Qualitative research in health care
Third edition

Edited by
Catherine Pope
Nicholas Mays
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Preface

We had no idea in 1996 that we would, a decade later, be embarking on a third edition of this book. When we wrote the original paper [1] which inspired the book, qualitative methods were largely unfamiliar to health professionals and researchers, but the intervening years have seen a huge expansion in the use of these methods in health care research. The place of qualitative research is now sufficiently recognised at the highest level to merit the commissioning, by the UK Cabinet Office, of a guide for civil servants and researchers on how to assess the quality of qualitative policy evaluations [2].

Having begun life as a series of papers in the *British Medical Journal*, this book has become international – having been translated into Japanese and Portuguese [3,4] – and we find that its readership now includes health care professionals working in different health systems, researchers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, and policy makers and research funders from across the globe. This book is now one of several on the application of qualitative research to health care, but we believe that it remains distinctive as a way into the field for those with little or no previous knowledge of qualitative methods.

For the third edition we have updated the existing material, incorporating new examples and references, and added new chapters on topics that we see as increasingly relevant in an introductory text. As well as introducing the key methods the book now includes chapters exploring the interface between qualitative and quantitative research – in primary ‘mixed method’ studies and in the emerging arena of secondary analysis and ‘research synthesis’. We owe a debt of thanks to all the authors – those who contributed to the previous editions and those involved in producing this volume – for making the editing process so straightforward for us.

As ever this book has been improved by the constructive advice, commentary and expertise of colleagues, readers and reviewers. Other researchers have made our job easier by opening up and contributing to debates about methodology and research quality, and by simply undertaking the kinds of qualitative research that we refer to in this book. We remain grateful to our editorial team: Mary Banks
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who has supported us since the first edition, and the new team at Blackwell Publishing, notably Vicki Donald.

Catherine Pope and Nicholas Mays, 2006

References

CHAPTER 1
Qualitative methods in health research

Catherine Pope, Nicholas Mays

Qualitative methods have much to offer those studying health care and health services. However, because these methods have traditionally been employed in the social sciences, they may be unfamiliar to health care professionals and researchers with a biomedical or natural science background. Indeed, qualitative methods may seem alien alongside the experimental and observational quantitative methods used in clinical, biological and epidemiological research.

Misunderstandings about the nature of qualitative methods and their uses have caused qualitative research to be labelled ‘unscientific’, difficult to replicate or as little more than anecdote, personal impression or conjecture. The first edition of this book, and the series of papers in the British Medical Journal on which the book was initially based, deliberately set out to counter this view. The growing interest in qualitative methods in health research, and their increasing acceptance in clinical and biomedical arenas, in the 10 years since the book was first published, suggest that such misunderstandings may be diminishing. The purpose of this book has therefore altered subtly. Its main aim continues to be to introduce the main qualitative methods available for the study of health and health care, and to show how qualitative research can be employed appropriately and fruitfully to answer some of the increasingly complex questions confronting researchers. In addition, the book considers the ethics of qualitative research and how to assess its quality and looks at the application of qualitative methods within different styles of research and in the emerging area of research synthesis.
The link between theory and method

Some of the earlier misunderstandings about qualitative research were compounded by some of the terminology used, which was, and may still be, unfamiliar to researchers who do not have a social science background. The terms ‘qualitative research’ and ‘qualitative methods’ are often used interchangeably, but, strictly speaking, the term research methods refer to specific research techniques used to gather data about the social world. The choice of research method is typically informed by a research strategy or a set of decisions about the research design, and by beliefs about how the social world can be studied and how the validity of social knowledge established by such research might be assessed. For many social scientists, the choice of a particular research method is also inextricably linked to a particular theoretical perspective, or set of explanatory concepts, that provide a framework for thinking about the social world and inform their research (see Box 1.1).

As a result of these different theoretical positions, qualitative research is neither unified nor well defined. There is considerable debate about what constitutes the central tenet of qualitative research. So, for example, Silverman [3] reviews four ‘definitions’ of qualitative research before offering his own prescriptive account of what qualitative research should be. Elsewhere, Hammersley [4] has examined the methodological ideas that underlie the distinctive Chicagoan tradition of qualitative research, with its emphasis on naturalistic methods (see below). The debate about qualitative research is such that Denzin and Lincoln [5] are forced to conclude that it is ‘defined primarily by a series of essential tensions, contradictions and hesitations’. The distinctions between the various theoretical stances are frequently presented as clear-cut, but in practice the contrasts are often less apparent. Moreover, the connection

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**Box 1.1** Some theoretical perspectives that inform qualitative methods [1,2]

- Ethnography
- Symbolic interactionism
- Constructionism
- Ethnomethodology
- Phenomenology
between research and theoretical perspective may not always be clear: sometimes the link is implicit or is simply not acknowledged. So, while many social scientists contend that research should be theoretically driven, others have suggested that the link between theory and methods is overstated. Brannen, for example, has argued that

the practice of research is a messy untidy business which rarely conforms to the models set down in methodology textbooks. In practice it is unusual, for example, for epistemology (i.e. the specific theory of the nature of knowledge adopted by the researcher) to be the sole determinant of method... There is no necessary or one-to-one correspondence between epistemology and methods [6: 3,15].

She suggests that the choice of method and how it is used are as likely to be informed by the research question or pragmatic or technical considerations as by the researcher’s theoretical stance (though others would disagree). This may be particularly the case in health services research because of its applied nature: research here tends to be geared towards specific practical problems or issues and this, rather than theoretical leanings, may determine the methods employed.

**So what is qualitative research?**

Qualitative research is often defined by reference to quantitative research. Indeed, the articles on which the first edition of this book was based were commissioned, not as a series about qualitative research, but as a series on ‘non-quantitative methods’. An unfortunate corollary of this way of defining qualitative research is the inference that because qualitative research does not seek to quantify or enumerate, it does not ‘measure’. It is worth noting that it is both feasible and legitimate to analyse certain types of qualitative data quantitatively (see Chapter 7). Whilst it is true that qualitative research generally deals with talk or words rather than numbers, this does not mean that it is devoid of measurement, or that it cannot be used to explain social phenomena.

Measurement in qualitative research is usually concerned with *taxonomy* or classification. Qualitative research answers questions such as, ‘what is X, and how does X vary in different circumstances, and why?’ rather than ‘how big is X or how many X’s are there?’