Navigating the Maze of Research
Enhancing Nursing and Midwifery Practice

Sally Borbasi • Debra Jackson
Navigating the Maze of Research: Enhancing Nursing and Midwifery Practice 3e

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CHAPTER 5

Qualitative Research: The Whole Picture

Debra Jackson and Sally Borbasi

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter and following critical reflection the student will be able to:

1. Define qualitative research
2. Describe qualitative research classifications
3. Discuss conceptualisation for various research designs
4. Describe structural elements for various research designs
5. Describe processes involved in conducting a study
6. Identify methods used in analysing various types of studies
7. Describe the reporting of study results and conclusions
8. Discuss the relationships among phases of the research process
9. Cite examples of phases of the research process
10. Compare and contrast qualitative and quantitative research.

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Abstract

Qualitative research is used to examine subjective human experiences by using non-statistical methods of analysis. It can be classified by theoretical perspective (that is, constructivist, interpretive, critical) or by research design. Research design classifications include phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, historical method and case study. Qualitative research processes vary across research methodologies. The research aim provides a broad boundary that guides the conduct of the study. Data collection occurs predominantly through observation and in-depth interview, though other methods are also used. Analysis takes place using various methodologies to manage, interpret and synthesise data. With some qualitative approaches, analysis even dictates the direction and course of further data collection. Qualitative researchers search for patterns of meaning in the collected narrative, observational or other data. Findings are presented in a descriptive narrative format with excerpts of data used to illustrate key patterns and themes.

WHAT IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

In order to engage with the nursing and midwifery literature and effectively explore questions in those domains, an understanding of qualitative approaches as well as quantitative approaches is necessary. This chapter defines qualitative research, compares qualitative and quantitative approaches, explores various ways in which qualitative research can be classified and identifies and discusses phases of qualitative research processes.

Nurses and midwives have an interest in questions and issues that involve human subjectivity and in developing holistic understandings of people and their experiences. These interests mean that nurses and midwives have embraced qualitative methods because they provide researchers with methodical and
rigorous pathways to exploring and drawing meaning from life experiences. They draw on inductive reasoning processes and seek to examine and understand the whole of the phenomenon of interest. The focus of the research is on the process by which concepts are attributed with meaning in a given context rather than on cause and effect, or measurement of the concepts and their relationships. Qualitative researchers view reality as a subjective, multifaceted experience rather than as a single, fixed, objective actuality. Complex phenomena closely tied to the human experience or subjects about which little is known are readily understood using a qualitative approach, for example: What is it like to be lonely? What is the experience of loss through unsuccessful reproductive technology or a spontaneous miscarriage? What is it like to be an international student studying nursing or midwifery in an Australian university?

Qualitative research uses multiple data collection procedures that rely heavily on researcher involvement. Qualitative researchers may seek to examine individual lives and their stories and behaviour; organisations and their functioning; role relationships and intercommunications; or cultures and their conduct, interactions and social movement. Qualitative research projects are generally characterised by small sample sizes and rich descriptive data. Qualitative projects generate findings using analytical procedures that are non-statistical in nature.

**No Singularly Defined Scientific Approach**

No singularly defined scientific approach governs qualitative research. It is driven by multiple methods across various disciplines. Therefore, many aspects of qualitative research are not as clear-cut as those for quantitative research. While traditional quantitative research has concentrated on trying to establish relationships and differences within a narrow, controlled frame of reference, qualitative research permits multiple ways to explore the depth, richness and complexity inherent in most phenomena. Table 5.1 presents some of the differences between the two approaches.

Qualitative researchers do not claim their findings are generalisable. Because the study methodology embraces the examination of subjective phenomena, findings are considered to be idiosyncratic to a particular situation. That means they are considered to be representative of a particular person (or people), in a particular context or setting and not necessarily reflective of experiences of other people in other contexts or settings. Many people assume that qualitative research is easily performed and fail to undertake adequate education in qualitative methodologies before embarking on qualitative studies. Qualitative research methodologies are founded on philosophical traditions and influences, the basic tenets of which need to be understood prior to designing the study. Conducting qualitative research studies requires every bit as much expertise as conducting quantitative research studies and may take longer because of the nature of recruitment, data collection and analysis and in writing up – often considered a craft in itself. Qualitative research methodologies are not fixed, they are constantly evolving and developing. As previously stated it is important that qualitative researchers have a good grasp of the tenets that underpin
qualitative research – this will inform the continued development of qualitative methods.

**HOW IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH CLASSIFIED?**

Several terms are used to describe or classify qualitative research. We explore some of the more common classifications and terms so they will be familiar to you when you encounter them in the literature. Qualitative research may be classified by theoretical perspective or by research design (Box 5.1).

