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Focus on Research Methods

Whatever Happened to Qualitative Description?

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Abstract: The general view of descriptive research as a lower level form of inquiry has influenced some researchers conducting qualitative research to claim methods they are really not using and not to claim the method they are using: namely, qualitative description. Qualitative descriptive studies have as their goal a comprehensive summary of events in the everyday terms of those events. Researchers conducting qualitative descriptive studies stay close to their data and to the surface of words and events. Qualitative descriptive designs typically are an eclectic but reasonable combination of sampling, and data collection, analysis, and re-presentation techniques. Qualitative descriptive study is the method of choice when straight descriptions of phenomena are desired. © 2000 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Res Nurs Health 23:334–340, 2000

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Qualitative researchers now have the option to choose from an increasing array of theoretically and technically sophisticated methods. Accordingly, it may seem strange to resurrect a plainer and considerably "less sexy"[1] method: namely, qualitative description. Yet it is precisely the increasing complexity of qualitative methods and the tyranny of method in nursing research that makes the rediscovery of qualitative description necessary.

Descriptive research is typically depicted in research texts as being on the lowest rung of the quantitative research design hierarchy. In this hierarchy, "true" experiments aimed at prediction and control are the gold standard and any other design is *non*-experimental and weak (e.g., Talbot, 1995). The view of description in quantitative research as the "crudest form of inquiry" (Thorne, Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997, p. 170) likely has negatively influenced researchers engaging in qualitative research, many of whom have felt obliged to defend their efforts as something more than mere description. That is, they have sought "epistemological credibility" (p. 170) by designating their work as phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, or narrative study. In too many cases, however, this effort has resulted in "posturing" (Wolcott, 1992) about phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, or narrative study rather than in phenomenologies, theories, ethnographies, or narrative interpretations. A confusing state of affairs exists whereby studies are called narrative, even though they may include nothing more than minimally structured, open-ended interviews; phenomenologic, even though they may include nothing more than reports of the "subjective" experiences of participants; or, ethnographic, even though they

[1] I am indebted to Joan Lynaugh for the phrase "less sexy," which she used to refer to things that are important but nevertheless fail to get the attention they deserve.

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may include nothing more than participants in different ethnic groups. Indeed, although they may undeniably be worthwhile studies that yield valuable information for practice, these so-called narrative, phenomenologic, and ethnographic studies are often better described as qualitative descriptive studies, albeit with narrative, phenomenologic, and ethnographic overtones. I will return to the subject of overtones in qualitative research later.

In the now vast qualitative methods literature, there is no comprehensive description of qualitative description as a distinctive method of equal standing with other qualitative methods, although it is one of the most frequently employed methodologic approaches in the practice disciplines. Accordingly, in this paper, I describe qualitative description as a method that researchers can claim unashamedly without resorting to methodological acrobatics. My presentation of qualitative description was inspired, in part, by Thorne, Kirkham, and MacDonald-Emes' insightful discussion of ''interpretive description'' (1997), but departs from that discussion and from Thorne's (1991) earlier related discussion of ''methodological orthodoxy'' in three ways. First, I see qualitative description as a categorical, as opposed to ''noncategorical alternative'' for inquiry; that is, the method already exists but is relatively unacknowleged, as opposed to being a new, distinctively nursing adaptation of grounded theory, phenomenology, and ethnography. Second, I see qualitative descriptive studies as less interpretive than ''interpretive description'' in that they do not require researchers to move as far from or into their data. Third, they do not require a conceptual or otherwise highly abstract rendering of data. My depiction of qualitative description departs from Artinian's useful discussion of the ''descriptive mode'' of qualitative inquiry (1988) in that I view it as producing a complete and valued end-product in itself, rather than as an ''entry point'' (p. 139) into other qualitative studies: as she presented it, as a necessary prelude to grounded theory inquiry.

I refer to the method I present here as *basic* or *fundamental* qualitative description to differentiate it from other kinds of qualitative description, such as phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography. Phenomenologic, grounded theory, and ethnographic studies are not exclusively in the descriptive domain, though, as they may also be used to explain phenomena. Unfortunately, the words *basic*, *fundamental*, and *surface* (a word I use later in this article) connote something elementary, superficial, simple, or merely preliminary. In no way do I wish to reinforce, by using these words, those invidious hierarchies that present one method as easier, less valuable, less desirable, or less scientific than another. No method is absolutely weak nor strong, but rather more or less useful or appropriate in relation to certain purposes. Accordingly, I present qualitative description here as a valuable method by itself. Comparisons to other methods are for the purposes of illumination, not ranking or denigration.

