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Understanding the importance of collecting qualitative data creatively

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Understanding the importance of collecting qualitative data creatively

Abstract

IN ITS broadest sense, qualitative research encompasses any study that does not use statistical methods or quantify results (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Qualitative researchers undertake their work in the natural setting, attempting to understand or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

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Creatively Collecting Qualitative Data

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In its broadest sense, qualitative research encompasses any study that does not use statistical methods or quantify results (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Qualitative researchers undertake their work in the natural setting, attempting to understand or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings that people bring to it. Our libraries are full of research texts and sentinel sources that describe the underpinnings and various methodological approaches to qualitative research, including grounded theory, phenomenology, story-telling, naturalistic enquiry and ethnography. What is often missing from these texts is discussion about the range of methods that can be used to collect the qualitative data which forms the basis of these studies.

There are many ways of gathering data to capture the multiple realities and gain a deep understanding of the human experience. Whilst interviews, focus groups and observations may be the most common methods of qualitative data collection, qualitative research inherently invites creativity and the use of innovative methods to gain an insight into the participants' world. A key feature of *Nurse Researcher* is that we seek to publish papers that describe the experiences of nurse and health care researchers in applying methodologies, data collection or analysis methods into research practice. In particular we are always seeking papers that have a message for other researchers about lessons learnt or tips for future use of the reported approach. This edition of *Nurse Researcher* showcases two papers which have used different but innovative methods of qualitative data collection. Learning from the experiences of others in implementing creative methods of data collection is a powerful tool that can inform the use of such methods of data collection in future studies.

In a narrative review of studies reporting innovation in qualitative research methods across the social sciences over a quarter of the included papers reported the use of creative methods of data collection as the area of innovation in their work (Wiles et al. 2010). Such methods of data collection included art, drama, dance, poetry, photography or combinations of these. The review identified that the use of creative methods to collect data is not just about the art of qualitative research. Rather, using innovative methods was seen as a strategy to enhance participation in hard to reach groups and also facilitate participants to reveal their stories, particularly when sensitive issues or vulnerable populations are involved (Wiles et al., 2010). In both of the theme papers in this issue the use of innovative methods of collecting data has

promoted a greater engagement of participants than might have occurred with more traditional methods of collecting data.

In the first paper Cross et al. (2015) reports a study that utilised storyboards in focus groups. This study sought to evaluate the impact of a project on vulnerable young women in the UK. The storyboards were divided into three sections and used as a way for the participating women to depict their position before the project being evaluated, at the current time and their hopes for the future. The storyboards could be created using a range of craft materials, drawing or words depending on the participants' preferences. When the participants presented their perceptions back to the group in a facilitated discussion, these storyboards were used as prompts. The presence of the story boards provided opportunities to stimulate discussion that might not have been revealed in conventional interviews or focus groups. This discussion was then recorded as a source of data.

In addition to the creative use of storyboards, the study by Cross et al. (2015) highlights an important consideration in using creative data collection techniques, namely the need to consider data analysis strategies upfront. Whilst creative data collection may encourage participants to engage in the project, it is important that the researcher has a clear plan for analysing the collected data to ensure that it enables them to answer their research question. It is too late at the end of data collection to be left with a mountain of photographs, art work or the like without a clear plan for how the material will be analysed. Rather, the analysis strategy should be determined during the study planning phase and clearly embedded in the research plan. In their study, Cross et al. (2015) used the storyboards created by participants to prompt them to share their perceptions and experiences of the project verbally in focus group discussions. Transcripts of these discussions then became a data source that could be analysed.

In the second paper, Hinsliff-Smith et al. (2015) describes the use of diaries in a phenomenological study of the experiences of breastfeeding amongst new mothers in the first six weeks post-partum. Women were recruited from 34 weeks gestation and provided with a diary in which to record their experiences of infant feeding following birth. In this study the use of diaries allowed the researchers to capture the changes in participants' attitudes and perceptions over time as they experienced the early weeks of breastfeeding. This is in contrast to a study that purely used interviews or focus groups where experiences would be captured in a single snapshot rather than on an ongoing basis. Being able to make entries at a time that suited the participant facilitated ongoing data collection and promoted participation. Additionally, the relative anonymity provided by the journaling process encouraged participants to express their true feelings rather than providing what they perceived to be socially acceptable responses.

It is clear that the use of creative methods of data collection may facilitate participant engagement and enhance the richness of the data gathered. However, it is important that such methods provide a means to answer the research question, are coherent with the methodological approach and are underpinned by an appropriate method of data analysis. Whilst often we consider the various elements of a research project in isolation, it is important that as researchers we reflect on the entirety of our projects to ensure the level of consistency and logical flow that are the hallmarks of a rigorous project.

References

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