**Theoretical Perspective**

When theoretical perspectives are used to classify qualitative research they indicate the underlying belief systems that informed the research. Postpositivist research grew out of a disenchantment with the radical objectivity of the positivist tradition and led to the beginnings of qualitative or interpretative research. The interpretive tradition seeks understanding of the world through the perspective of people who have lived a particular experience (for example, women who have had a mastectomy), or who have a particular way of being in the world (such as those from a particular cultural or social background). Critical theorists are agents of change. They are interested in the social construction of experience
and the material resources, power dynamics and ideologies of societies and use research to develop transformative knowledge (knowledge to effect positive and empowering change). Poststructural and postmodern studies may also be concerned with concepts such as culture, gender, power and oppression, and how these are represented in everyday life through language and structures such as large institutions and other constructs of social governance. They may be concerned with ingrained social stereotypes and prejudices.

Research Design

Classification by research design or methodology provides us with slightly more direction as to what a qualitative study might be all about. Although it is important to understand that each of these designs is underpinned by a theoretical perspective, these are the classifications you are most likely to see in the nursing literature.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the study of lived experiences. The researcher examines human experiences through interviews and descriptions that come from the people who have lived a particular experience. Phenomenological research seeks to describe the ‘essence’ of an experience as it is lived and to understand the objectivised subjective meaning of the experience. It is based on the premise that the way individuals ‘know’ is through their perceptions. Therefore reality is perceived as subjective and unique to individuals based on their experience. However phenomenology is objectivised because it seeks to get beneath the everyday taken-for-granted assumptions that society may hold about a particular phenomenon and reveal it in a fresh light to produce new understanding.
Types of general questions that might be asked in a phenomenological study are ‘What is it like to experience …?’, ‘How does or did it feel?’ or ‘Tell me about your experiences of …’. For example, ‘Tell me about your experiences of being a surrogate mother.’ After asking a broad general question, phenomenological researchers may use more specific questioning to probe and clarify aspects of the experience. Interviews and observations are most frequently used to collect data. Analysis occurs by searching the data for themes and patterns. Reflections are drawn on the meaning of the whole of the experience.

Recent examples of published Australian phenomenological studies can be found in articles by McCloughen et al (2010), who adopted a phenomenological approach to explore Australian nurse leaders’ experiences of mentoring relationships. Scorbini et al (2009) used a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of people living with hepatitis C. If done well, phenomenology as a research approach can be an extremely powerful vehicle for portraying what a human experience is like. Because it is founded on philosophy, its concepts can be hard to grasp at first. The work of UK academic Linda Finlay makes phenomenology more accessible to the novice (http://www.lindafinlay.co.uk/phenomenology.htm).

See also the Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology – it’s free online and can be found at: http://ipjp.org/.

Max van Manen’s Phenomenology Online is also a good starting point: http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/.

Ethnography

Ethnography is the systematic study of cultures or subcultures. It has its roots in anthropology. ‘Culture’ is a broad term whose meaning could range from study of a community in Western Samoa, to examination of a neighbourhood in Melbourne or Auckland, or investigation of the culture of a hospital, or of a group of people such as those who are homeless. Ethnography focuses on the study of the symbols, rituals and customs of an identified cultural group. It provides a picture of that identified group through observation and documentation of interactions in their daily lives.

Research questions in ethnography focus on issues such as:

- What procedures does a person follow that makes that person part of a group?
- What practices do group members engage in that result in a particular end product?
- What kinds of work do members engage in to accomplish the goals of the group?
- What are the everyday rituals, norms and patterns of behaviour within a specified social setting?

Ethnography focuses on group interactions and activities rather than on individual behaviours. Researchers immerse themselves in the culture or group to be studied. Data are gathered through observation and interview and are
analysed for cultural patterns in an attempt to grasp the lifeways of a particular
group in a particular environment.

Leininger is a prominent nurse ethnographer who has conducted a lifetime of
ethnographic studies that examine the phenomenon of ‘caring’ from various
cultural perspectives. She views caring as the central and unifying theme for the
practice of nursing (Leininger and McFarland 2006). Recent examples of ethno-
graphical studies in nursing can be found in a study by Griffiths (2011) that
drew on ethnographic techniques to explore the roles of nurses in a medical
assessment unit. Murphy and Merrell (2009) used an ethnographic lens to
explore the care culture in a hospital gynaecological unit for women in early
miscarriage. Early classic ethnographies can be attributed to pioneers such as
Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead – later Claude Lévi-Strauss and
Clifford Geertz. As is the case with the other qualitative methodologies, the
philosophical, paradigmatic and theoretical aspects of ethnography are in a
continuous cycle of deconstruction and reconstruction. Classical ethnographical
approaches have been highly contested and reshaped over the years. Critical
approaches to ethnography seek to emancipate and change.

**Grounded Theory**

In grounded theory research, data are collected, analysed and used to develop
a theoretical explanation and generate hypotheses for further research. Thus, the
theory is generated from and ‘grounded’ in the data. Grounded theory is used
to examine basic social processes that occur in a given phenomenon. Core
concepts and dominant processes occurring in interactions are identified. Then the
researcher attempts to discover explanations for these concepts and processes.

