

Qualitative methodology made easy

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This short document is a resource for postgraduate students and researchers in medical and health sciences who want to undertake qualitative research. This resource serves to enable readers to be able to identify differences between specific philosophical paradigms that shape qualitative methodologies.

There are many excellent resources that develop specific theories, demonstrate improvement, and offer step-by-step guides to implementation. We have listed a few of our favourites at the end of this document.

KEY TERMS

Ontology

Ontology is the study of being or reality. It is concerned with our perceptions of the nature of existence or essence. In the context of research this is important.

Quantitative research is concerned with proof that a natural phenomenon exists, whereas qualitative research is concerned with 'how' and 'why' situations occur or phenomenon exist in the form they do.

Tanisha Jowsey (BA (hons1), MA, PhD) is a medical anthropologist with expertise in qualitative research methods (particularly phenomenology and narrative analysis), chronic illness, and the relationship between time and health. Among Tanisha's favourite theorists are Pierre Bourdieu, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Clifford Geertz, Barbara Adam, Mike Bury,

Jane Desborough (RN, RM, MPH, PhD) is a health services researcher, with expertise in mixed methods research, including grounded theory and multi-level modelling. Her background as a registered nurse and midwife and experience working with health policy further inform her approach to research.

"Qualitative research is about exploring issues, understanding phenomena, and answering questions by analyzing and making sense of unstructured data."

[What is Qualitative Research | Data Analysis Software](http://www.qsrinternational.com/what-is-qualitative-research.aspx)
| NVivo
www.qsrinternational.com/what-is-qualitative-research.aspx

Quantitative and qualitative

There are two primary models for undertaking research: Quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research is concerned with establishing proof of existence and is numerically-based. Qualitative research is concerned with the how and why of existence; perspectives of truth & reality (see Mills, Birks, Haora, 2014; see also Rapport, 2014).

Epistemology is concerned with how we gain knowledge of being or reality

How do we know the world? What is the relationship between the inquirer and the known? (see Mills, Birks, Hoare, 2014).

Epistemology is concerned with how we gain knowledge of being or reality. How do we know the world?

Paradigms are “models or frameworks that are derived from a worldview or belief system about the nature of knowledge and existence. Paradigms are shared by a scientific community and guide how a community of researchers act with regard to inquiry” (<http://www.qualres.org/HomePhil-3514.html> Accessed 21.07.15. See also, Savin Baden & Howell Major, 2013).

Methodology: your methodology is a combination of the philosophical paradigm that underpins the research with the subsequent data collection and analysis methods. Methodology refers to the way we collect and generate data. It describes the articulated, theoretical approach we take to gaining knowledge about our world and is informed by our philosophical position. (Ellen, 1984see also <http://www.qualres.org/HomePhil-3514.html> Accessed 21.07.15; and Savin Baden & Howell Major, 2013).

Your ontological beliefs guide your thoughts about how knowledge can be gained.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES - THE MARVELLOUS TABLE OF ANSWERS*

Methodology & Outcome	Theme of Knowledge	Characteristics	Data Collection/ Generation methods	Data analysis methods	Commentary
Action research Knowledge, participatory process, Outcome & Change	Participatory and Post-modern Pragmatic approaches	Action oriented – purpose to produce research-informed change to address live issues Those affected are involved as participants (co-producers of knowledge and action) Iterative planning, action and review	Observation Interviews & focus groups Surveys Face-face surveys in smaller groups – group feedback Participatory video in community interventions	Purpose: To produce theory/ understanding To inform action Emergent process based on cycles of action, reflection and integration. Methods can be adopted from other methodologies such as grounded theory. Some have termed their approach as grounded action research. (Baskerville & Pries-Heje 1999)	Data collection/ generation are often integrated Often cycles of action and reflection are integrated. Planning, action, observation and evaluation (Lewin (1946); Kemmis and McTaggart (2005)) Publications: action research; International Journal of Action Research, Systemic Practice and Action Research.
Critical Ethnography Knowledge of Culture, Illumination & Change	Social constructivism – interpretation by the researcher and the actions stemming from these, or co-construction by researcher and participants. Underpinned by Realism & Critical theory	Fieldwork is the cornerstone of ethnography [1]. Traditionally this referred to researchers immersing themselves in a community for extended periods of time. However, it can also refer to immersion for shorter periods.	Sampling – snowball or theoretical. Criterion –based & purposeful – to provide the most information-rich data possible. Interviews, conversations, observations, field notes, surveys, focus groups, performances, and collection of archival data.	Seeking patterns & irregularities; explanations of a phenomenon. First step is usually coding into units & categories – inductive or deductive. Informed by emergent understandings. A range of analytical approaches can be used: Cultural analysis, thematic analysis, narrative analysis, content analysis and discourse analysis.	Anchored in philosophy of realism, that reality exists independently of the researcher, although this construction of reality is influenced by the researcher [1]. The traditional end product is an ethnographic text. Dissemination can take a number of forms. E.g. Policy, news media, peer-reviewed pubs, activism ...

