N 536 - Utilization of Nursing Research in Advanced Practice, Summer 2008

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http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/64943
Qualitative Research

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Characteristics

- Subjective: Captures views, motivations, and experiences of participants
- Provides meaning to data with words
- Can be used to explain survey results
- Can be used to develop surveys or materials or interventions for patients
- Can be used to develop new hypotheses
• Qualitative research is dismissed by many as “soft research”
• Totally opposite of quantitative research in terms of trying to get equally distributed groups

• Want to get experts on certain topics
• Want to get views of like people to see if can identify themes
• Totally opposite in terms of trying to control for extraneous variables
Types of Designs

- Focus groups
- Interviews
- Documentation: e.g., charts, letters, diaries
- Observation
- Case study
Focus Groups

• Bring together groups of people of a certain type to identify their views, wants, needs, etc.

• Have its roots in advertising

• Groups are usually segregated by age, gender, race, or perhaps other attributes
Recruiting Focus Group Subjects (1)

- Go to where they (potential subjects) hang out
- Use an advertising agency to recruit potential subjects
- Have potential subjects fill out a focus group screener, including questions of
  - Demographic questions
  - A few questions of interest to our topic
Recruiting Focus Group Subjects (2)

- Look over the screener and decide who we want to invite to the group
- Call potential subjects and invite them
- Invite a few extras just in case
  - If too many, we can pay them and send them home
- Give them a general idea about what you are going to talk about
- But not a lot
- As we are going for spontaneous “from the heart” responses
Focus Group Procedures

- Each subject may be paid for $75 or higher for coming
- Best to arrange all of our groups on 1 day to avoid a historical effect
- 6-10 participants per group
- Each group may last for about 1½ hours
- Respondents are asked to come early to eat and drink
  - Get our participants socializing and talking to each other
Focus Group Facility

- A room with a large table
- Generally the room has a 2-way mirror
- Observers (can be the researchers) may watch from behind the glass
- If the researchers do not have funding for renting a facility with a 2-way mirror, the researchers can use a large room and have observers present in the room
- Notes (data) are taken by the observers
- Sessions will usually be taped and transcribed later (data)
Focus Group Leader or Moderator

- Is best to have a disinterested moderator to avoid bias
- Is best to have a moderator similar to group: e.g., a Hispanic woman for group of Hispanic women
- The moderator should be trained and able to get people talking
Focus Group Moderator Guide

- Is an outline for the moderator to follow
- Must use the same guide for every group so all groups are approached in the same manner

- Starts out explaining the “rules of the game”
  - Today we are going to talk about ..... 
- Have open ended questions
- Has prompts
Sample Questions

- Tell me about your end-of-life preferences

- Prompt
  - Can you say a bit more about that
  - Why do you feel that way?
Interview Techniques

- Use open ended questions
- Use careful listening
- Do not lead respondents
Terminating The Group

• Generally have a debriefing time
• Let participants ask any questions they may have
• Often, participants may want to meet the observers, if the observers are behind the glass

• Thank participants and pay them CASH in an envelope
Focus Group Data Analysis (1)

- Can be a nightmare
  - Many focus group studies not published for this reason
- Take the transcripts from each group
- Have two disinterested persons read the transcripts and identify themes, if any
- Then, have the disinterested persons (aforementioned) come together along with the researchers to identify or verify the developed themes
Focus Group Data Analysis (2)

- Very sophisticated programs now that you can read in the transcripts
- Identify different “nodes”
- You can ask the program to tell you how many times a certain word was mentioned
- All these are attempts to “quantify” the data
Focus Group Data Analysis (3)

- Give participants specific scenarios and ask the group if they can come to an agreement
  - For example: If you had 6 months to live, would you rather live a few days longer and stay in the ICU or go home a live a few days shorter?

- This way, the researchers can say how each group responded to each of the predetermined scenarios without fancy data analysis programs
Another trick

- Put all important concepts on cards
  - e.g., end-of-life preferences
- During the group, have the observers add to the stack of cards any new concepts that the group may mention
- At the end of the group, have the participants do a “card sort” exercise
  - Place 4 hats in the front of the room
  - The moderator yells each concept out and asks the group to quickly put the concept in the very important, important, neutral, or not important hat
- This way, we will have very important and important concepts “quantified” for each group
Last Thoughts on Focus Groups

- Is best to do a few groups for each segmented category
  - Could have a weird group or a heckler or a dominant person that intimidates the group

- Large studies do groups in different regions of the country
Interviews

- Used interviews if the topic is too sensitive to discuss in a group
- Used to gain unique insights of individuals
- Used if respondents are so dissimilar or live too far away to assemble a group

- Similar ideas for interviewing as in focus groups
An Interview Example

- A study tested the differences between a new smoking intervention and a traditional smoking cessation program.

- All smokers that were assigned to the new intervention group were interviewed after the study to see:
  - What they liked and disliked about the intervention.

Qualitative Research
Example: Go through patient charts and read nurses notes
  - To identify common themes

Example: Go through nursing diaries
  - To identify what it was like to be a nurse in the 1800’s
Documentation (2)

- The same idea as in the focus group analysis
- Have two independent reviewers read the document and identify themes
- Then, the independent reviewers meet together with the research team
- Goal: Reach a consensus on the themes
Observation

- Come from anthropology
  - Example: We observe family members in the waiting room of an intensive care unit
- We take notes on the types of concerns family members are expressing
- We identify common themes from our notes
Case Study

- Comes from medicine
- Study individual cases to identify a common theme

Example: When AIDS first presented itself, it was not a known disease and was initially classified as cancer
Mixed Methods (1)

- Bring together both qualitative and quantitative data
- Use both to explain a phenomenon
- Example: The researchers may use the quantitative data from the RCT and the qualitative data from the interviews
Mixed Methods (2)

Example:

- Give the focus group participants in the end-of-life group a survey to take home and complete
- Then, the researchers can compare the focus group data and survey data to see if they match
- Allows the researchers to get data from respondents who were quiet during group or data that people did not feel comfortable about talking about in group
Triangulation

- Bring together multiple sources of data to explain a phenomenon
Summary

- Can be biased in its nature
- Often, may not be generalizable to the population
- Best if a qualitative study can be used in conjunction with a quantitative one