Research questions revolve around the chief concern or problem of individuals
in a defined area. Examples of research questions that might be asked in a
grounded theory study are ‘How do people prepare themselves emotionally for
surgery?’ or ‘How do cancer patients achieve hopefulness?’ Data are collected
using observational and interview techniques. Coding helps the researcher con-
ceptualise the underlying patterns of the pieces of data collected. Categories of
data are then developed. Analysis uses a process known as constant comparison
whereby each piece of data is compared to data already collected. Concepts are
developed as data are blended into larger and larger categories. Relationships
between concepts are examined and then linked into a conceptual framework.
The literature is then consulted to determine whether any similar associations
have already been uncovered.

A grounded theory approach was used to explore the perceptions and strategies
of drug users and nurses when addressing pain management in acute care set-
tings (McCreaddie et al 2010). Banner (2010) also used this approach to develop
a theory to meet the needs of women undergoing coronary artery bypass graft-
ing. Try a Google search for Glaser & Strauss to find out more.

**Historical Method**

Historical method research examines social phenomena by studying their his-
torical context or their past. A historical study analyses a defined event, identifies
key concepts and relationships and draws inferences in an attempt to
understand the impact of that event on the present. Historical research involves revisiting an historical event, viewing it from a fresh perspective and searching for new meaning. Historical research is used to investigate past similar events or phenomena and derive common theoretical explanations of those events. For example, an historical study might try to explain a nursing shortage by examining past cycles of nursing shortages.

Historical researchers look at what has been, what is and what should be. The researcher begins with an acknowledged philosophical or interpretive point of view. This is important because this point of view influences how information is gathered, read and interpreted. Thus different researchers with varying points of view could revisit the same set of historical events and interpret them quite differently.

Historical research is somewhat different from the other forms of qualitative research discussed thus far. Rather than observing or interviewing people in the present, the historical researcher relies on historical documents and past written records. These might include diaries, letters, newspapers, articles, books, audio or videotapes, government or professional records and archives. People might be interviewed, but it would be to elicit their recollections of a past event. This type of interview is generally known as an oral history.

Historical research is not nearly as prevalent in the qualitative nursing or midwifery research literature as some of the other classifications we have discussed. However, an excellent example can be found in a paper by Fealy et al (2010), which critically examined sanitary reform in 19th-century hospitals, and the effects of this on theories of infection. The researchers drew on published sources including hospital archives and public health records. From this historical account, the authors have been able to point to issues that can be adapted to present-day situations. In an Australian context, Grehan (2004) took an historical approach to explore the movement to professionalise nursing and midwifery during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the colony of Victoria.

**Case Study**

A case study is an in-depth examination of certain phenomena in an individual or in small numbers of individuals. It has also been used to examine the workings of a group, organisation or institution. It is a study of the particular. Nursing and medicine have long used this approach to detail what happens when a person has a certain disease. Medicine focuses on the disease and its processes, whereas nursing focuses on how the individual responds to the disease, the treatment and the environment. Much of the early research reported in the nursing literature used a case study approach.

Mixed methods (use of both qualitative and quantitative data) approaches are often used to generate comprehensive understandings of the case. For example, if you study an illness and its effects on an individual, some characteristics of the illness can be quantified or measured (for example, vital signs, frequency
of signs and symptoms). However, other characteristics are better described in narrative fashion (for example, the feelings associated with illness).

Remember, a case can be any social unit – an individual, a family, a street, a school, a town, a hospital ward or birthing centre and so on.

The case study is used to examine one entity in-depth and to study and analyse patterns occurring in that one case. When researchers study more than one unit (for example, individual, group or institution) they are really doing what is termed a collective case study or a series of case studies. This is done to see if patterns carry over from one case to the next. Case studies provide a way to study and analyse phenomena that are relatively rare. Though case studies have not been seen as frequently in the nursing literature as they once were, the method has undergone something of a renaissance and is being seen more frequently in the literature. Case study was used to examine the negative effects of prolonged labour in women delivering their first child (Nystedt et al 2005). Luck et al (2008) used an instrumental case study design to explore the meanings that Emergency Department nurses ascribe to acts of violence from patients, their family and friends and how these meanings impacted on the nurses’ responses to such acts.

Student Challenge

Scrutinising Study Classifications
1. Go to the library and look up the research studies cited as examples in the previous paragraphs. Can you tell why they are classified as they are?
2. Now choose several other current qualitative nursing or midwifery research articles. See if you can locate one study in each of the five qualitative research design categories. (Use the design category as your search term and limit the results to one or two years.)
3. Observe the general look and feel of the articles you’ve located. Note how they differ from quantitative reports. Note how they differ from one another.

WHAT IS THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PROCESS?

As you have already observed, qualitative and quantitative research look different in final written report format. The conduct of research is also different, with the processes of qualitative research being less segmented and therefore providing more scope for creative, expressive and innovative dimensions. Several phases of a given process frequently occur simultaneously or are revisited numerous times during the course of a study. Many of the decisions about various aspects of the process are made or altered as data are collected and certain trends or patterns are noted. There is an artistry and responsiveness to qualitative research, with a much greater focus on writing and rewriting in order to create a text representative of the phenomenon under examination.