Methodology & Outcome	Theme of Knowledge	Characteristics	Data Collection/ Generation methods	Data analysis methods	Commentary
<p>Discourse Analysis</p> <p>Knowledge of Discourse, Illumination & Change</p>	<p>Seeking to understand how language or discourse shapes inferences and is shaped by context.</p> <p>Interpretivism Critical theory Rhetoric Structuralism</p>	<p>Technical analysis <i>Discourse Analysis (DA)</i>:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recording interaction 2. Transcribing 3. Study of tape repeatedly 4. Conversational structures, moves and strategies 5. Building an argument [2] <p><i>Conversational Analysis (CA)</i> The study of verbal & non-verbal interaction.</p> <p>Situational analysis Discourse is bound up in context: What situates a discourse? How/ what discourses organise contexts across macro, meso and micro levels? [3]</p>	<p>Audio and audio-visual recordings of interviews and speech (naturally occurring). Observations Texts Transcriptions Minimal interaction/ influence by the researcher optimise naturally occurring speech and actions.</p>	<p>Transcription DA & CA use a precise form of transcription, using symbols overlapping time pauses, speech and audible breaths [3, 4]. The data session – read and re-read transcripts/ listen repeatedly to tapes. Often borrow from ethnography, grounded theory and action research methods. Example: open and axial coding Discourse tracing Structured-focused comparison method traces how discourses track up and bear down across macro, meso and micro levels [3].</p>	<p>“The inferences people make about others based on small aspects of their language and other features of their talk” [3] Our word and language are deeply shaped by institutions, relationships, the media and larger systems of practice. Text or Talk The study of language in its spoken & written forms and in context. Focus on how language is used in social settings. <i>Macro-discourses</i>: enduring patterns of text and talk across contexts; discursive practices [5] <i>Meso discourses</i>: connections between meso and micro discourses</p>

Methodology & Outcome	Theme of Knowledge	Characteristics	Data Collection/ Generation methods	Data analysis methods	Commentary
<p>Grounded Theory</p> <p>Discovery Knowledge of process, outcome and change</p>	<p>Traditional: post positivism (emergence of theory from data set)</p> <p>Evolved: symbolic interactionism (focus on context & action)</p> <p>Constructivist: constructivism</p>	<p>Discovery</p> <p>Aim to develop theory that is grounded in the data</p> <p>Symbolic interactionists and constructivists acknowledge the history & theory that researchers bring to a study, hence requiring reflexivity throughout the process.</p> <p>Traditional GT doesn't acknowledge influence of the researcher.</p>	<p>Concurrent data collection & analysis – when, where & how to collect data that will inform developing theory</p> <p>Interviews Documents, Questionnaires & surveys Field notes & memos</p> <p>Initial purposive sampling followed by theoretical sampling. Recruitment until data <i>saturation</i>. <i>Memos</i> – most important tool (log activities, record decision-making processes & analytical thinking and processes, provide an audit trail which reinforces the quality and rigour of the research) [6]. <i>Constant comparison</i> – each new piece of data compared with existing data – coding and category development. <i>Theoretical sensitivity</i>. <i>Coding</i> Initial coding (open): fracturing into smaller segments, relevance and processes. Intermediate coding (selective, axial or focused coding): development of categories, core variable/s, category axis. Identification of relationships b/w categories [6]. Advanced coding (theoretical or selective): aided by writing a narrative (<i>storyline technique</i> [7, 8]), which aids theoretical integration. Grounded theory is finalised with theoretical codes – a framework that enhances the explanatory power of the storyline [6]. Coding paradigm to support questioning of the data around condition, actions/interactions and consequences [9].</p>		<p>Originated with the work of Glaser & Strauss (1967) Traditional, evolved and constructivist. Underpinned by varying theories of reality. Whether there is reality outside of people's perceptions or if reality is relative to a specific conceptual scheme, theoretical framework, society, culture, paradigm ... Memos are an important GT method – for iterative analysis, reflexivity and development of theoretical sensitivity. Theoretical sensitivity is essential for GT. "The ability to recognise and extract from the data elements that have relevance for your emerging theory" [10]</p>

