**Research Recap**

**A Primer on Qualitative Research Methods**

**Introduction to Qualitative Methods**

Qualitative research is a scientific method that involves gathering and analyzing non-numerical or non-quantitative data to gain an understanding of individuals’ personal and social realities, including understanding their attitudes, beliefs, and motivations.

* Data does not necessarily have to be expressed in numbers. Data can come in the form of words, images, impressions, gestures, or tones, which represent real events.
* Qualitative research focuses on subjective data that is not easily coded into numbers – although sometimes qualitative research is translated into quantitative data.
* Compared to quantitative research, qualitative research tends to work with fewer subjects or respondents (cases) but analyzes each case more deeply.
* Qualitative research uses natural logic to get at what is real - the quality, meaning, and context of people’s lives.
* There are few step-by-step rules, prefabricated methods, terms, or procedures.
* Qualitative research is geared toward identifying the essence of something.

**When Are Qualitative Methods Appropriate?**

* When there is a need to humanize problems or data.
* To describe complex phenomena that are not easily reduced to numbers.
* To provide a holistic as opposed to detailed view.
* To get a handle on a problem when there is no obvious starting point.
* To get the emic perspective (insider’s view) rather than the etic perspective (outsider’s view).

**A Few Specific Forms of Qualitative Research**

1. **An historical study** involves detailed examination of people, events and documents. The purpose is to study the past and to arrive at conclusions that may also involve the present and future. The validity of this form of research is dependent on the use of reliable interview sources and historical documents. When the focus is on a person, an historical study may result in a biography and “historical study” is sometimes used interchangeably with “biographical study.”

**Examples of Research Questions that Could be Examined with an Historical Study:**

* How have attitudes toward adoption changed over the past 50 years in the U.S.?
* Are parents as satisfied with the role as they were in 2000?
1. **Phenomenology** is a wide-ranging form of study, wherein the researcher looks to gather information that explains how individuals experience a phenomenon. Experience may involve perception, thought, memory, imagination, and/or emotions. This model recognizes that there is no single objective reality; instead, everyone’s experiences are unique. The outcome is described from the point of view of the participants. However, the researcher may derive a set of findings that can be used to identify themes surrounding the phenomena under study. The researcher attempts to set aside biases and preconceived assumptions about individuals’ experiences, feelings, and responses to situations. Usually a small sample of participants (10-15) is used.

**Examples of Research Questions that Could be Examined with a Phenomenological Study:**

* What are the experiences of parents caring for a child born with a significant anomaly?
* What is it like to present at an abortion facility when a woman has not made up her mind?
* How do people feel when protests are occurring in their neighborhoods?
1. **Grounded Theory** is a methodology designed to develop a theory pertaining to a social issue. The theory is developed to identify problems and define how people deal with them. Grounded theory depends solely on the data gathered. Grounded Theory is based on the notion that careful observation of the social world can lead to theory development. Data collection and analysis occur simultaneously, with one informing the other. The researcher groups data into concepts, categories and themes and the actual data collection process is influenced by the evolving concepts, categories, and themes. Distinguishing characteristics are that the data collection is cyclical and reflective in contrast to more linear approaches used with other methodologies.

**Examples of Research Questions that Could be Examined with a Phenomenological Study:**

* Are political biases operative in academic publishing?
* How do young doctors in training cope with the demands of working long hours during internships?
1. **Ethnography** is the study of a particular group within a culture. Researchers immerse themselves in the culture they are studying. The data are then gathered through direct observation and interaction with the participants belonging to the culture. Results are presented from the perspective of the participants. Ultimately, this study aims at understanding group culture.

 **Examples of Research Questions that Could be Addressed with Ethnography**

* Are people living in low-income neighborhoods in Detroit receiving the appropriate information and communication about aspects of pregnancies for them to optimize their health and that of their infants?
* What are the concerns of military spouses living in remote rural areas when their partners are on extended leave during times of war?

**Sampling Methods for Qualitative Studies**

* Purposive sampling - selection of individuals based on the researcher’s perspective on experiences/qualities with relevance to the objectives of the study.
* Convenience sampling - selection based simply on readily availability participants.
* Snowball sampling - the selection of participants by referral from people who know of potential participants and people who have participated in referring others.
* Extreme case sampling - participants are selected because they are rare cases.
* Typical case sampling - selection of participants is based on those believed to be regular or average.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

* Qualitative research employs various data collection techniques, such as interviews, focus groups, and direct observation.
* Interviews may be unstructured with open-ended questions and follow-up questions based on participant responses. On the other hand, structured interviews have a predetermined number of questions for every participant. Interviews are typically one-on-one and appropriate for sensitive topics or for those needing in-depth exploration.
* Focus groups are often held with 8-12 participants and are used when group dynamics and collective views on a topic are desired. Researchers can be participant-observers to share the experiences of the subject or non-participants/detached observers.
* Qualitative data collection may occur at a central place or the participants’ own environments, depending on study goals and design.
* A large amount of data is often generated with qualitative studies that needs to be transcribed and coded manually or using computer-assisted analysis software.
* Results are presented in various formats, including a synthesis and interpretation, *presented with excerpts or in terms of themes and theory or model development.*

*“You may have heard the world is made up of atoms and molecules, but it's really made up of stories. When you sit with an individual that's been here, you can give quantitative data a qualitative overlay.”* – William Turner

**Sources and supplemental Reading**

* **Cochrane Qualitative & Implementation Methods Group** [**https://methods.cochrane.org/qi/**](https://methods.cochrane.org/qi/)
* **International Institute for Qualitative Methodology** [**https://www.ualberta.ca/international-institute-for-qualitative-methodology/index.html**](https://www.ualberta.ca/international-institute-for-qualitative-methodology/index.html)
* **Tenny, S., Brannan, J. M., & Brannan, G.D. Qualitative Study. [Updated 2022 Sep 18]. In: StatPearls [Internet]. Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing; 2024 Jan-. Available from:** [**https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK470395/**](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK470395/)
* **TQR: Where the World Comes to Understand Qualitative Research:** [**https://tqr.nova.edu/tqrresources/**](https://tqr.nova.edu/tqrresources/)
* **University Libraries** [**https://guides.lib.unc.edu/qual**](https://guides.lib.unc.edu/qual)