is going on in a given situation. The team members have to devise an interview schedule that has several short open-ended questions to focus on their inquiry.

Interpretive design: The three most common approaches to interpretive design are ethnography, phenomenology, and grounded theory. All three are now used in health and social care research. These three approaches to research use inductive reasoning. However, the particular perspective from which they seek to do this will vary according to orientation.

Ethnography: It is an approach to research influenced by the anthropological tradition, in which the researcher seeks to understand human behavior from the perspective of the individual in a given culture. Phenomenology is an approach to research that emphasizes and seeks to explore the real-life experience of an individual.

Grounded theory: It is an approach to research in which the aim is to collect and analyze qualitative data in order to develop a theory that is "grounded" in the data. Grounded theory is rather different from the other approaches of qualitative research because it uses both inductive and deductive reasoning.

Conclusion: In conclusion, it can be said that qualitative research is a highly scientific method of research involving modern and acceptable statistical analysis and inference also, and the results that we get can be applied beneficially to further researches, generation of treatment, diagnostic and public health strategies and most importantly framing new social, scientific and governance policies.

Keywords: Descriptive design, Interpretive design, Qualitative research.

Bengal Physician Journal (2019); 10.5005/jp-journals-10100-6103

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research is a comparatively new approach to research, and more so in the field of medical science in particular. There is a common myth that this type of research is not very scientifically approved or reliable. Also, it is particularly applicable in the field of social sciences, and not so much in a pure scientific arena, particularly, one like medical science. This article is written, therefore, to elaborate on the scientific background and the theoretical approaches to qualitative research.¹

Qualitative research is a scientific method of observation to gather nonnumerical data. This type of research "refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, symbols, and description of things" and not to their "counts or measures." Qualitative methods are best for researching many of the why and how questions of human experience, in making a decision (e.g., not just what, where, when, or who). Qualitative research is concerned with developing explanations of phenomena. That is to say, it aims to help us to understand, the social world in which we live.²

It is also concerned with the social aspects of our world and seeks to answer questions about:

- Why people behave the way they do?
- How opinions and attitudes are formed?
- How people are affected by the events that go on around them?
- How and why cultures and practices have developed in the way they have?

Researchers using a qualitative method might approach their work in a number of different ways. The chosen approach provides

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How to cite this article: Paul UK, Bandyopadhyay A. Theoretical Approaches to Qualitative Research. *Bengal Physician Journal* 2019;6(1):12–14.

Source of support: Nil

Conflict of interest: None

a framework surrounding application of the data collection techniques.

Data collected using qualitative approaches can be used in two ways:

To describe or explore the situation by summarizing findings (descriptive design), and to interpret situations (interpretive design).

DESCRIPTIVE DESIGN

Descriptive or exploratory design is a very commonly used approach to research, in which the researcher simply wants to explore or identify what is going on in a given situation.

Example

Our Department of Community Medicine, MGM Medical College, was in process to provide their services and teaching to local community needs. As a part of it, faculties decided to identify the local health problems and community's expectations. To do this, they undertook a need assessment to find out the community members' views and expectations. As it was a new community, the team members felt that a qualitative approach would be more appropriate. They decided to use open-ended interview questions to focus their inquiry. The team members devised an interview schedule that had five short open-ended questions to focus their inquiry.

Interview Schedule

- Please, can you tell me about the services you have been receiving?
- Are you satisfied with this service?
- If "yes," how?
- If "no," then please tell us why not?
- Do you have any suggestions to improve our services?

INTERPRETIVE DESIGN

The three most common approaches to interpretive design are:

- Ethnography
- Phenomenology
- Grounded theory

All three are now used in health and social care research. These three approaches to research use inductive reasoning. However, the particular perspective from which they seek to do this will vary according to orientation

Ethnography

It is an approach to research influenced by the anthropological tradition, in which the researcher seeks to understand human behavior from the perspective of the individual in a given culture.³

Example

A professor of medicine learned from a primary school teacher belonging to Bedia tribal community in a Bengal village that malaria is quite prevalent in his village among the tribal community.

So the professor decided to probe into the matter by exploring the knowledge, attitude, and practice of Bedia tribal people, particularly ones related to malaria. This is "ethnography," which is an approach to qualitative research in which human behavior in a given culture is influenced by its level of education and anthropological tradition.

One more thing is very important in the study, that is, how to gain entry into a tribal community to perform any study or awareness. It is imperative to know the behavioral, mental, and cultural uniqueness of the community first, and then, only a study approach can be done, and health or knowledge can be imparted.

Phenomenology

It is an approach to research, which emphasizes and seeks to explore the real-life experience of an individual.

Phenomenological research, then, is directed towards active involvement in one person's reality—for example, what it means to be a person waiting for a renal transplant (which may be his or her only remaining source of hope for life).⁴

To help develop the interpretation of the situation being studied, the phenomenological researcher may draw on other sources of data, such as novels, films or reviewing, and analyzing other people's research.

Example

Dr Sandip is a PDT in the Urology Department of a Tertiary Care Medical College. He has found many cases of urethral stricture. Lots of papers have been published on treatment methodology, signs and symptoms, development and effects of newer methods of treatment, and so on. However, there is a dearth of literature, as to how the spouse of a urethral stricture patient feels like, although she is the key person in the life of this patient and is most affected by this. This study of a phenomenon in the life of a stake bearer is "phenomenology," which is an approach to qualitative research emphasizing and seeking to explore the real-life experience of an individual related to a particular phenomenon.

Grounded Theory

It is an approach to research in which the aim is to collect and analyze qualitative data in order to develop a theory that is "grounded" in the data. Grounded theory is rather different from the other approaches discussed so far because it uses both inductive and deductive reasoning.

The researcher formulates tentative theories about what is observed (using inductive reasoning) and then follows-up these ideas by further inquiry (deductive reasoning).⁵

The grounded theory falls into the category of the generation of knowledge through theory development rather than theory testing. The approach to data analysis in grounded theory is more structured than in other methods. Data are analyzed concurrently as they are collected. Any emerging theories that arise out of the research are called as grounded in the data.

Example

Dr Barun is a PDT in a Tertiary Care Medical College in India. Although the doctor-patient relationship is supposed to be one of mutual trust, confidence, and mutual goodwill but in recent years, the dynamics of the society has changed. People, doctors, and even authorities are misinformed with concocted unscientific reports of the press, hearsay and so on.

Therefore, Barun feels compelled to go into a scientific qualitative study on this issue. As a first part, he intends to do a grounded theory study by interview technique on practicing doctors attached to hospitals. He will start taking interviews of such doctors and during the process will simultaneously go for "constant comparison" that is writing memos and analyzing data as data collection process goes on and changing tracks and the process continues and stopping data collection the moment it is deemed necessary. Formulation of theories as the process goes on is "inductive reasoning." At the end, the data are subjected to transcription and content analysis, which leads to final theory formation "deductive reasoning." The final theory involved giving the reasons for the problem, and the actions to be taken are grounded in and evolved from the data themselves.

CONCLUSION

Qualitative research comprises compilation of nonnumerical data, their scientific analysis, and through thematic analysis ultimately to come to a definitive inference and sometimes development

of a new theory also. In conclusion, it can be said that qualitative research is a highly scientific method of research involving modern and acceptable statistical analysis and inference also, and the results that we get can be applied beneficially to further researches, generation of treatment, diagnostic and public health strategies and most importantly framing new social, scientific and governance policies.

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