

# Qualitative and Mixed Method Research a Leverage for Positive Health Outcome

## Abstract

Qualitative methods have become important tools within this broader approach to applied research, in large part because they provide valuable insights into the local perspectives of study populations. Qualitative methods are also effective in identifying intangible factors, such as social norms, socioeconomic status, gender roles, ethnicity, and religion, whose role in the research issue may not be readily apparent. When used along with quantitative methods, qualitative research can help us to interpret and better understand the complex reality of a given situation and the implications of quantitative data. For participants - whether members of the study population or someone related to the population in a professional capacity - in-depth interviews offer the opportunity to express themselves in a way ordinary life rarely affords them. Qualitative approaches typically employ a mixed methods design in which qualitative methods are primary or central to the research design. The concept of quality in health care is multidimensional and multifaceted and some of the questions asked related to the quality of care or services may not be acquiescent to quantitative methods. Qualitative research offers a variety of methods to be used for identifying what is really important to both patients and carers.

## Key Words

Health outcome; qualitative research; mixed method research

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## INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research methods are gaining in popularity outside the traditional academic social sciences, particularly in public health and international development research. Whereas quantitative research methods once dominated these fields, researchers have now begun drawing from a more diverse repertoire of methodologies as they tackle international public health problems. Qualitative methods have become important tools within this broader approach to applied research, in large part because they provide valuable insights into the local perspectives of study populations.<sup>[1]</sup> The great contribution of qualitative research is the culturally specific and contextually rich data it produces. Such data are proving critical in the design of comprehensive solutions to public health problems in developing countries, as scientists, medical doctors, pharmaceutical companies, and

humanitarian organizations have come to recognize that biomedical solutions are only partial remedies.<sup>[2]</sup> Rather, the success of a health intervention - that is, whether it actually reaches the people it is intended to help - rests also on how well it addresses socio behavioral factors such as cultural norms, ethnic identities, gender norms, stigma, and socioeconomic status. Success measured on this basis has a bearing, in turn, on the cost-effectiveness, efficiency, and efficacy of interventions, concerns not insignificant in the eyes of project managers and funding agencies. The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue. It provides information about the "human" side of an issue - that is, the often contradictory behaviors, beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships of individuals. Qualitative methods are also effective in identifying

intangible factors, such as social norms, socioeconomic status, gender roles, ethnicity, and religion, whose role in the research issue may not be readily apparent.<sup>[3-4]</sup> When used along with quantitative methods, qualitative research can help us to interpret and better understand the complex reality of a given situation and the implications of quantitative data. Participant observation is a qualitative method with roots in traditional ethnographic research, whose objective is to help researchers learn the perspectives held by study populations. Participant observation is also useful for gaining an understanding of the physical, social, cultural, and economic contexts in which study participants live; the relationships among and between people, contexts, ideas, norms, and events; and people's behaviors and activities.<sup>[5]</sup>

### **In-Depth Interviews**

In-depth interviews are one of the most common qualitative methods. One reason for their popularity is that they are very effective in giving a human face to research problems. In addition, conducting and participating in interviews can be a rewarding experience for participants and interviewers alike. For participants - whether members of the study population or someone related to the population in a professional capacity - in-depth interviews offer the opportunity to express themselves in a way ordinary life rarely affords them.<sup>[6-9]</sup> Many people find it flattering and even cathartic to discuss their opinions and life experiences and to have someone listen with interest. For their part, interviewers engaged in in-depth interviews are offered the privilege of having people who are virtually strangers entrust them with a glimpse into their personal lives. It is important to emphasize the voluntary nature of the interview. Remind participants that they are not obligated to respond to any question. If the interview guide includes questions that may be of a personal or sensitive nature, explain this to participants in advance. It is important to emphasize that participants should respond to all questions as fully and honestly as possible, but only to the extent that they feel comfortable doing so. If the instrument design allows, it can be advantageous to let the interview conversation proceed more or less naturally, as long as you can redirect the focus if necessary.<sup>[10]</sup> Adapting the flow of the interview may involve recognizing when a participant has already addressed a particular question in a previous response, rephrasing a question, or asking questions

in a different sequence from how they are organized in the interview guide (unless the research design requires a specific order). Again, this emphasizes the need for familiarity with the guides. Proficiency in techniques for asking effective questions is especially important for leading interviews in which participants speak liberally. This involves keeping track of which questions have and have not been asked and answered; knowing how to phrase questions that encourage participants to provide elaborate, detailed (rather than brief) responses; and asking questions that elicit the participant's own views and experiences as opposed to reflecting the convictions of the interviewer.<sup>[11]</sup> Relevant techniques include asking one question at a time, verifying unclear responses, asking open-ended questions, avoiding leading questions, and using follow-ups and probes.

### **Focus Group Toolkit**

Focus groups are especially effective for capturing information about social norms and the variety of opinions or views within a population. The richness of focus group data emerges from the group dynamic and from the diversity of the group. Participants influence each other through their presence and their reactions to what other people say. Because not everyone will have the same views and experiences because of differences in age, gender, education, access to resources, and other factors many different viewpoints will likely be expressed by participants.<sup>[12-14]</sup> Focus group data can also capture idiosyncratic experiences and views of individuals, but it is preferable to collect that data during one-on-one interviews, rather than in a group environment. Within a study, focus groups are typically one method among many that are used to create a complete picture of how a given issue affects a community of people. Focus groups contribute to this broad understanding by providing well-grounded data on social and cultural norms, the pervasiveness of these norms within the community, and people's opinions about their own values. Focus group data consist of tape recordings, transcripts of those recordings, the moderator's and note-taker's notes from the discussion, and notes from the debriefing session held after the focus group. Notes are initially handwritten in field notebooks, on the focus group guide, or on special forms. After data collection, all handwritten notes are expanded into more complete narratives, then entered into a computer. An effective focus group facilitator knows the research material well and is

