

Getting started with qualitative research: developing a research proposal

The aim of this article is to illustrate in detail important issues that research beginners may have to deal with during the design of a qualitative research proposal in nursing and health care. Cristina Vivar has developed a 17-step process to describe the development of a qualitative research project. This process can serve as an easy way to start research and to ensure a comprehensive and thorough proposal.

key words

- ▶ qualitative research
- ▶ research proposal
- ▶ research process
- ▶ proposal design

Introduction

All professional disciplines have an obligation to increase scientific knowledge through investigations. In this respect, nurses have an important contribution to make, extending and updating knowledge, and publishing findings with the purpose of improving the quality of nursing care (Parahoo 1997). Novice researchers, however, may find it difficult to initiate investigation and may need guidance concerning how research is conducted. The purpose of this article is to illustrate in detail important issues about the design of a qualitative research proposal in nursing and health care. The article is intended to be of value in the preparation of a proposal to novice researchers with little or no previous experience of research.

While a step-by-step process is explained to assist the individual, it must be acknowledged that research ideas can benefit from discussing views

and possibilities with colleagues and more experienced researchers. This helps with development, clarification and focus for the proposed work. Networking with others in the area can show where emphasis is needed in the research. The focus here is on the individual researcher but a mentor or supervisor can prove to be a good sounding board for discussing ideas, observations and progress; for recommending enhancements; and for suggesting alternative perspectives to be considered. When conducting research as part of a degree programme, the researcher will have access to invaluable direction, support and encouragement from a more experienced researcher acting as a supervisor. Working in collaborative research, as one of a team, presents different circumstances and issues. However, they are not incorporated in this article.

It is important for new researchers to acknowledge that there are different ways of designing social research (Blaikie 2000). The methodology or approach chosen depends upon the questions to be addressed or the hypothesis to be tested (Polit and Beck 2004). Furthermore, the way in which the study is designed influences the choice of method(s) used (step 8 – see below). However, any methodology should be based on a systematic and rigorous collection and analysis of data (Robson 2002).

The first step in the research process is the development of a clear and well thought-out proposal (Lusk 2004). A proposal may be required for several purposes – for example, for a grant application; for an academic degree such as a masters (MSc) or a doctoral thesis (PhD); for a conference or seminar; or for ethical approval as part of a study. In a successful research proposal, the aims and purposes of the project must be clearly articulated, the research design must be appropriate for the aim of the study and it must be clearly explained in detail (Dallas *et al* 2005a, Dallas *et al* 2005b).

The authors have developed a 17-step process to describe the development of a qualitative research project. These steps include: (1) selecting an interesting topic; (2) introducing the background to the problem; (3) presenting the significance of the study; (4) defining the concepts; (5) establishing the research aim(s); (6) deciding on the research paradigm; (7) finding a theoretical framework; (8) choosing the data collection method; (9) planning the data collection; (10) describing the procedure of data analysis; (11) enhanc-

ing the quality of the data; (12) reporting the ethical issues; (13) presenting the limitations of the study; (14) disseminating the findings; (15) planning the time frame; (16) concluding; (17) presenting the references. This article provides step-by-step guidelines to help the novice researcher meet the goals of a research proposal. Information on what to question in each of the steps is also presented in Table 1.

Step 1: selecting an interesting topic

The first step in a research proposal is to select a topic that requires investigation. This may come from a list of subjects that are new in nursing, from problems encountered in daily nursing practice or from areas of recent impact in nursing. Once a topic of significance has been selected, a literature review needs to be conducted to identify what has already been written in the field. The use of published articles and books as well as grey literature (literature not easily available, including brochures, pamphlets, reports, etc) is valuable information.

Reviewing the literature will inform whether the original topic needs to be investigated or whether other studies have already researched the area of interest. In addition, it will help to justify the study, provide the background to the problem (step 2) and show the significance of the study (step 3). If there is found to be a gap in knowledge in the area that has originally been selected, it can then be estimated whether investigating the topic is feasible. This means that the researcher needs first to evaluate whether the topic is researchable in terms of time and difficulty as well as in terms of the competence of the researcher. If the proposed study is very complicated and beyond the expertise of the investigator, if it would require too many resources that are not available or would take longer than the time available, then the project needs to be redefined. Care is required to ensure that the study is not methodologically too ambitious, taking into consideration the researcher's training, experience and skills. The credibility of the researcher, meaning the ability of the individual to collect, analyse, and interpret data in a rigorous way, is an important element to enhance the quality and credibility of qualitative research (Patton 1999). The issue of credibility is further explored in step 11.

Step 2: introducing the background to the problem

The second step is to illustrate and provide a critical appraisal of what has been researched in the topic so far. Describing pertinent practice-based research, systematic reviews, literature reviews, meta-analysis and other types of publications allows an up-to-date summary of the status of research in the area. In parallel, a research gap is highlighted, introducing the relevance of the study.

