



A Brief Introduction to Qualitative Description: A Research Design Worth Using

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The purpose of this editorial is to provide an introduction to and practical explanation of qualitative description as a possible research design for you to consider. Qualitative approaches have exploded over the last three decades, and although qualitative description is widely used in a number of disciplines, it is also poorly understood or maligned for not being a scholarly qualitative approach. After reading this editorial, I encourage you to download and read the journal articles in my reference list to help you achieve better knowledge about this important and relevant approach to research. Like all other research approaches and methodologies, it is important that you are well-versed with knowledge and skills needed before you start any new study using qualitative description.

As an editor I often receive manuscripts where the researchers have stated that their study used grounded theory, phenomenology, or some other qualitative approach. On reading through the manuscript it becomes clear to me that the researchers have claimed to use methods that they clearly have not. The reason for doing so may be due to academic invention in a bid to make their work more theoretically or methodologically acceptable. Or it could be the case that, as novice researchers, they may be confused as to what approach they have actually used. Such claims have been noted previously by the qualitative scholar, Margarete Sandelowski.¹ In reading such manuscripts I find that the research process described does not adhere to any well formulated qualitative approach, other than what

can be best described as qualitative description. They may not have given clear evidence of any theory or particular qualitative method followed but just stated it as a qualitative study. My usual decision is to either reject such manuscripts or ask the authors to undertake a major revision and to consider describing their use of qualitative description in a meaningful way, if this is indeed what they have used. However, there is no point in them trying to use qualitative description to salvage a poorly designed or poorly conducted research study.²

Like all qualitative studies, researchers using qualitative description need to concentrate closely on rigor and trustworthiness throughout the study, and to provide the reader with reflexive explanations of how they attended to method and methodology.³ A qualitative descriptive approach is often shunned by in various schools of thought as being of second rate research, and lacking scientific rigor.⁴ But this is not the case. Qualitative description has both benefits and limitations and has a firm place in the world of research generally, and not just health research.

Qualitative description is well suited to studies that involve mixed methods or questionnaire design, or where there is a need to develop straight forward and first hand description of the facts of the phenomena, such as patients or health professionals' knowledge of an event or experience.¹ It is also very useful to perform a qualitative descriptive study prior to developing an intervention. My experience is that undertaking a qualitative descriptive study is also relevant for doctoral

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students where they have limited funds or time to compete their studies and that this would suit their research question(s). My experience in many countries is that doctoral or master students often lack relevant academic support for using highly interpretive qualitative approaches such as phenomenology or grounded theory. Such studies require prolonged skill building and understanding of theory and abstract conceptual thinking, data collection and analysis, and report writing in a manner befitting the approach to be used.

So what are the elements of qualitative description you need to know about?

Below I have set out some relevant points as described by Sandelowski¹ and other scholars.

Theory

Firstly, the origins of qualitative description are based in naturalistic inquiry principles. It is the least theoretical of all the qualitative approaches,³ but is practical or pragmatic when the researchers want to uncover the “who, what or where” of certain events or experiences.^{1, p.339} And this approach should be considered when *only description of the phenomena* under investigation is required. It is always favourable to use a conceptual framework to help both frame a study and to help understand the findings, but researchers should be prepared to alter that framework as necessary throughout the study. Researchers may also use the lens of an interpretive theory to help guide their study, to serve as a “conceptual hook upon which to hang study procedures and representation”.^{5, p.17}

Novice researchers need to be aware that there may be traces of other research approaches in qualitative description, such as phenomenology or ethnography, that may be confusing when considering research theory. So often there are grey areas between philosophical and theoretical stances in qualitative approaches.

Sampling

Often various forms of purposive sampling are used in a qualitative descriptive study, including maximum variation,¹ homogenous, stratified or multiple case sampling,⁵ and researchers can also use snowball sampling to recruit their study population.

Data collection

Commonly, in-depth interviews or focus group discussions are used in qualitative research.¹ An interview guide for a qualitative descriptive study often contains more focused questions than those found on guides for other types of interpretative studies. These questions need to be carefully thought out with an expert group and tested before use with a small sample in pilot interviews. Sandelowski¹ states these questions should be guided by the ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘where’ and ‘why’ of an event or experience. Data collection can also be undertaken through observations or by reviewing documents, and can supported by demographic details of the participants. It is always best if data collection and analysis take place simultaneously so that errors and omissions can be corrected early⁶.

Data analysis

Researchers should not be fooled into thinking that the process of data analysis in qualitative description does not involve interpretation of the meaning of participants’ statements. This does need to occur to a certain extent, but not to the depth of other interpretative approaches. Researchers need to concentrate on interpreting data in a meaningful, correct and rigorous fashion, albeit flexible as the occasion demands. This is especially evident in the data analysis process where the researchers sort and code the data, using a system of content analysis that can be modified, and to develop categories; and then provide “rich, straight description of an experience or an event”.² Readers will find a useful summary of the three different types of content analysis conventional, directed, and summative in the article below by Colorfri & Evans.⁶

To explain further, it is important to recognise that qualitative description is different from the analysis in other qualitative methods. For example, the aim is not to write thick description of the findings regarding aspects of a culture as one would do in ethnography, nor to develop a theory, as is the aim in grounded theory, nor to provide interpretations of the meaning of an experience as in phenomenology.³ In

qualitative description Sandelowski¹ says that the aim is to achieve a low level of interpretation of the data with the researcher “staying closer to their data and to the surface of words and events”.^{1, p336} Further, in some qualitative descriptive studies, researchers use “quasi-statistical” analysis or a numerical system in the content analysis¹ such as counting similarities in the data.

The research findings

Being true to the qualitative descriptive tradition means that the researcher needs to write a careful descriptive summary of the contents of the data. This needs to be organized in a way that best fits the data,^{2,3} incorporates the theoretical framework used,⁵ and supports the findings by the inclusion of participant quotes to add both richness and evidence. Like in other qualitative approaches, it is important that the researcher does not describe beyond the data.^{1, 2}

Limitations of qualitative descriptive studies

To overcome criticism of your qualitative descriptive study not being rigorous, as a researcher you must attend to rigor throughout the study. Rigor can be enhanced through employing a number of strategies as described by Milne et al. and found summarized in a useful table in their article.⁶ These strategies include principles related to credibility, criticality, authenticity and integrity. I encourage all qualitative researchers to take note and use such strategies, not just those undertaking qualitative descriptive studies.

Another arguable limitation is that there is no requirement for theoretical foundations for qualitative descriptive studies. However, this limitation can be overcome if the researcher stays close to the data as cautioned by Sandelowski,^{1,2} ensures that the participants’ points of views are given precedence, and that a group of researchers rigorously analyses the data, rather than a sole researcher⁶. Lastly, because the approach requires researchers to provide description of the phenomena, this reduces their ability to speak in general terms. Therefore using a qualitative descriptive study as a precursor to further research (such as an intervention study, or questionnaire development) is more desirable.⁶

In conclusion, qualitative descriptive studies have a rightful and important place in the world of research today, and have a particular usefulness to nursing researchers, including students. Do not be put off by criticisms of this method from what you read in the literature, and attempt to try to choose a more epistemologically acceptable research approach, nor try to present your qualitative study as using methods that you have not. Straightforward descriptions of events or the experiences of others have an important and meaningful place in the worlds of health care and nursing as we attempt to improve practice and patient outcomes. But to attain these remember you need to be rigorous at all times in your research processes. Finally, an excellent article to read is Bradshaw et al.⁷

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