QUALITATIVE DESCRIPTION VERSUS QUANTITATIVE DESCRIPTION AND OTHER QUALITATIVE METHODS

All inquiry entails description, and all description entails interpretation. Knowing any phenomenon (or event or experience) requires, at the very least, knowing the ''facts'' about that phenomenon. Yet there are no ''facts'' outside the particular context that gives those facts meaning. Descriptions always depend on the perceptions, inclinations, sensitivities, and sensibilities of the describer (e.g., Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Giorgi, 1992; Wolcott, 1994). ''There is no pure looking with a naked, innocent eye'' (Pearce, 1971, p. 4), and there is no ''''immaculate perception''' (Beer cited in Wolcott, 1994, p. 13). Researchers seeking to describe an experience or event select what they will describe and, in the process of featuring certain aspects of it, begin to transform that experience or event.

Although no description is free of interpretation, basic or fundamental qualitative description, as opposed to, for example, phenomenological or grounded theory description, entails a kind of interpretation that is low-inference, or likely to result in easier consensus among researchers. Even though one researcher may feature the feelings and a second researcher the events a woman reported in an interview, both researchers will likely agree that, for example, the woman stated several times that she was angry and that she stated that her mother died one day after she herself learned she had breast cancer. In the case of two researchers describing ostensibly the same scene, one researcher might feature the spatial arrangement in a room, while the second researcher will feature the social interactions. But both researchers ought to agree with each other's descriptions as accurate renderings of the scene. That is, with low-inference descriptions, researchers will agree more readily on the ''facts'' of the case, even if they may not feature the same facts in their descriptions. Descriptions—whether in the form of descriptive

summaries of interview or observation data—entail researchers' choices about what to describe. But these descriptions must always accurately convey events in their proper sequence, or have descriptive validity, and the meanings participants attributed to those events, or have interpretive validity (Maxwell, 1992). Although human beings can never, and will likely never want to, describe everything that is "there," what they choose to describe will be something that most observers would agree is in fact "there."

Accordingly, although unavoidably interpretive, in that it is "filtered through (human) perceptions" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 13), basic qualitative description is not highly interpretive in the sense that a researcher deliberately chooses to describe an event *in terms of* a conceptual, philosophical, or other highly abstract framework or system. The description in qualitative descriptive studies entails the presentation of the facts of the case in everyday language. In contrast, phenomenological, theoretical, ethnographic, or narrative descriptions re-present events in other terms. Researchers are obliged to put much more of their own interpretive spin on what they see and hear. This spin derives, in part, from these methodologies themselves. Grounded theory study inclines the researcher to look for, and interpret data as, elements in a "conditional/consequential matrix" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 181). Certain types of phenomenologic studies incline the researcher to look for, and interpret data in terms of, "lifeworld existentials," such as corporeality and temporality (Van Manen, 1990, p. 101). Such descriptions require researchers to move farther into or beyond their data as they demand not just reading words and scenes, but rather reading into, between, and over them (e.g., McMahon, 1996; Poirier & Ayres, 1997). Wertz' (1983) analysis of the "moments" of a phenomenological study is an excellent demonstration of the successive transformations from a participant's description of an event to a researcher's phenomenological description of that event.

Although less interpretive than phenomenological or grounded theory description, fundamental qualitative description is more interpretive than quantitative description, which typically entails surveys or other pre-structured means to obtain a common dataset on pre-selected variables, and descriptive statistics to summarize them. Quantitative descriptive studies entail interpretation in that researchers set the horizon of expectations for the study by pre-selecting the variables that will be studied, and in that they draw conclusions from the results of statistical tests, which are themselves based on sets of assumptions. But it is a kind of interpretation that does not move beyond these pre-set confines, including the operational definitions of concepts and their representations as items in surveys and other measures. Quantitative description limits what can be learned about the meanings participants give to events. Moreover, in quantitative description, researchers leave less room for the unanticipated (Becker, 1996, p. 61).

Researchers conducting qualitative studies want to collect as much data as they can that will allow them to capture all of the elements of an event that come together to make it the event that it is. As long as they are "in the field," they are obliged to consider as data whatever they observe in the field. Qualitative researchers cannot, as readily as quantitative researchers, "insulate themselves from data" (Becker, 1996, p. 56). Although "full description is a will-o'-the wisp," the "fuller" description of qualitative description is preferable to qualitative researchers than the confined, or (what they often perceive to be the) "skimpy" description resulting from quantitative surveys (p. 64). Finally, in quantitative research, there is a sharper line drawn between exploration (finding out what is there) and description (describing what has been found) than in qualitative descriptive studies.

In summary, qualitative descriptive studies offer a comprehensive summary of an event in the everyday terms of those events. Researchers conducting such studies seek descriptive validity, or an accurate accounting of events that most people (including researchers and participants) observing the same event would agree is accurate, and interpretive validity, or an accurate accounting of the meanings participants attributed to those events that those participants would agree is accurate (Maxwell, 1992). Researchers conducting qualitative descriptive studies stay closer to their data and to the surface of words and events than researchers conducting grounded theory, phenomenologic, ethnographic, or narrative studies. In qualitative descriptive studies, language is a vehicle of communication, not itself an interpretive structure that must be read. Yet such surface readings should not be considered superficial, or trivial and worthless. I intend the word *surface* here to convey the depth of penetration into, or the degree of interpretive activity around, reported or observed events. There is nothing trivial or easy about getting the facts, and the meanings participants give to those facts, right and then conveying them in a coherent and useful manner.