Having identified and read the literature, it can be helpful to categorise it in a way that will help formulate thoughts and decide how to present this material in the proposal. For example, one might separate research articles from opinions, editorials and other papers that do not include a research study; systematic reviews from literature reviews; and seminal work from recent findings. Another possibility is to categorise the literature in terms of specific content being explored relating to the selected topic for enquiry. Analysis and reflection on the body of material available will help to elucidate areas where further study is required.

Step 3: presenting the significance of the study

Step three involves clarifying why the research is important for the body of knowledge and identifying the benefits derived from conducting this research. This step requires time and reflection to demonstrate the practical and methodological implications of the study and emerges from the cognitive work involved in step 2. Here, one can highlight the deficits in existing publications and justify the need for the proposed study.

Step 4: defining the concepts

The main terms to be used in the research have to be defined to avoid any misunderstanding. Clarification of the meaning of the terms ensures transparency of the study and allows other researchers to understand the specific context of the phenomenon under study. Abstract concepts need to be explained, assumptions made explicit and, if terms such as 'young', 'adult' and 'elderly' are appropriate in the study, they should be clearly defined with respect to their use within the study.

Step 5: establishing the research aim(s)

In this stage, the purpose of the intended research is presented. The research problem can be stated as a question or an aim when the study is concerned with exploring a particular phenomenon. It can also be stated as a hypothesis when the study is concerned with testing an assumption.

It is at this stage that a decision is taken about whether the research will take a qualitative or a quantitative focus, depending on the research aim(s). Any research proposal, including quantitative and qualitative research as well as projects using triangulation of methodologies (use of more than one type of methodology in a single research), contains steps 1, 2, 3 and 4. The aim needs to be made explicit, allowing for no misunderstanding. Specific questions will follow from the aim and should be listed here. Aim(s) and questions are generally more appropriate in qualitative studies.

Step 6: deciding on the research paradigm

There are health problems that cannot be dealt with from pure quantitative or qualitative perspectives. This, however, does not mean that one methodology is superior to the other. On the contrary, each generates a different but complementary type of knowledge (Kelle and Erzberger 2004). The most important consideration is that the choice of the paradigm emerges from the aim of the study (Silverman 2000). In other words, the nature of the phenomenon being studied determines the methodology to be used (Parahoo 1997).

On one hand, qualitative research tends to emphasise the dynamic, holistic and individual aspects of the human experience, and it attempts to capture those aspects in their entirety, within the context of those who are experiencing them (Silverman 2000). The purpose of qualitative research is not prediction and control but rather description and understanding (Streubert Speziale and Carpenter 1995). A qualitative approach helps with the documentation and description of the experiences of those facing a phenomenon. Qualitative research is often used when variables cannot easily be identified, and theories are not available to explain the behaviour of participants and need to be developed (Creswell 1998). Qualitative research also needs to be conducted when little is known about a phenomenon or when present theories need revising (Morse and Field 1996).

On the other hand, quantitative research deals with quantity and numbers rather than with quality and description (Parahoo 1997). While it is feasible to access data from a larger sample in quantitative studies, it is not possible to achieve the depth of data that qualitative research gives. The emphasis in quantitative work is on collecting measurable information and statistics.

After deciding on the type of data (descriptions or numbers) that are required so that an answer to the research problem can be found, the next decision is to identify the type of research design that will be used. If a qualitative design has been considered the best way to achieve the aims(s) of the research, it is the intention of this article to show how to develop a qualitative proposal.

The qualitative approach lies within an interpretative tradition, one that seeks to understand the meaning of human experiences. According to Creswell (1998), there are five major divisions within qualitative traditions: biography; phenomenology; ethnography; grounded theory; and case study. All five traditions focus on the experiences of people and stress the uniqueness of individuals. However, the five differ in form, terms and focus. Broadly speaking, a biographical study focuses on the life of an individual and her or his experiences. A phenomenological study, however, reports the meaning of lived experiences for several individuals with reference to human phenomena. The intent of grounded theory is to generate a theory that relates to a particular situation. An ethnographic study describes and interprets a cultural or social group by immersing in the day-to-day lives of people. Finally, a case study is an in-depth exploration of a single case or multiple cases.

Of these five traditions, the researcher has to decide which approach appears to be the most appropriate for the aim(s) of the study and has to defend the reason for the choice. It is stressed once again that the phenomenon to be investigated determines the methodology to be used, which in turn determines the method(s) (step 8).

