

Designing Qualitative Research 1

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C007

Aims of session

- To briefly revisit the assumptions of quantitative and qualitative research
- To introduce the different stages of qualitative research design
- To consider ethical issues in qualitative research design

Differences between qualitative and quantitative research

- Both have very different theoretical assumptions
- Quantitative research tends to be driven by theory – ‘top-down’ approach
 - Tests hypotheses
 - Reductionist
 - Research methods aim to be scientific
- Qualitative researchers approach research with no fixed ideas – ‘bottom-up’ approach
 - Focus on construction and negotiation of meaning
 - No reduction of data

Participants

- Deciding on participants is closely linked to deciding on your topic
- Careful consideration must be given to how access to participants will be gained
 - What ethical clearance will you need?
 - How time consuming will access be?
 - Will participants be able to give their own consent or will they need a representative?
 - Are you going to work with individuals or groups?

Method and Analysis

- The majority of the rest of course is tied up exploring issues around these two
- They are closely interwoven in qualitative research and choices about one will always inform choices about the other
- You can start by making a firm decision about either – you might like a particular type of analysis or you might want to try a specific method
- Both will also be informed by your topic

Research questions

- Qualitative researchers don't work with hypotheses
- Research questions are set which are based loosely around questions we want to think about
- These depend on the type of methodology employed
- E.g. in looking at managing diabetes:
 - A grounded theorist would set a question such as 'What factors do diabetics consider important in managing their treatment?'
 - A discursive theorist would ask questions like 'How do diabetics construct their experiences of diabetes?'

Ethical considerations

- Whatever research is conducted ethical considerations must be taken into account
- This is often of even more importance in qualitative work than in quantitative
- The ethical considerations discussed here are informed by the BPS code of ethics (www.bps.org.uk)

Ethical considerations

- Informed consent – participant should be able to give full consent to research process based on informed choice (all the more important when dealing with vulnerable groups)
- Deception – participant should be aware of what the study is looking at and should not be deceived in any way
- Right to withdraw – participant should be given the right to withdraw at any time
- Debriefing – participant should be given any relevant further information about the study and their own role in it

Ethical considerations

- Confidentiality and anonymity – data should be treated as confidential with all participants names and identifying features changed
- Protection of participants from physical and psychological harm – ensure you consider the types of things which might cause stress:
 - Different viewpoints
 - Religions
 - Cultures

Ethical considerations

- Observational research – difficulty of informed consent in naturalistic observation
 - Must respect privacy and psychological wellbeing of participants
 - Must only take place where participants are in public place and would expect to be observed by strangers
 - Must take account of cultural values

Ethical considerations

- Observational research as a participant-observer raises a number of issues extending beyond formal consent for research
 - You may choose to be as open as possible with the 'team' thus enabling more freedom in asking questions as the fieldwork progresses
 - You should be aware that your presence may affect behaviour of those being observed – especially if you are a regular part of/known to the team prior to the research

Ethical considerations

- Internet-based research – poses unique difficulties
 - Informed consent, offering right to withdraw and debriefing difficult to implement with ‘unknown’ participants
 - Robinson (2001) argues that if a message is posted in a password protected site then the postee can reasonably expect it to be private
 - If publicly accessible then it can be disseminated to a much wider audience
 - Robinson suggests that if already existing, publicly accessible data is used then the need to obtain informed consent is no longer applicable
 - Should still protect anonymity/confidentiality e.g. by removing ‘signature’ lines and changing usernames

Ethical considerations

- Media-based research – focuses on publicly accessible data
 - Either written (newspapers, magazines etc) or spoken (TV, radio etc)
 - With the development of the Internet the wealth and diversity of material available has grown e.g. parliamentary debates, international news items, historical documents, etc
 - As long as it is in the public domain then it is available for analysis

Summary

- I have looked at different aspects of designing research such as choosing participants and formulating research questions
- I have briefly touched on method and analysis which forms the basis of the rest of the course
- I have particularly focused on ethical considerations in doing different types of qualitative research

Further reading

- Robinson, K.M. (2001). Unsolicited narratives from the internet: A rich source of qualitative data. *Qualitative Health Research*, 11 (5) 706-714.
- Silverman, D. (2005) *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook* (2nd Edn). London: Sage.