In qualitative research, the conception and design of the study form a detailed blueprint for conducting, analysing and interpreting the study. In qualitative
research, conceptualisation and design form only a broad umbrella-like structure for the study. Data collection and analysis dictate detailed study decisions. We will use the broad research phases identified in Chapter 4 as we discuss the qualitative research process. However, keep in mind the phases are more fluid and less distinct for qualitative research and that the process varies for the different research classifications we have identified. You will see there are common issues to be addressed for all classifications of qualitative research. This section discusses those common features using the phases of the research process identified in Chapters 4 and 9.

Phase 1: Conceive the Study

As with quantitative research, the first task a qualitative researcher faces is to make a decision about what to study. The activities in this phase focus on identifying the phenomenon to be studied. This means an identification of some ‘whole’ or ‘whole process’ the researcher is interested in studying. This differs from quantitative studies, in which specific measurable concepts are identified. Table 5.2 presents specific examples by research design.

The initial identification of the phenomenon to be studied is done in the broadest sense. Phenomenological studies identify a phenomenon to be explored and seek individuals with experience of the phenomenon to be interviewed. Examples are parents of children in an intensive care unit or people who have undergone heart transplant surgery. The ethnographer may choose a group of people or a field setting with a broad statement of what is to be investigated. For example, the health beliefs and practices of Vietnamese immigrants or older residents of a nursing home might be selected. Grounded theorists begin with a broad area of social interest with no specific problem in mind. For example, the area of interest might be hopefulness and cancer. Historical research begins with a broadly defined historical event such as the influence of Nightingale’s system of nurse education in Australia and New Zealand.

Although all researchers bring their own frame of reference and belief systems to their work, qualitative researchers acknowledge and accept the role of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. This means qualitative researchers may state their preconceived notions or ideas about the study at the outset, while others will attempt to ‘ bracket’ them by taking steps to set them aside during the investigation. A hypothesis-driven design is not a feature of qualitative research. However,

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<th>Research Design</th>
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<tr>
<td>Phenomenology</td>
<td>Lived experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnography</td>
<td>Issue(s) of interest within a defined culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grounded theory</td>
<td>Basic social process</td>
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<tr>
<td>Historical method</td>
<td>Past event</td>
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<tr>
<td>Case study</td>
<td>Broad area for case(s) selection</td>
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historical research is a possible exception and may propose broadly stated hypotheses about expected relationships among historical phenomena.

Most qualitative designs include a literature review at this point. The review serves various purposes depending on the study classification. For example, phenomenological researchers may conduct a literature review to ascertain whether the area of interest (that is, the lived experience) has been previously researched and there is a demonstrated need for such a study. They may also do a literature review to see how other researchers have used phenomenological ideas in the design and conduct of research. Ethnographers may do a literature review to help identify a culture or to identify a particular aspect of a culture that has not been previously researched. When a culture has been selected, they may do an extensive literature review for any available information about that defined culture.

Literature review is an integral part of historical research and the selection of the event to be studied. Historical researchers often conduct extensive literature reviews to place limits on the final topic to be studied. In fact, the initial literature review and narrowing of the event and the historical time span often require a large investment of time. Some case studies do an extensive literature review for all information available on the identified area of interest (for example, a disease process). Others may review the literature as data are collected. Grounded theory researchers make a point not to look at the literature before beginning the study. In grounded theory studies, the literature review occurs after data collection and analysis have begun and theory has emerged from the data. Then the literature is reviewed and related to the developing theory emerging from the data. This is done to avoid ‘contamination’ of the data with preconceived concepts and notions about what might be relevant.

Once the phenomenon of interest is selected, a research aim is formulated. This might be expressed in the form of a research question, purpose or objective. The aim is generally broad and serves as a general focus or guide for the study. More defined focal areas of the research often emerge as data are collected and analysed. Table 5.3 presents sample research aims for each design using the previously cited articles in the discussion on design classification.

Do the following student challenge and see if you can identify the research intent in some sample studies.

---

**Student Challenge**

**Reading Research Aims** Use the studies you found in the previous student challenge and the studies listed in this chapter.

1. For the studies that were identified in this chapter, see if you can locate the research aims listed in Table 5.2.
2. Now look at the other studies you located. Can you determine the research aim for each of them?
3. Examine the literature reviews. Can you tell when these were done? Are the reviews more comprehensive in some studies than in others?
Section 2: Talking the Talk

Phase 2: Design the Study

Once the phenomenon has been identified and the general aim of the study is determined, the next phase is to determine the methodology and design the study around it. The chosen design dictates the general structure of the study and includes initial decisions about setting, sample selection and data collection methods. Remember, the qualitative process is fluid and sampling and data collection methods may evolve during the course of data collection.

Setting

The setting in qualitative research is often referred to as the ‘field’ because the study is set ‘in the field’ (that is, the natural setting where the phenomenon under investigation occurs). Settings vary by type of research design. The selected setting assumes more importance in some research designs than in others. The data collection method may also influence the selected setting. Phenomenological research settings are usually chosen based on convenience for the people who are being studied. Since most of the data is collected through a series of interviews with individual participants, setting is secondary.