Step 7: finding a theoretical framework

A theoretical framework is used in research to provide a structure for examining a problem and serves as a guide to explore relationships between variables to interpret and explain the data. Such a framework may be

applied from nursing or from a related discipline such as psychology or sociology. While it is appropriate to find a theoretical framework for most qualitative approaches, it does not generally apply to the grounded theory. This is because the purpose of grounded theory research is to generate theory inductively from empirical data, rather than testing an existing theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Step 8: choosing the method of data collection

Having agreed on the type of qualitative design, the next decision is about the type of method(s) that will be used to collect the data. The most commonly used methods for gathering qualitative data are interviews, focus groups and observations. These different methods are summarised in Table 2.

The choice of methods will depend on the research aim, methodology and type of information required, and on an evaluation of the human and material resources available for the project. The methods used in qualitative research have been criticised for providing merely descriptive and anecdotal evidence (Silverman 2000). Qualitative data, however, with their emphasis on people's lived experience, can provide a holistic picture of what 'real life' is like (Miles and Huberman 1994). Therefore, qualitative techniques allow for a rich and deep understanding of an event. Although there are advantages in using qualitative methods, there are also disadvantages. For example, interviewing is costly and requires time and energy to administer (Polit and Hungler 1995). Besides, the interviewer's interaction can affect the interviewee's responses, so there is risk of bias (Rice and Ezzy 1999). However, the interactive nature of qualitative research can also be considered a strength as researchers are the instrument in qualitative inquiry (Patton 1990).

In this step, the researcher needs to identify the population under study and make clear the inclusion and exclusion criteria of participants, as well as the type of sampling most appropriate for the study. A major concern is the sample size, meaning the number of participants needed in the study. In qualitative research, the size of the sample is generally small and the sample is not representative of the whole population, so the results of the study cannot be generalised to the target population (Creswell 1998). However, this is acceptable as the goal of qualitative research is to gather rich information

rather than to develop a precise estimate of what percentage of a population behave or feel in a certain way. For further information on sampling refer to Polit and Beck (2004).

Having decided how to collect data that capture the required information, the next decision is to plan collection.

Step 9: planning the data collection

Unexpected problems often arise in the course of a project. For this reason, it is important to carry out a pilot study. This is a small-scale version of the major study (Polit and Hungler 1995). In qualitative research, a pilot study can be helpful in exploring the researcher's skills in conducting an interview and to assess whether the questions are clearly understood by the participants or whether they require modification. In addition, it is important in qualitative research to create an open atmosphere with the aim of allowing the participants to express their feelings and perceptions without constraint (Hallett 1995). A pilot study therefore allows the researcher to become familiar with the procedure and to identify where modifications in technique, approach or questions can be made to improve the quality of the data obtained in the main study.

Step 10: describing the procedure of data analysis

Prior to analysis, if audio-tapes have been used in the interviews, data need to be transcribed verbatim. If field notes have been taken during the research, these need to be included in the analysis. There are computer programs, such as NUDIS*T ('non-numerical unstructured data indexing, searching and theorising'), that can help in the analysis and representation of data by storing and organising files, and searching for themes (Creswell 1998). The use of this qualitative data analysis program will give the researcher quick and easy access to the material (Robson 2002).

Finally, the way in which the data will be analysed has to be made explicit and the procedures justified. Complete transparency here allows other researchers to critically appraise how the findings emerged and to evaluate the conclusions reached. At the same time, this process enhances the quality of the data, as shown below.

Step 11: enhancing the quality of the data

A credible qualitative study will contribute to the body of knowledge and enhance the quality of practice. It is thus important to guarantee rigorous techniques to produce clear and accurate descriptions of a particular aspect of human experience. Social researchers have identified four measures of rigour to assess trustworthiness in qualitative studies (Lincoln and Guba 1985). These are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility refers to the authenticity of the data, meaning that the data are a true reflection of the participants' experience of the phenomena under study. A way of ensuring credibility of data is to give findings to participants to validate results (Creswell 1998). Transferability is concerned with the generalisation of the study, denoting the extent to which the data are relevant to a number of contexts (Robson 2002). This could be guaranteed, for example, by recruiting information from a heterogeneous sample (participants with different characteristics of age, sex, marital status, etc). Dependability refers to the degree of consistency if the research is repeated (Robson 2002). Finally, confirmability concerns the concept of objectivity of the data (Robson 2002). These two criteria of rigour are strengthened in the final report by presenting an in-depth description of how the study is conducted, how and what decisions are made, and any issues that occur through the study.

Step 12: reporting the ethical issues

Since qualitative methods, such as interviews, focus groups and observation, are essentially processes of human interaction, potential risks of interaction may arise, including embarrassment, misunderstanding, and conflicts of opinions and values (Rice and Ezzy 1999). The personal nature of qualitative research requires the researcher to pay attention to several considerations, such as ethical approval from an institutional review board, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity.

