WEEK 8

Medical Research

Qualitative ResearchProposal

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1. Background and Introduction

• **Qualitative methodology** is used when:

- Little is known about a topic.
- The research context is poorly understood.
- The boundaries of a domain are ill-defined.
- The phenomenon cannot be quantified.
- The nature of the problem is unclear.
- The researcher believes the phenomenon needs re-examination (Morse, 2003).

• Researchers need:

- A clear picture of the issues and questions they want to investigate.
- Ideas about how the investigation will be conducted.
- An **open mind** to improvise, revise, and adjust.

• Writing a qualitative proposal is challenging because researchers often **design studies by conducting them**, rather than conducting studies by a fixed design (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003).

• **Quantitative researchers** usually know what knowledge they expect to obtain before starting the study.

• **Qualitative researchers** enter the study without fully knowing what phenomenon will emerge and drive the inquiry.

• Therefore, a qualitative proposal can only **anticipate** how the study will proceed.

• Qualitative research accepts that there are **multiple ways of understanding the world** and that truth is often **context-dependent**.

• The focus is on understanding the **participants' perspectives and meanings**, rather than the researcher's viewpoint (Jones, 1995).

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2. Process of the Qualitative Proposal

• Qualitative researchers often face a **Catch-22 situation**:

- They choose qualitative research because little is known about the phenomenon.
- Yet they are expected to explain data analysis before the data exists.

• The researcher must still convince reviewers or funding agencies that the study is worth conducting.

• Developing a **rigid and detailed plan** for data collection and analysis is often impossible in qualitative research (Morse & Field, 1996).

• Unlike quantitative research, there is **no single accepted framework** for qualitative proposals.

• A successful proposal should focus on the questions reviewers are likely to ask rather than only the researcher's concerns (Silverman, 2000).

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3. Questions Every Qualitative Proposal Must Answer

Why should anyone be interested in my research?

• Explain the significance and value of the study.

Is the research design credible, achievable, and logical?

• Demonstrate that the study can realistically be completed.

Is the researcher capable of conducting the study?

• Show adequate preparation, knowledge, and competence.

(Bottorff, 2002)

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4. Guidelines for Writing a Strong Qualitative Proposal

Be Practical

• Explain how the research will address a specific problem or help solve an issue.

Examples:

- Improving staff morale.
- Understanding patients' perceptions of quality of care.

Be Persuasive

• A proposal is essentially an **argument** that the research question is important and worth investigating (Morse, 1994).

• The researcher must convince reviewers that:

- The topic is important.
- The study is worth spending time, effort, and resources on.

• Be realistic about what can be achieved (Silverman, 2000).

• Show how the research will:

- Make a difference.
- Contribute to knowledge.
- Resolve a problem or theoretical dilemma.

(Higson-Smith et al., 2000)

• Qualitative research is used when **little is known** about a phenomenon.

• It focuses on **participants' meanings and perspectives**.

• Qualitative proposals are **flexible**, not rigid.

• There is **no single framework** for writing a qualitative proposal.

• Every proposal should answer:

1. Why is the research important?
2. Is the design logical and feasible?
3. Can the researcher conduct it successfully?

• Good proposals should be:

- **Practical**
- **Persuasive**
- **Clear**
- **Well planned**

5. Make Broader Links

• The researcher should demonstrate in the proposal an understanding of the **broader implications** of the proposed research (Silverman, 2000).

• The research problem should be placed in its **wider context**, showing how understanding one issue may help address another issue (Morse, 1994).

• The proposal should explain how the study may **improve practice**, **influence policy**, or contribute to future research.

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6. Aim for Crystal Clarity

• The proposal should be written in **clear, simple language** that can be understood by **non-specialists**.

• Avoid excessive **technical jargon** and explain concepts clearly because reviewers may come from different disciplines (Morse, 1994).

• The proposal should be **concise**, using **short and simple sentences** (Silverman, 2000).

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7. Plan Before You Write

• Careful planning is essential before writing the proposal.

• The proposal should demonstrate an **understanding of the existing literature** and show that the researcher has considered the **time required** for each stage of the study.

• **Time management** is an important part of the planning process.

• Reviewers evaluate how realistically and effectively the researcher plans to use time (Arber, 1993).