Methodology & Outcome	Theme of Knowledge	Characteristics	Data Collection/ Generation methods	Data analysis methods	Commentary
Narrative Research Knowledge, Illumination & Change	Ethnography Phenomenology Phenomenological hermeneutics Narrative psychology	The aim is to create “a space where the inquirer immerses herself in a particular world, observes, reflects and is part of” [11]. A deeper experience and understanding of the world results. Requires reflexivity, multiple iterations and the capacity to ‘think narratively’ [11].	Participant stories, field notes, conversation, imagined dialogue, poetry, artwork, audio-visual materials, artworks... <i>Often concurrent data collection & analysis occurs, allowing emergence of insights, connections & new questions.</i> Personal notebook for reflection (similar to memos).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading & re-reading notes • Looking for patterns, connections, contiguity and stand-out moments. • The researcher re-tells the story. • Construction of others’ voices and realities through narratives [12]. Underpinned by: <i>Temporality</i> (events have a past, present & future) <i>Sociality</i> (place of researcher in the study) <i>Place</i> (location or sequence of locations) [13].	This style of research is time-consuming and requires flexibility and patience. at times it might feel “fragmented and disjointed” [11]; however it is the joining of fragments into the whole that creates the story or narrative. Similar to all qualitative research, the legitimacy of narrative research has been scrutinised. For some it comes down to the difference between a good and bad story about human truths ...
Phenomenology Knowledge of Lived Experience	Constructivism or Interpretivism	Husserl: intentionality a central tenet – the process that consciously occurs in relation to the object of attention. The focus is on the perception of the world rather than taken-for-granted assumptions. Existential: interpretive. Hermeneutic phenomenology: understanding the	Prior to commencement the researcher needs to reflect on his/ her previous experience of the phenomenon and reflect on personal thoughts/ experiences that might influence their understanding or perceptions of participants’ experiences. Recruitment until data saturation. Semi or unstructured Interviews	Crucial element in research process. Close and repeated engagement with the data [14]. Reading & re-reading data. Thematic analysis. Bracketing, eidetic reduction and epoche [15] (a theoretical moment when all judgements of the existence of the external world and all action are suspended).	“Understanding what it is <i>like</i> to be human and what constitutes our <i>lived world</i> ” [17]. Phenomenology is considered a philosophy & a methodology/ method. It is not interested in developing theory, but to gain insight into the human experience. The particular phenomenological

Methodology & Outcome	Theme of Knowledge	Characteristics	Data Collection/ Generation methods	Data analysis methods	Commentary
		<p>structures that make human existence possible.</p> <p>See also Heidegger [22], Merleau-Ponty [23], and Latour [24]</p>	Diaries	Questioning, 'imaginative variation' [15, 16].	approach taken will inform the methods used.
<p>Case Study Research</p> <p>Situated Knowledge and Change</p>	Participatory + Postmodern Constructivism or Interpretivism	<p>Exploratory: seeking to answer questions of 'how' or 'why' a phenomenon occurs [18].</p> <p>Seeking an in-depth analysis of a unit of study (person, organisation, system ...).</p> <p>"Defining the boundaries of the system under study" [19].</p>	<p>Detailed planning and design required, including negotiating access, preparation, conducting research and analysis. Access through a 'gatekeeper'.</p> <p>Often mixed methods required, hence design requires clarity re timing or data collection & integration of findings. Whilst classified as an individual methodology, case studies are often underpinned by other methodologies.</p>	Methods of analysis need to match the methodologies employed.	<p>"An intensive study of an individual unit of interest [20], with a focus on the developmental factors of that unit [18]" [21]. Closely related to ethnography, often referred to as 'ethnomethodology' [21]</p>