Ethnographical studies take place in a setting where the researcher can readily observe and interact with a grouping of people of a particular culture. If the culture of interest is people in an institution, a prison or nursing home might be an appropriate setting. If the culture of interest is the critically ill, the setting might be an intensive care unit. It is important that the setting in ethnographical

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<tr>
<th>Research Design</th>
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<td>Phenomenology</td>
<td>To explore Australian nurse leaders’ experiences of mentoring relationships</td>
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<td>To explore the experiences of people living with hepatitis C</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnography</td>
<td>To explore nurses’ role on a medical assessment unit</td>
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<td></td>
<td>To explore how nurses care for women during early miscarriage in a hospital</td>
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<td>gynaecological unit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grounded theory</td>
<td>To review the perceptions and strategies of drug users and nurses with</td>
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<td>regard to pain management in acute care settings</td>
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<td></td>
<td>To explore the illness experiences and processes in relation to women</td>
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<td>undergoing coronary artery bypass graft surgery</td>
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<tr>
<td>Historical method</td>
<td>To examine critically hospital sanitary reform with reference to theories</td>
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<td>about infection and contagion in Dublin hospitals, 1858–98.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>To trace the movement to professionalise nursing and midwifery that</td>
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<td>emerged in the colony of Victoria during the late 19th and early 20th</td>
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<td>centuries</td>
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<td>Case study</td>
<td>To analyse and describe women’s different perceptions and experiences</td>
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<td>of childbirth following prolonged or normal labour</td>
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<td>To explore the meanings that Emergency Department nurses ascribe to</td>
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<td>acts of violence from patients, their family and friends and how these</td>
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<td>meanings impact upon how nurses respond to such acts</td>
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Qualitative Research: The Whole Picture  CHAPTER 5

Observation is a key ingredient of an ethnographic study. Grounded theory research takes place in a setting that allows the researcher to observe the selected social processes in action. This means an ability to observe both the environment and the selected participants in the study. Case study settings allow the researcher to view and interact extensively with the chosen case. Historical studies have no real setting. Data are collected from records, relics and artefacts located, for example, in libraries, museums, personal collections, or boxes in storage. Table 5.4 lists possible settings for the studies we've been following.

**SAMPLES AND SAMPLING**

Samples in qualitative research tend to be small and selected using purposive or convenience sampling techniques, which means the sample is purposefully or conveniently chosen. The researcher is concerned that the selected sample be what is termed ‘information-rich’ – people who have experienced or are experiencing the phenomenon of interest and are willing and able to articulate that experience. This means the selected sample participants are able to provide a powerful picture of the phenomenon under study. Several other sampling techniques can be used to help provide an ‘information-rich’ sample. These include snowball, extreme, intensity, maximum variety and critical case (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Box 5.2 discusses these techniques.

Grounded theory studies use a sampling technique called theoretical sampling. In theoretical sampling, the researcher begins by collecting and analysing data on an initial sample. This sample is called an open sample because the sampling process is not guided by data analysis. As data are collected and analysed (coded), concepts begin to emerge that will help form an evolving theory. These concepts are called categories and are identified by their repeated presence or absence in the data. The researcher then samples again, looking for additional data to support identified categories. The researcher continues sampling data collection and analysis until all identified categories are fully explored or saturated.
Sample selection in historical research is slightly different because the sample comprises data sources rather than people. The sampling process occurs simultaneously with data collection and analysis and is ongoing as the researcher refines the study topic. As the topic becomes more clearly defined, the pertinent data sources become more readily identified. This sampling process can cover an extended period of time. Initially the needed data are known only generally. The researcher spends time collecting and reading data sources, which allows the researcher to add greater clarity and definition to the chosen historical topic, which in turn allows the researcher to identify additional required data sources more clearly. Sampling and data collection cease when no new information is uncovered from several successive sources.

**DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

Data for qualitative studies are gathered chiefly by use of observation and interview. When a researcher desires to study behaviour, activity and sequences of interaction, or the context or environment in which these behaviours and

### BOX 5.2 QUALITATIVE SAMPLING TECHNIQUES

**Samples of Convenience and Purposive Sampling**

As described previously, these are commonly seen in qualitative designs

In addition, the following may be seen:

**Snowball Sampling**

This method involves getting recruited participants to help identify and recruit additional participants

**Intensity Sampling**

Selection of participants who are experiential experts or authorities about the selected phenomena (for example, in the pain study, intensity sampling might choose those who have chronic pain)

**Maximum Variety Sampling**

The deliberate selection of participants who are different, who come from different backgrounds, for the purpose of observing commonalities of experience. (This is particularly helpful when exploring abstract phenomena such as love, joy or hope)

**Critical Case Sampling**

Selection of participants identified as demonstrating what has been identified as a ‘critical incident’ while collecting and analysing data. (Once critical cases have been identified, additional purposive sampling is conducted to find cases that confirm or refute the critical case)