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8. Structure of the Qualitative Proposal

A qualitative research proposal typically includes:

• Cover Page
• Abstract
• Introduction
• Review of the Literature
• Research Problem and Research Questions
• Research Objectives
• Research Design
• Research Methods
• Ethical Considerations
• Dissemination Plan
• Timeline
• Budget
• Appendices

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9. Cover Page

• Usually follows a format provided by the university or funding agency.

• Should include:

- **Title of the proposal**
- **Researcher's name and affiliation**
- **Co-investigators** (if applicable)
- **Degree and university name**
- **Signature lines**
- **Contact information** (address, phone number, email)

(Morse & Field, 1996)

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10. Abstract

• A **summary of the proposal** that introduces the project to reviewers.

• Should include:

- Brief introduction to the research problem
- Research question
- Purpose and objectives
- Research design
- Research methods

• Usually **250–300 words**.

• Often written **after completing the proposal**.

• Include up to **five keywords**.

• Common headings:

- Background
- Aim/Objectives
- Data Source
- Method
- Keywords

(Morse & Field, 1996)

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11. Introduction

• Should begin with something that **captures the reader's attention**.

• Introduce the topic, research question, and explain why the topic is important.

• Must demonstrate the **significance of the study** and justify the need for conducting it.

• The introduction should answer:

- Who is interested in this topic?
- What is already known?
- What remains unanswered?
- How will this study contribute to knowledge, practice, or policy?

• It also provides the **context and background** of the study.

(Heath, 1997; Burns & Grove, 2005; Burnard, 2004)

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12. Review of the Literature

• Includes literature that demonstrates the **need for the study**.

• Literature consists of all written sources relevant to the phenomenon under investigation.

• The researcher should:

- Critique previous studies.
- Identify gaps or shortcomings in existing research.
- Explain how the current study will address those gaps.
- Demonstrate how the study will add to existing knowledge.

• The literature review provides a **theoretical context** but is **not a conceptual framework**.

• The researcher should explain **how the literature search was conducted**, including:

- Databases/search engines used.
- Keywords used in the search.

• The literature review may appear as a separate section or be integrated into the introduction to justify the study.

(Morse & Field, 1996; Burns & Grove, 2005; Burnard, 2004)

13. Research Problem and Research Question

• The researcher answers the question: **“What is the problem?”**

• The research problem is a **synthesis of the introduction and literature review**, representing a clear diagnosis of the issue under investigation.

• The problem may be broad, but it should be **specific enough to justify the need for the study**.

• This section should conclude with the **research question(s)**.

• Example research questions:

- How is the primary health care policy implemented by different health professions?
- What happens to the system of relations when the activity takes place?
- What happens to the quality of care of low-income patients when they cannot access health care?

• Research questions clearly define the **focus and scope** of the study and should be manageable within the available time and context.

(Bottorff, 2002)

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14. Research Purpose and Objectives

• The **research purpose (aim/goal)** provides a broad statement of what the researcher intends to achieve.

• It should be a **clear and concise statement** of the study’s overall goal.

• The purpose often indicates whether the study aims to:

- **Identify**
- **Describe**

- **Explain**
- **Predict**

(Burns & Grove, 2005)

Example:

Aim:
• To develop best-practice guidelines for counselling for HIV testing during pregnancy.

Objectives:
• To explore and describe factors influencing pregnant women's decisions to undergo HIV testing.

• To explore and describe factors influencing counselling for HIV testing according to counsellors.

• To describe current counselling practices regarding HIV testing during pregnancy.

• To describe evidence regarding counselling for HIV testing during pregnancy through a systematic review.

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15. Research Design

• Research begins with a **research problem**, which guides the selection of the research design.

• A research design is a **plan or blueprint** used to conduct the study.

• It provides guidelines and instructions for addressing the research problem and maximizing the validity of findings.

• The purpose of the design is to align the **research goals** with the **practical limitations** of the project.

• Components commonly described in the research design include:

- Qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods approach.
- Exploratory, descriptive, comparative, or explanatory design.
- Contextual or universal nature of the study.

(Mouton, 1996; Mouton & Marais, 1994)

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16. Research Design in Qualitative Research

• Qualitative studies are always **contextual** because findings are valid within a specific setting.