* Adapted with permission from the authors: Mills, J and Birks, M., 2014, *Qualitative Methodology. A practical guide*, Sage: London

A BIT MORE ABOUT PHILOSOPHY

CONSTRUCTIONISM

Similar to Rapport's work on inter-subjectivity (1997), constructionism is the building of reality through interactions between people. Constructionism is a philosophical paradigm, a social theory of reality, and a learning theory. All three centre on the notion that people are rational and that they create knowledge of the world (learn) through interactions with others. Savin-Badin and Howell Major (2013) explain that people who work within this paradigm believe that people use signs and systems to understand, experience and construct their social realities. Hence reality is an internal experiences as opposed to an external reality independent of individual perceptions. The shared construction of knowledge between people is informed by shared meanings, ideas, practices, and beliefs.

Shared artefacts contribute to this construction. For example, people have a common understanding of time in terms of hours and minutes which allows for them to effectively arrange a meeting time. They may decide to meet on an electronic platform such as in a chat room; in which case they need to have a shared understanding of what the platform is, how to access it, and how to utilise it. People who follow a constructionist paradigm acknowledge that data are co-created through active engagement between people, underpinned by relational or participatory knowing (Savin-Badin and Howell Major, 2013).

Constructionism or constructivism?

Tanisha remembers the difference between constructionism and constructivism like this:
constructionism, think construction, building. It takes lots of people working together to build a building. Constructionism involves the ideas and interactive learning of many people. Whereas constructivism has the 'ivi' from an 'individual': focus is on how the individual makes sense of information.

Constructionism stems from symbolic interactionism and phenomenology. In Berger and Luckman's seminal work (1966) on constructionism they propose that people are as much informed by social reality as they inform social reality. This idea was later taken up by Pearce (1995). Fairhurst and Grant (2010) succinctly summarise Pearce's work in the following way: "Pearce (1995) distinguishes between the construction of social reality, which foregrounds perception, and the social construction of reality, which foregrounds action" (2010: 177).

CONSTRUCTIVISM

Jean Piaget, founder of constructivism in educational theory, proposed that people create their own sense of reality through their own perceptions, ideas and experiences. This paradigm is based upon an understanding that each person creates their own reality, which is founded on the meanings that the individual assigns to experiences and ideas. Hence, all knowledge is a compilation of human-made constructions' (Raskin 2002: 4). Savin-Badin and Howell Major (2013) explain that people who work within the constructivist paradigm have a sense of unity between subjective and objective realities, their truth emanating as a creation of perspective rather than a discovery in itself. Qualitative research that follows this paradigm is concerned with identifying the way in which individuals construct knowledge.

PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology is a paradigm rooted in consciousness, intentionality and embodiment. It is concerned with how people make meaning about life and the world in and through the body. Phenomenology is a deeply philosophical paradigm that has been developed by Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and more recently, Latour and van Manen.

Drawing on van Manen (1997) and Lavery (2003), Savin-Badin and Howell Major explain that people who follow a phenomenological paradigm:

“... see reality as a product of the mind, the world of ideas (van Manen, 1997). Meaning is shaped through individual experiences of the world” and reality cannot be separated from the individual. People who follow this paradigm are concerned with individual’s ‘life-worlds’ as being experienced “pre-reflectively, without resorting to categorization or conceptualization, and quite often includes what is taken for granted or those things that are common sense’ (Lavery, 2003:4).” -Savin-Badin and Howell Major, 2013:61

This experience, Merleau-Ponty (2002) suggests, is primarily informed by the body, which posits around us a biological world through which we come to experience external phenomena, and develop perception and representation.

