

Understanding qualitative research

By Mary Ann Remshardt, MSN, EdD, RN, and Deborah Lynn Flowers, MS, PhD, RN

CHANCES ARE, when you think of research, you think of *things that can be counted*. That is, you think of quantitative research—an objective study with careful measurements and tight controls on the research process.

But *not everything that counts can be counted*, especially in nursing. Our interactions are influenced by our awareness of the feelings, beliefs, values, and the distinct perspectives of each person. To evaluate these concepts in their contexts, we need qualitative research.

Focused on discovery and description, qualitative nursing research views the patient, the family, and the nurse as interactive partners in a social framework. The purpose of qualitative inquiry is to understand how people create meaning in their worlds and make sense of particular situations.

Crafting problem and purpose statements

The problem statement indicates the direction of the study, and the purpose statement indicates the focus and may identify the approach. Well-constructed problem and purpose statements do the following:

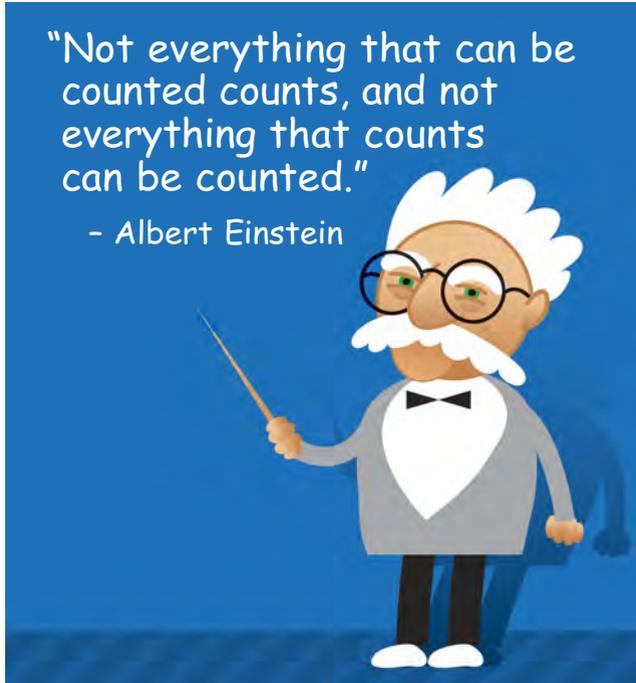
- describe the researchable problem and clearly express the study's purpose
- clearly and succinctly identify key concepts of interest to be studied
- define the population to be studied and the study setting
- justify the study as a means of generating new knowledge.

Qualitative approaches

Qualitative approaches include phenomenological research, grounded theory, ethnographic research, and his-

"Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted."

- Albert Einstein



torical methods. (See *Four qualitative approaches*.) These approaches are based on a holistic worldview that incorporates these ideas:

- There is not a single reality.
- Reality is based on perceptions that are different for each person and change over time.
- What we know has meaning only within a given situation or context.

The reasoning process in qualitative research involves perceptually putting pieces together to make integrated wholes. Because perceptions vary, many different meanings are possible.

Reviewing the literature

The purpose and timing of the literature review vary, depending on the type of study. Phenomenological researchers review the literature after they collect and analyze their data, so the research is not influenced by preconceived notions. These researchers use the literature review to compare their findings with the literature to determine current knowledge of a phenomenon.

Grounded theory researchers may perform a minimal literature review at the start of their study. Then, they review the literature throughout the study to explain, support, and extend the theory developed through their research.

Ethnographic researchers perform an extensive review of the literature early in the study to provide a general understanding of variables in a selected culture. Historical researchers use information gained from an extensive literature review and other sources to explain how a phenomenon has developed over a particular time period.

Sample selection and size

Qualitative research focuses on discovering meaning and multiple realities, so sampling is based on obtaining ade-

Four qualitative approaches

A researcher tries to use the approach that best fits the question.

Phenomenological research

This approach is based on the premise that there's not a single reality but that each person embraces his or her own reality. Thus, the goals of the phenomenological approach are to accurately describe human events and to unveil their essential meanings. To achieve these goals, a researcher conducts in-depth

interviews and has intensive dialogues with the people experiencing the events.