• The researcher should provide a clear description of the **research setting or context**.

• The proposal should explain **why that setting was selected** and how it relates to the research problem.

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17. Research Method

• The chosen research design influences the selection of research methods.

• Research methods describe the practical procedures used to conduct the study.

• Key components include:

- **Population and Sample**
- **Data Collection**
- **Ensuring Rigor/Trustworthiness**
- **Data Analysis**

• These components explain how data will be obtained, managed, analyzed, and evaluated throughout the study.

18. Population and Sample

• Population refers to all elements (individuals, objects, or substances) that meet specific criteria for inclusion in a study (Burns & Grove, 2005).

• The definition of the population depends on the sampling criteria and the similarity of participants across settings.

• The researcher should clearly describe the **population (N)** and explain how participants will be selected and how access to the research setting will be gained (Heath, 1997).

• A **sample** is a subset of the population selected for the study.

• The researcher must:

- Identify the **sampling technique** (e.g., purposive sampling)
- Justify why it is appropriate
- State **inclusion and exclusion criteria**
- Estimate the **sample size (n)**

• Example: A study population may include community health centres, health professionals, and surrounding communities within a specific health district.

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19. Data Collection

• The researcher explains what will be studied and how data will be collected.

• The approach depends on whether the study uses an **inductive or deductive strategy**.

• **Inductive approach:**

- No predefined framework
- Concepts and theory emerge from data

• **Deductive approach:**

- Starts with an existing framework, theory, or model
- Data collection is guided by that framework

• The researcher must clearly describe:

- Type of data (documents, field notes, interviews, focus groups, videos, etc.)
- Data collection methods (interviews, observations, discourse analysis, etc.)
- Justification for each method
- How each method contributes to understanding the phenomenon

• If interviews or focus groups are used, details must include:

- Procedure of conducting sessions

- Role of moderator/facilitator
- How responses will be elicited
- Interview guide (attached if possible)

• Example: Observation and interviews may be combined, sometimes with assistance from trained data collectors using structured instruments.

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20. Rigor (Trustworthiness of the Study)

• Rigor refers to the **quality, credibility, and trustworthiness** of the research process.

• It must be maintained throughout all stages of the study, including design, data collection, and analysis.

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21. Data Analysis

• The researcher must describe the **data analysis process in detail**.

• This includes:

- Coding of data
- Sorting and categorizing information
- Development of themes

• Data reduction procedures should be explained, including:

- Transcription of interviews
- Field note write-ups
- Use of software (if applicable)

• The analysis method must be supported with relevant citations.

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22. Ethical Considerations

• Qualitative research involves close interaction with participants, creating important ethical responsibilities.

• Ethical considerations include:

- Protection of participants' rights
- Informed consent
- Ethical approval from institutions

• Participants' rights include:

- Right to privacy
- Right to autonomy and self-determination
- Right to confidentiality
- Right to fair treatment
- Protection from harm or discomfort

• Consent must be obtained from participants and relevant authorities before data collection begins.

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23. Dissemination Plan

• The researcher should explain how results will be shared.

• Common methods include:

- Publication in peer-reviewed journals
- Conference presentations (oral or poster)

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24. Timeline

• The timeline is a **work schedule** for completing the research.

• It includes:

- Research activities
- Time required for each activity
- Sequence of tasks

• It can be presented as text, table, or Gantt chart.

• Qualitative research often experiences delays due to:

- Recruitment difficulties
- Time-consuming data collection
- Lengthy analysis process

• It is recommended to **triple estimated time for each activity** to ensure realistic planning (Morse & Field, 1996).

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25. Budget

• Qualitative research is often wrongly assumed to be inexpensive, but it can be costly and unpredictable.

• The budget should include:

- Estimated number of participants
- Data recording tools (audio recorders, batteries, etc.)
- Transcription costs
- Equipment details (model and price)
- Personnel costs (including benefits)
- Supplies (printing, stationery, communication)
- Travel expenses
- Dissemination costs (e.g., conferences)

• An additional allowance should be included for unexpected costs and delays.

• All budget items must be clearly justified.

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26. Appendices

• Appendices include supporting documents for the proposal.

• Common items include:

- Informed consent forms
- Ethical approval letters
- Permissions from research sites
- Letters of support
- Research team CVs