There are two key ways in which phenomenology tends to be followed in primary health research; one follows Heidegger’s and Merleau-Ponty’s emphases on the body (for example: Dennis, 2011), and the other follows emphasis on ideas, such as with interpretive modes within this paradigm (for example: interpretive phenomenological analysis – Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).



Maurice, we simply can't know what her experience is.

Image detail: *Phenomenology*. Created by Tanisha Jowsey and Hugh Brocklebank for the Centre for Medical and Health Sciences Education, University of Auckland. 01 July 2016.

ONCE YOU HAVE CHOSEN YOUR PHILOSOPHICAL PARADIGM

DATA COLLECTION

Data generation takes place when the researcher engages directly with a data source and generates material for analysis. This can take place in a number of ways, including in-depth interviews, focus groups or through analysis of visual data such as photographs. Most often when people refer to qualitative research, they refer to the conduct of interviews, which are at times referred to as the 'gold standard' of qualitative research (Silverman, 2000). However, one criticism of the interview method is that it informs us of what people think and believe, but not of what they do. To gain insight into this other methods are more valuable, for example audio-visual materials, such as the filming of consultations. There is also the collection of data from documents, objects or artefacts. One example of the use of artefact was a study conducted examining the use of PowerPoint presentation by teachers and the ways in which they and students interact with this medium (Adams & Thompson, 2011). By emphasizing interviews over the three other categories of data sources, we appear to have chosen the "precariousness of a one-legged stool" (Hall & Rist, 1999) over the sturdiness of the 4-legged chair (Sandelowski, 2002).

Using a combination of data sources is a good way to gain insight into a phenomenon from a number of perspectives. A good example of this is Shah's 2006 triangulated work on participant observation, Forum Theatre and life story interviews (Shah, 2006).

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis should be undertaken with the philosophical paradigm firmly in mind. The paradigm can direct the analyst to view data in a particular way. For example, some paradigms might be more concerned with how the research participants made sense of things in terms of what was said to them, whereas other paradigms might be more concerned with bodily experiences or

intersubjectivity. Tanisha has previously published a resource concerning general purpose thematic analysis, which goes into more detail concerning analysis than we do here.

Jowsey T. 2016. General purpose thematic data analysis made easy. Auckland: Compassion Publishers

PRESENTATION OF YOUR FINDINGS

Regardless of the output format that you intend to write (article, report, thesis chapter, and so forth), there are certain steps that should be taken to demonstrate rigour and quality. Here are a few tips to remember when writing up your findings:

- Quotations, field notes, and other data where appropriate should be identified in a way which enables the reader to judge the range of evidence being used
- Distinctions between the data and their interpretation should be clear
- The iteration between data and explanations of the data (theory generation) should be clear
- Sufficient original evidence should be presented to satisfy the reader of the relationship between the evidence and the conclusions (validity)
- There should be adequate consideration of cases or evidence which might refute the conclusions

WRITING THE ABSTRACT FOR YOUR QUALITATIVE JOURNAL ARTICLE

The amount of information and the type of information that you put into the methods section in a qualitative paper is informed by factors such as the amount of structure required by the journal, the word limit, and the complexity of your methods. It may also be informed by the kind of journal you are writing for – are they interested in knowing all the details of how you coded and grouped data into thematic categories? They may or may not be. What you include in the abstract of a peer-reviewed article manuscript will differ according to the journal specifications. For example, *Health Expectations* has quite a structured abstract:

- Objective
- Background
- Design and participants
- Results and conclusions

Whereas *Health Sociology Review* simply require 200 words. Only having a maximum word count, in the abstract and or the main text body, and not having any formula required within the abstract/body is common practice in qualitative journals. But this is not the case in health care journals or medical journals. It is always a good idea to look at other papers already published with the target journal to see what they have included in there and which bits apply to your own work.

CONCLUSION

This resource has introduced a number of philosophical paradigms and research methods, as well as leading theorists associated therewith. It is important to identify your philosophical paradigm before embarking on a large-scale research project because this will inform the kinds of questions you will ask and how you will approach the data collection and analysis.

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