Qualitative Reseach

Quantitative research are designed to precisely measure the association between biological, social, environmental, and behavioral factors and health conditions.

Qualitative research methods focus on understanding why and how individual life experience and the context of community life influence health and wellness. Such contextual information is difficult to capture through traditional quantitative surveys. Methods that rely on rapport and trust between researcher and participant that include open-ended questions enable participants to talk about their perceptions and experiences Qualitative methods may be employed in combination with quantitative methods during the research process.

Mixed Methods Research

When qualitative and quantitative methods are blended in the context of a research study, we refer to it as a "mixed methods research." In such cases it is common to employ qualitative methods to:

1. Generate hypotheses which may be applied to intervention design and evaluation
2. Enrich Understanding about a research topic that may be inaccessible using quantitative methods
3. Provide insights that specialists and researchers may not considered beforehand
4. Facilitate partnership between researcher and community members affected by the heath issue under study

Comparison of Research Methods

	QUANTITATIVE	QUALITATIVE
GENERAL FRAMEWORK	Test hypotheses, data collection is rigid relying on structured methods, such as questionnaires, surveys, record reviews.	Explore phenomena using more flexible methods that categorize responses to semi-structured methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation
ANALYTIC OBJECTIVES	Describe populations and quantify exposure-outcome associations	Describe and explain variations and relationships
QUESTION FORMAT	Close-ended	Open-ended
DATA FORMAT	Numeric or categorical	Textual (based on audiotapes, videotapes, and field notes)
FLEXIBILITY IN STUDY DESIGN	Study design is stable throughout a study. Participant responses do not influence or determine how and which questions researchers ask next.	Study design is more flexible. Participant responses affect how and which questions researchers ask next. Study design is iterative, i.e., data collection and research questions can be adjusted according to what is learned.

The product of qualitative research can be recurrent themes or hypotheses by identifying salient factors and informing predictions about relationships. Themes are unifying concepts that identify and characterize a pattern of behaviors, group interactions, or individual perceptions.

Learning Objectives

1. Articulate the purpose and significance of qualitative research methods
2. Determine when it is appropriate to use qualitative methods to address research
3. Illustrate ethical considerations in the conduct of qualitative methods
4. Define the major qualitative research techniques, their strengths and limitations and contexts in which they are best used
5. Define and illustrate the importance of "Community-based Participatory Research" (CBPR) as a research design often involving qualitative methods

Common Qualitative Methods

Participant Observation

Collecting data on behaviors in natural settings; study cultural aspects of a particular setting. Usually conducted early in a study but can be used to follow up as well. The role of the participant/observer is to careful observe all details with a wide angle lens.

- **Non-participation:** No involvement with the people or activities studied (ex. studying television programs)

- **Passive Participation:** Present at the scene where activities take place, but does not participate in them or interact with other people. (Ex. Court or clinic waiting room observer)
- **Moderate Participation:** Balance between insider and outsider / participant and observer. (Ex. Participating in a town meeting)
- **Active Participation:** Active involvement in what your subjects are doing. (taking a minimum wage job to see how poor people manage expenses)
- **Complete Participation:** Some who is already involved in a particular activity or part of a particular group to specifically record systematic observations.

In-Depth Interviews

These are the best way of collecting in-depth information on personal histories, opinions, and life experiences. These can be unstructured, semi-structured, or structured interviews. The idea is to have a guided discussion reflecting the individual's perspectives and experiences. The researcher might read questions from a prewritten guide which are open-ended in order to have the participant lead the discussion. These are great for sensitive topics when surveys or focus groups are ineffective.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

These provide a means of collecting data on cultural perspectives and norms of a group. Usually about 5-10 people, with 3-5 groups per strata, discussing a set of predetermined topics. Stratification is the breakdown of groups based on how similar or different members of the group should be. These strata could be characteristics such as age, wealth, race, etc. These are useful for characterizing social and cultural norms or exploring how people talk about a sensitive topic. Keep discussion open-ended and avoid asking why or for examples. The group is the unit of analysis, not the individuals within it.

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)

Over the past 25 years it has become increasingly apparent that there is a health disparity in people living in disadvantaged communities, which is why it is crucial to move beyond traditional approaches which have previously led to breaches of trust and deep divides between researches and the community.

Minkler and Wallerstein state: "CBPR begins with an issue of real importance to the community and involves the stakeholders and community members throughout the research process, including its culmination in education and action for social change." CBPR is not a method but an orientation; subjects are not objects of research but active participants. It's like a potluck with everyone bringing knowledge and expertise to the table. Note there are several names given to such approaches.

CBPR can...

... support the development of research questions that reflect issues of real concern

... improve our ability to achieve informed consent and address "cost and benefits" at the community level

... improve cultural sensitivity and reliability and validity of measurement tools

... uncover knowledge critical to enhancing understanding sensitive health issues

... improve recruitment and retention efforts by increasing community trust

... increase the relevance of intervention studies, and thus the likelihood of success

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is the process of organizing, coding and examining raw data and finding patterns in order to interpret or understand behavior and social phenomena.

Data could be in the form of texts, audio-recordings, images, and artifacts. Software programs such as NVivo are useful for managing qualitative data. In such programs the analyst does the coding of the data himself, which allows them to identify major themes. There are two type of coding; **Inductive**, which is often done at the formative stage of research and relies on "open" coding to allow meaning to emerge from the data, and **deductive**, which is usually done at the confirmatory

stage and starts with a hypothesis before starting to code.

Using a qualitative research approach means:

- Focusing on social, economic, and political context of behavior
- Looking at ourselves as well as objects of our study
- Examining things we take for granted
- Recognizing the inadequacy of judging solely with our own norms
- Understanding the importance of obtaining an insider's perspective
- Being open to expect the unexpected
- Being willing to admit we may not know all the questions, let along all the answers
- Realizing there is no "value-free" science

Criticisms of Qualitative Research

- Lacks reproductability
- Lacks generalizability
- Researcher bias

Qualitative Articles Should Report:

- Relevance of question and rational for approach
- Sampling strategy (selection, saturation)
- Data collection (interview guide, depth of data)
- Analysis (number of coders, training, code structure, systematic process, software, divergent cases, participant confirmation, audit trail)

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