Grounded theory

Grounded theory is an inductive technique developed for health-related areas of interest. The goal is to construct theory when no theory exists or when existing theory fails to provide sufficient evidence to explain a set of circumstances. The researcher selects participants based on their knowledge of the topic and compares incidents, categories, and concepts to determine similarities and differences and to develop a theo-

ry that explains behavioral variations. Researchers commonly use observation and interviews for this approach.

Ethnographic research

Ethnographic research focuses on scientific description, analysis, and interpretation of cultural groups, such as an ethnic population, a community, an organization, or a group of people with a shared experience. The goal is to learn about customs from those who live in the culture and to understand their worldview. The researcher participates in events to understand the culture from

within. Techniques include participant observation and in-depth interviews.

Historical research

Historical research is a systematic approach for understanding the past by collecting, organizing, and critically appraising facts. One goal is to shed light on the past, so it can be used to guide the present and future. After identifying the phenomenon to be studied, the researcher uses authenticated data sources, including written documents, photographs, videos, and interviews with those who witnessed the event.

quate, appropriate information. Research may start with a small, nonrandom sample, such as a group of people who know the phenomenon under study and can provide rich

descriptions of it. As research unfolds, the researchers may select participants based on early findings. For example, early study participants may make referrals to other poten-

Introducing:

nurse•••
connect.com

Your professional online network — get connected!



We're Raising the Bar on Dementia Care.

Whether you're a certified nursing assistant, recreational therapist, nurse practitioner, physician or other professional caring for individuals with Alzheimer's disease or related dementias, Dementia Care Professionals of America is for you!

DCPA includes:

- Comprehensive training programs
- Qualification status
- Membership benefits
- Continuing education credits

For more information, call 866.AFA.8484 or visit www.careprofessionals.org



A Branch of the
Alzheimer's Foundation of America

tial study participants who meet the researchers' criteria.

Sample size in qualitative research depends on the purpose of the inquiry, the quality of the information, and the sampling strategy. There are no firmly established rules or criteria. Sampling continues until no new information can be collected.

Protecting the participants

In our positions of trust, we have a great deal of influence over patients who are vulnerable because of their health concerns. We must use our influence prudently. We need to ensure that our potential study participants are capable of granting informed consent and that they have all the information they need to do so.

In qualitative research, consent becomes a dynamic interactive process. One approach to informed consent is *process consent*, in which the participants can renegotiate the consent if an unanticipated event occurs. By providing an opportunity to reconsider the consent agreement, the nurse-researcher confirms her role as an advocate and proceeds in the best interest of all participants.

Reviewing the findings

Critiquing qualitative studies involves evaluating the researchers' expertise and the quality of the study. One goal is to ensure that the participants' experience is accurately represented, which may take the form of returning to the participants after the study to validate the reported findings. To judge the rigor of their science, nurse-researchers using qualitative methods may apply these criteria:

- *Dependability*: Are changes or surprises in the phenomenon accurately and adequately documented?
- *Confirmability*: Is the phenomenon viewed objectively and are the interpretations confirmed with research participants?
- *Transferability*: Can findings and results be transferred to other settings, situations, and populations?

Qualitative research can provide nurses with an understanding of the experiences of others. This holistic, individual approach to research and knowledge can only broaden and deepen the art of nursing. ★

Selected references

- Burns N, Grove S. *The Practice of Nursing Research: Conduct, Critique, and Utilization*. 5th ed. St. Louis, Mo: Elsevier; 2005.
- Lincoln YS, Guba G. *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, Calif: Sage; 1985.
- Munhall PL. *Nursing Research: A Qualitative Perspective*. 3rd ed. Sudbury, Mass: Jones and Bartlett; 2001.
- Nieswaidomy RM. *Foundations of Nursing Research*. 5th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall; 2008.

For a complete list of selected references, visit www.AmericanNurseToday.com.

Mary Ann Remshardt, MSN, EdD, RN, is an Associate Professor of Nursing, and Deborah Lynn Flowers, MS, PhD, RN, is a Professor of Nursing. Both teach at East Central University (South Campus) in Durant, Oklahoma.