**Theoretical Sampling**

This technique is used in grounded theory whereby sampling continues until the theory is sufficiently developed

**Extreme or Deviant Case**

Learning from highly unusual manifestations of the phenomenon of interest
actions take place, observation is used. Observations may be classified by several features, such as structure, participation of the researcher and visibility of the researcher. Box 5.3 presents a fuller description of these classifications. Ethnographic studies use an unstructured participant approach. Grounded theory uses a combination of observational approaches. Interviews allow the researcher to tap into the opinions, attitudes and belief systems of participants. Interviews can be on a continuum from structured to unstructured. Highly structured and focused interviews are used primarily in quantitative research and were discussed in Chapter 4. In-depth semistructured or unstructured interviews are generally used in qualitative research. Unstructured interviews are guided by the methodology and general aim of the research and are largely conducted in a conversational, storytelling style. The researcher might begin with a very broad, open-ended request, such as, ‘Tell me about …’. As the person being interviewed tells the story, the interviewer may ask additional questions to encourage elaboration on a certain aspect of the story. Different styles of interview are used to produce the best data for answering the research question. For example, an ethnographic interview will differ from a phenomenological interview because the researcher is not seeking to explore the same constructs.

The real instrument in a qualitative study is the researcher. This is because the amount, type and quality of data retrieved are due in large part to the skills and abilities of the researcher, who must be able to enter the field and gain the trust of the people in that environment. Qualitative interviewing requires

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**BOX 5.3 CLASSIFICATION OF OBSERVATION FEATURES**

**Structure**

- Structured: specified behaviours are predetermined and listed on a checklist to be counted or checked off during an observation period
- Unstructured: behaviours are described and recorded as or after they occur using a journal, diary or field notes. A detailed descriptive picture is recorded

**Participation of the Researcher**

1. Participant: the researcher is an active part of the activities or behaviours engaged in by the participants being observed
2. Non-participant: the researcher is a bystander or passive participant in the activities being observed

**Visibility of the Researcher**

1. Concealed: the non-participant observer is hidden from those being observed. The activities might be recorded on video tape for later viewing and analysis, or activities might be viewed from a concealed space such as behind a two-way mirror
2. Non-concealed: the observer is in full view of the participants
considerable skill and particularly so because it is often about sensitive or potentially distressing topics. Participants are therefore vulnerable. Narrative is often the primary source of data and poor interviewing skill will compromise the quality of data and therefore the study itself. The researcher must have well-honed interviewing skills, with a good feel for the ebb and flow of conversation and be able to keep the interview flowing with well-placed responses and cues. Interviewing requires active listening and the ability to pick up and follow-up on subtle leads or clues dropped in the course of the interview. The researcher must be able to put the participant at ease and know how to elicit information that participants may find hard to express. The researcher must have an eye for detail and be attuned to variations and changes when observing. The researcher needs to be able to capture in-depth what has been seen and heard. Finally, the researcher must have a good grasp of self. This means being aware of and able to recognise and reflect on feelings and beliefs that may influence the data collection and analysis. In short, quality data collection in a qualitative study demands a very skilled researcher. Qualitative data collection demands specialised skills on the part of the researcher.

Researchers use several tools to record their observations or interview results. These include audio and video recordings and field notes. Audio and video recordings are later transcribed for closer analysis. Field notes are a written account of what the researcher sees, hears, experiences and thinks during the course of data collection. Field notes can be classified into four basic types. The first is a brief description of what has occurred. Notes of this type contain key phrases and major events and are often jotted down in the field. The second type of notes is an expansion of the first type. These are recorded immediately after a data collection session and expand on the brief notes, adding detail. A reflective journal is also kept by many researchers and contains descriptions of personal thoughts and feelings that occur during the process of data collection. Finally, any insights, analysis of observations, judgments and interpretations made in the field are recorded and kept.

Qualitative researchers are concerned with the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the data they collect. They do not tend to speak in terms of reliability and validity but rather in terms of the ‘confirmability’ of the study. Confirmability comprises three attributes: credibility, auditability and transferability. ‘Credibility’ is a term used in qualitative research to examine whether or not the explanation or interpretation of data matches what has been described or recorded. Credibility may be examined and cross-checked through the use of two techniques: member checks and audit trails (Jackson et al 2003). Though controversial (St Pierre 1999), member checks are made by having study participants review the material once it has been analysed and interpreted. Credibility then is a question of validity. Some might call this ‘truth’ but in qualitative research the notion of truth is a complex issue, as some people believe there may be many ‘truths’, each being grounded in ‘its own context and personal perspective’ (Shank 2002). Data are considered dependable when what is recorded matches what actually occurred. The use of audio and video recordings and multiple samplings helps ensure data are dependable.
Audit trails (decision trails) ensure that adequate documentation is available about the data collection and analysis processes. Enough detail should be provided to enable another researcher to repeat the study. This is known as auditability.