practiced in the method. As a first step in preparing for a focus group, become thoroughly familiar with the informed consent documents. Although you will read the form to participants, you should also be able to explain its contents in your own words. Be prepared to address any questions participants may have about the content of the consent form, the terminology used, whom to contact for further information, the purpose of the research, and so on. Next, the moderator should become thoroughly familiar with the focus group guide. Being familiar with the guide allows the moderator to be more engaged during the discussion, to adhere to the guide more easily should the conversation begin to deviate from the questions, and to focus on encouraging equal participation from group members rather than on locating the questions in the guide. It is important to understand the purpose behind each question and how it fits within the overall research aims.<sup>[15]</sup> It may be necessary to rephrase questions that are unclear to participants, or to spontaneously think of follow-up questions and probes. You should be able to recognize when participants have adequately addressed the intent of the question, when a response or responses contain information that applies to a separate question or to a scripted follow-up question, and when or which probes are needed to elicit additional information from individuals or from the group as a whole. Being familiar with the guide also enables you to use it flexibly, taking advantage of natural shifts in the discussion. It is advisable to review the focus group guide before every session. If multiple versions of a guide have been developed, make sure you are using the correct version.<sup>[16]</sup>

#### **Qualitative Approach to Mixed Methods**

A qualitative approach to research encompasses several theoretical traditions. All of these approaches have the common core assumption that reality is socially constructed and that subjective meaning is a critical component of knowledge building. The qualitative tradition recognizes the importance of the subjective human creation of meaning but does not reject outright some notion of objectivity. Additionally, some qualitative perspectives stress a critical stance toward knowledge building, whereas others highlight the importance of transformation with an emphasis on social justice and social change as primary research objectives. The research method that qualitative researchers utilize often entails having a strong connection to one's research respondents through

the practice of empathy, that is, by closely identifying with respondents' experiences. Individuals are perceived to be "meaning makers" of the worlds they reside in; it is their lived reality that qualitative researchers seek to understand. A qualitative approach does not place subjective experience outside the realm of scientific inquiry. Rather than seeking an answer to a given question with the goal of generalizing their findings to a wider population, qualitative researchers look for complexity.<sup>[17]</sup> They value human subjectivity and seek to understand the range of experiences and the contexts within which they arise. Qualitative researchers often use both qualitative and quantitative methods in the service of a qualitative approach.

#### **Reasons for Mixing Methods from Qualitative Research**

Qualitative researchers pursue a mixed methods design for a diverse range of reasons. Qualitative approaches typically employ a mixed methods design in which qualitative methods are primary or central to the research design. In discussing the motivations for using a mixed methods approach, we use the capitalized term "QUAL" to denote the dominance of the qualitative component of a study in a qualitative approach to mixed methods research design; the lowercased term "quan" is used to indicate the auxiliary role of the quantitative component in the figures on mixed methods designs.<sup>[18]</sup> Mixed methods designs also take into account whether or not the two studies are mixed sequentially (one, then the other) or concurrently (at the same time). There is also the issue of at what point(s) in the research projects the two studies are interacting with one another

#### **Qualitative Research in Health Care Management**

Recently, there has been a greater acceptance of the qualitative approach, even as a stand-alone method, in health care research. Institutions that control funding for medical research have developed ethical guidelines for assessing qualitative studies which indicates formal acceptance of this form of research within an area previously dominated by quantitative methods. Quality of health care is one of the areas where qualitative methods can be used. The concept of quality in health care is multidimensional and multifaceted and some of the questions asked related to the quality of care or services may not be acquiescent to quantitative methods. Qualitative research offers a variety of methods to be used for

identifying what is really important to both patients and carers. It can also be used to identify and detect obstacles to change and the reasons why improvement does not occur. It is therefore an essential component of health services research because it enables us to reach areas not amenable to quantitative research, for example, lay and professional health beliefs. In addition, qualitative description can be a prerequisite of quantitative research, particularly in areas that have received little previous investigation.<sup>[19]</sup> Qualitative research is widely used to study issues related to doctor-patient interaction especially in general practice. Studies concerning patients' versus doctors' agendas in general practice and general practitioners' perceptions of effective health care are examples. Recently there have been more studies concentrating on patients' own perceptions and views regarding their health and health care services. Another area where qualitative research is being used in health care is to identify obstacles and barriers to practice change by exploring the reasons behind certain behaviours. In addition to issues related to the patients' perception, some qualitative studies concentrated on factors fostering the doctor's motivation and the effect of doctors' social life and culture, in addition to issues related to the doctor's own health. Qualitative work can help in identifying cultural and social factors that affect health care positively or negatively. Such information can be helpful in improving service delivery. Studies on patients from ethnic minorities have identified administrative and language barriers that affected health care and shed light on some of the beliefs and behaviours of these patients that might have affected help seeking and compliance.<sup>[20]</sup> There has been an increasing interest and use of qualitative research methods in primary health care and general practice articles.

### CONCLUSION

Qualitative research methods are receiving an increasing recognition in health care related research. The use of qualitative research in health care enables researchers to answer questions that may not be easily answered by quantitative methods. Moreover, it seeks to understand the phenomenon under study in the context of the culture or the setting in which it has been studied, therefore, aiding in the development of new research instruments, such as questionnaires that are more culturally acceptable. However, because health care related research has, for decades, been

based on quantitative methods, the introduction of a new method requires researchers in health care who attempt to use it, to have a thorough understanding of its theoretical basis, methodology and evaluation techniques.

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