The proposal has to be submitted to an ethics committee for approval. The issue of informed consent can be addressed by giving to participants verbal and written information about the aims and development of the research. Participants should have an opportunity to ask for clarification and to raise any issues of concern with the research prior to signing a consent

form. A copy of the signed consent form can be provided for informants in order to remind them of their agreed conditions. To maintain confidentiality, participants' descriptions of their experiences should not be stored with any identifying labels; codes should be used to replace names and addresses to ensure that no one will be able to identify the participants from any report published about the research.

Step 13: illuminating the limitations of the study

Some caution must be exercised in drawing firm conclusions from qualitative research. Qualitative research is specific to the sample and setting of the research and it cannot be generalised to other populations or different contexts. However, it may be possible to identify trends that may also apply to similar situations and these may be borne out in further research. In addition, it has to be recognised that all research has limitations and the researcher must acknowledge these.

Step 14: disseminating the findings

This step involves sharing results of the research with others professionals and with the population in general. The dissemination of research findings is commonly achieved by presentation in professional academic journals, conferences, seminars and other meetings of scientific interest.

A summary of the report can also be made available to the participants who will be interested in the outcome of the research. The way in which the findings of the study are presented in published papers depends upon the expected audience, their pre-existing knowledge, focus of interest and expertise.

Step 15: planning the time frame

A research proposal needs to include a time frame and plan of the work. Management of time is paramount as it keeps the researcher on schedule throughout the research process and it provides reviewers with justification of the length of time (usually one, two or three years) that the project requires to be completed (Ezzy 1999). In setting a time frame, it is important to be realistic. When funding is obtained to support a study, the providers expect to be able to see that the research is progressing as planned and that it will

be completed within the time specified.

Step 16: concluding

The conclusion is the closing section to the proposal. It highlights the main elements and provides a summary of the crucial issues. Before submitting a proposal for evaluation by experts, it is recommended that it is read and re-read to ensure its coherence, to identify any incongruence or misunderstanding and to correct any typographical, grammatical or spelling errors.

Step 17: presenting the references

All work cited in the proposal has to be referenced. Obsolete documents have to be avoided unless they have been of great impact in the field being studied.

Summary

This article has provided an overview of the main steps inherent within a qualitative research proposal. The sequence of steps has shown that developing a proposal is a systematic process that requires time, intellectual endeavour and planning. Although this 17-step process can initially appear long, the novice need not be discouraged. A step-by-step process can be invaluable for the neophyte to ensure a comprehensive and a thorough approach. It is hoped that this guideline serves as an easy way to start with research. Further reading on writing a research proposal is recommended to complement this article (Carlisle 1994, Ezzy 1999).

Key points

- Conducting research starts by developing a proposal
- It is possible to make changes to the original research plan; proposals are often modified across the research process
- Consider the type of audience to which the proposal is addressed (scientific researchers, academic professionals, politicians etc)
- Evaluate critically the proposal before submitting it

Table 1. Preparation of a qualitative research proposal

1. Topic of interest	What specific situations have been observed that require a research question to be answered?
2. Background of the problem	What is already known about the problem? What aspect(s) of the problem has (have) not been investigated yet?
3. Significance of the study	How would the research proposal contribute to knowledge?
4. Definition of concepts	What are the definitions of the terms or concepts that will be investigated?
5. Research aim(s)	What aim(s) can be achieved to respond to the problem?
6. Research design	What is the most appropriate design that would respond to the research aim(s)?
7. Theoretical framework	What model might be used to interpret the data and present the findings?
8. Methods of data collection	What is/are the most appropriate method(s) that would allow the collection of the information required?
9. Pilot study	How can suitable participants be accessed and recruited for a small-scale version of the main study?
10. Analysis of data	What is the most appropriate data analysis for use in this study?
11. Quality of data	How can the quality and credibility of the data be enhanced?
12. Ethics	What ethical issues need to be considered for this research?
13. Limitations of the study	What are the limitations of this proposal?
14. Dissemination of findings	How will the results of the study be disseminated?
15. Planning the time frame	How will the time frame be planned?
16. Conclusions	What are the main elements of this research?
17. References	What references have been used for this proposal?

Table 2. Types of qualitative methods

Method	Characteristic
Interview	Interviews are verbal interactions between researcher(s) and participant(s) to acquire valid and reliable information appropriate to the research questions. Interviews may be structured, unstructured or semi-structured They may be conducted in a face-to-face situation or by telephone
Focus group	Focus groups involve a type of interviewing generally between one researcher and a group of participants. This is useful when the researcher is interested in different perspectives on a phenomenon and can arrange to interview a group of appropriate individuals together
Observation	Direct observation potentially provides more comprehensive data about how a person behaves in a particular situation. However, it requires special skills to be meticulous in recording and interpreting the behaviour and it is not always suitable in intimate situations

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