Fittingness or transferability relates to when the findings ‘fit’ into contexts outside the study situation. It is important to understand that the notion of validity or rigour in qualitative research is a contested space and theorists are constantly extending its agenda (Guba and Lincoln 2005). Look for a decision trail and authenticity in any research report and you should be halfway there.

**Student Challenge**

**Scrutinising Phase 2** Look again at the qualitative nursing or midwifery research studies you examined earlier. Scan these studies and see if you can identify each of the elements we have discussed in phase 2.

1. Identify the settings.
2. Identify the sample and sample size.
3. Did any of the studies use snowball, intensity, maximum variety, critical sampling or extreme sampling techniques?
4. What data collection methods were used?
5. Did any of the studies address the issues of reliability and validity? (Look for key terms such as accuracy, credibility, member checks or audit trails.)

**Phase 3: Conduct the Study**

This phase receives a lot of time and attention in qualitative research. The conceptualisation and planning stages are usually preliminary and broadly defined, in order to lay a broad set of boundaries for data collection. As data collection begins, data analysis may occur simultaneously. Data collection and analysis can lead to ongoing conceptualisation and planning about further collection and analysis. So we again see the fluid and repetitive (iterative) nature of the qualitative research process.

The issues of human subjects’ approval and informed consent as they apply to qualitative research differ from those of quantitative research. Most of the guidelines and procedures used by institutional ethics committees were designed for quantitative research methods. Although qualitative studies do not involve invasive, potentially risky procedures such as trialling drugs or treatments, there are still ethical considerations. Like other researchers, investigators using qualitative approaches have to be able to demonstrate that procedures of informed consent are addressed and also that participation is voluntary and that participants are able to withdraw from the study at any time. Frequently, the focus of qualitative research is on things that are intensely personal and even traumatic in nature, so participation in qualitative studies can involve participants being asked to recall (and therefore in a way relive) very traumatic life events. This means there is the potential for emotional distress. Institutional ethics
committees will expect to see strategies for dealing with the possibility of emotional distress in participants.

Consent forms often do not contain a detailed description of the study or the risks and benefits because they are not known at the time of data collection. Permission is obtained for interviews and for the use of audio and video recording equipment. Confidentiality is assured. Consent may need to be renegotiated with participants as data collection progresses and information emerges that may send the collection process in a new direction.

Subjects of qualitative research studies are often called participants or informants rather than subjects. Many qualitative researchers see the term ‘subject’ as too closely associated with the concept of experimentation and the connotation that people are being experimented on like laboratory specimens. The term ‘participant’ or ‘informant’ is used to convey the sense of mutual participation and trust building that occurs between the researcher and the people being researched and is reflective of a qualitative worldview.

Data collection is a lengthy process in most qualitative studies. Whereas data collection in typical quantitative studies might take from several minutes to several weeks, data collection in qualitative studies may last for months or even years. The process of data collection is often described in more detail in qualitative studies because the collection process is often used to make decisions about the credibility of the data. Take the following challenge.

**Student Challenge**

**Study Conduct** Look again at the qualitative research studies you examined for phases 1 and 2. Look for evidence of the steps in phase 3.

1. Were the rights of human subjects protected in these studies? What evidence did you find to support this?
2. Is there evidence of approval by an institutional ethics committee?
3. Was informed consent obtained?
4. What information was provided about what occurred during data collection?

**Phase 4: Analysis**

Analysis of data in qualitative studies is an inductive process and involves examining words, descriptions and processes. Analytical procedures vary according to the design, but all require the researcher to read and re-read field notes and transcripts, to ensure familiarity with the data. This is often called data immersion or dwelling with the data. It lets the researcher get in touch with not only the content but also the feeling, tone and emphasis being communicated.

Initial analysis efforts are directed at setting up a system to make large volumes of data more manageable. A system is needed that allows the researcher to file, code and easily retrieve needed data. Computer programs can assist in this management and analysis process. The researcher searches for themes, patterns
and meaning in the data and arranges this information in some way that classifies or categorises it.

**METHODS OF ANALYSIS**

Several specific formats and methods have been developed to analyse the data collected for various types of qualitative research. Common techniques used in phenomenological research include methods by Giorgi (1970), Spiegelberg (1976), Colaizzi (1978), van Kaam (1984), Parse et al (1985), van Manen (1990) and, more recently, interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al 2009). All these methods are similar, requiring qualitative researchers to immerse themselves in the data and use inductive reasoning to sort and make sense of, and to extract and synthesise meaning from, the data. Once the data is more manageable, the researcher begins to refine categories and to assign meaning. Data are compared and contrasted, similarities and differences noted and processes and relationships defined. Finally, descriptions are constructed that represent the synthesis of material. These descriptions may take the form of a metaphor or an analogy or may be presented as a common theme, or series of themes. Great care is taken in the synthesis of the research and several drafts may be required in order to portray the experience in a meaningful light. Art is increasingly becoming a medium through which to express qualitative work.

Grounded theory has a very well-defined method of data collection and analysis, described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Strauss (1987) and Strauss and Corbin (1990). The key is the use of techniques known as theoretical sampling and the constant comparative method. Theoretical sampling was discussed earlier in the sampling section. In the constant comparative method of analysis, the researcher categorises units of meaning through a process that compares recorded incident to recorded incident until concepts and categories of concepts begin to emerge. As this occurs, theoretical constructs and relationships are developed and a theory emerges.

Ethnography uses several analytical methods such as ethnoscience, life history, network and event analysis and the natural history method to examine conceptual and structural patterns in an identified culture. Ethnoscience techniques are designed to explore the ‘mental maps’ that people use to navigate everyday life (Dobbert 1984). Examination takes place at four levels. Data are described, classified, compared and explained. Description occurs using a technique known as domain analysis; classifications are made through taxonomic analysis; and comparisons are made through componential analysis. Explanation occurs by using the information from the first three analytic steps to make sense of the cultural patterns that emerge. Spradley (1979, 1980) provides a good basic discussion of the four levels used in the ethnoscience approach. A life history gathers in-depth information about an informant’s life and examines how similar or different individual patterns are from surrounding cultural patterns. Network and event analysis techniques are used to examine social structures. If you are interested in critical ethnography, try a Google search for Phil Carspecken.

Historical studies use analytical techniques that examine the documents gathered to determine their importance, reliability and validity. Initial importance
may be judged in various ways, including a gross classification into three categories, such as: ‘clearly valuable’, ‘mildly interesting’ and ‘not valuable’. Valuable documents are included in the write-up. Interesting documents are re-reviewed and non-valuable documents are deleted from the study.

Case studies use a content analysis methodology that allows the researcher to search for patterns or themes in the data using a specific set of rules governing coding and the formation of categories and category relationships.

**FINDINGS**

The findings in most qualitative studies are presented in a way more immediately understandable to the novice reader of research than the results in most quantitative studies. This is because the language used is commonly in a descriptive narrative form. However, you will notice that many qualitative researchers have a very sophisticated use of language and you will see words used that you may not be familiar with. You will also notice many of these papers present very complex ideas and may require reading, reflection and rereading in order to grasp their meaning fully. Frequently, findings are illustrated with the use of excerpts of participants’ narratives. A good qualitative presentation of findings leaves the reader with a clear, cohesive picture of the phenomena under study that is validated by snapshots/quotes from the participants themselves.

**Student Challenge**

**Analysis and Results** Examine your chosen research studies for the analyses used and the results of the analyses.

1. Can you identify the specific analytic methods employed?
2. Were the results understandable? Did you get a sense of what had been uncovered in the study?
3. Did you find the results easier to decipher than those in the quantitative studies you examined in Chapter 4?

**Phase 5: Use the Study**

Qualitative research is very powerful in getting the human face of health or midwifery care into the public domain and reminding health professionals of the centrality of the human experience in the provision of such care. Qualitative research is used to raise awareness/understanding of issues related to the human experience. It answers questions that cannot be reduced to statistical measurement. Qualitative research is a powerful tool to persuade policy-makers and decision-takers to take heed of an issue. Qualitative research findings can change policy and inform practice and should lead to better care by nurses and midwives who, because of their increased insight, can modify their approaches. Because qualitative researchers are often studying hidden or poorly understood aspects of human existence they usually have recommendations for further work. Recommendations for further research may include ideas for both
quantitative and qualitative studies, but do remember that ultimately it is the research question that drives the methodology.

Consumers of research (such as you, the reader) need to be able to satisfy themselves that the findings of qualitative research are credible and trustworthy. Ensuring the trustworthiness of the study and its findings is crucial if qualitative research is to be as equally valued by the scholarly community as rigorous quantitative research. Although the notion of rigour is contentious in qualitative work, as discussed, qualitative researchers have developed concepts such as adequacy and credibility to ensure that qualitative studies meet the criterion of scientific rigour.

The qualitative researcher is under the same obligation as the quantitative researcher to disseminate the results of the research study. The avenues for this dissemination are much the same for qualitative and quantitative researchers and include journal articles and conference presentations. However, qualitative studies may also be found in monograph or book form because of the length of presentation. These formats allow fuller description and use of a greater number and variety of example illustrations obtained from data collection.

**Student Challenge**

**Examining Your Chosen Research Studies**

1. What did you glean from the studies’ conclusions?
2. What implications might stem from the studies that can be applied to:
   (a) your professional practice?
   (b) education and/or policy development?
3. How would you compare your overall experience of reading qualitative research studies with reading quantitative research studies? Did you find one type easier to read and understand than the other? Do you think there would be value in combining both approaches?

**USING QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACHES TOGETHER**

One question students frequently raise is whether quantitative and qualitative methods can be used together. Some researchers do combine the two methodologies to study certain phenomena and this is referred to as mixed method research and is covered in the following chapter.

**Resources Kit**

**Want To Know More About Qualitative Research?**

Check out the puzzles, activities and links on the Evolve website.

Try entering ‘qualitative research’ as a search phrase using a search engine on the internet. A variety of interesting websites are devoted to qualitative research.

References