DESIGN FEATURES OF QUALITATIVE DESCRIPTIVE STUDIES

Qualitative descriptive designs are typically an eclectic but reasonable and well-considered combination of sampling, and data collection, analysis, and re-presentational techniques. In the following sections, I describe typical design features. Qualitative description is especially amenable to obtaining straight and largely unadorned (i.e., minimally theorized or otherwise transformed or spun) answers to questions of special relevance to practitioners and policy makers. Examples of such questions include: What are the concerns of people about an event? What are people's responses (e.g., thoughts, feelings, attitudes) toward an event? What reasons do people have for using or not using a service or procedure? Who uses a service and when do they use it? What factors facilitate and hinder recovery from an event?

Theoretical/Philosophical Orientation

Qualitative descriptive studies are arguably the least ''theoretical'' of the spectrum of qualitative approaches, in that researchers conducting such studies are the least encumbered by pre-existing theoretical and philosophical commitments. In contrast to phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic, or narrative studies, which are based on specific methodologic frameworks emerging from distinctive disciplinary traditions (e.g., Lowenberg, 1993), qualitative descriptive studies tend to draw from the general tenets of naturalistic inquiry. Naturalistic inquiry is a generic orientation to inquiry that includes not only qualitative research, but also forms of behavioral research involving humans and animals, such as ethological observation. Naturalistic inquiry implies only a commitment to studying something in its natural state, or as it is, to the extent that this is possible in a research enterprise (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Willems, 1967). That is, in any naturalistic study, there is no pre-selection of variables to study, no manipulation of variables, and no a priori commitment to any one theoretical view of a target phenomenon. Accordingly, the naturalist inquirer will use techniques that allow the target phenomenon to present itself as it would if it were not under study.

Hues, tones, and textures. Although qualitative descriptive studies are different from phenomenologic, grounded theory, ethnographic, and narrative studies, they may, nevertheless, have hues, tones, and textures from these approaches. Any one qualitative approach can have the look, sound, or feel of other approaches. Charmaz (1990) described her grounded theory studies as having a phenomenological cast, and Sandelowski, Holditch-Davis, and Harris (1992) described their grounded theory study as acquiring phenomenological and narrative casts. Indeed, qualitative work is produced not from any ''pure'' use of a method, but from the use of methods that are variously textured, toned, and hued. There are ethnographic studies with grounded theory overtones (e.g. Timmermans, 1997) and grounded theory studies with ethnographic overtones (e.g., Kittell, Mansfield, & Voda, 1998).

Accordingly, qualitative descriptive studies may have grounded theory overtones as researchers may employ one or more techniques associated with grounded theory, such as a form of constant comparison, but not produce any theoretical rendering of the target phenomenon (e.g., Chow, 1998). Some qualitative descriptive studies have narrative or phenomenological hues as researchers might seriously attend to certain words and phrases, or moments of experience, but not produce narrative or phenomenological renderings of the target phenomenon (e.g., Jablonski, 1994). Altheide's description of ethnographic content analysis (1987) presents qualitative content analysis (to be discussed further below) as a technique with ethnographic and grounded theory overtones. Qualitative descriptive studies may also have shadings from larger paradigms, such as feminism.

Variously hued, toned, and textured studies are not to be confused with erroneous references to or misuses of methods or techniques. Researchers may claim to have used theoretical sampling, constant comparison, narrative analysis, and phenomenological reflection when nothing about their presentation indicates they used these techniques appropriately or at all. Researchers may also explicitly combine techniques, as in mixed method studies (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

Sampling

Virtually any of the purposeful sampling techniques Patton (1990) described may be used in qualitative descriptive studies. Especially useful, though, is maximum variation sampling, which allows researchers to explore the common and

unique manifestations of a target phenomenon across a broad range of phenomenally and/or demographically varied cases (Sandelowski, 1995). Researchers may also choose to sample cases to represent a combination of pre-selected variables (Trost, 1986), or typical or unusual cases of a phenomenon, in order to describe it as it tends to appear or uncommonly appears. As in any qualitative study, the ultimate goal of purposeful sampling is to obtain cases deemed information-rich for the purposes of study. The obligation of researchers is to defend their sampling strategies as reasonable for their purposes.

Data Collection

Data collection in qualitative descriptive studies is typically directed toward discovering the *who*, *what*, and *where* of events or experiences, or their basic nature and shape. Data collection techniques usually include minimally to moderately structured open-ended individual and/or focus group interviews. Focus groups can usefully be viewed as the qualitative counterpart to the quantitative survey, in that they are typically used in qualitative research to obtain a broad range of information about events. Data collection techniques may also include observations of targeted events and the examination of documents and artifacts.

Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis is the analysis strategy of choice in qualitative descriptive studies. Qualitative content analysis is a dynamic form of analysis of verbal and visual data that is oriented toward summarizing the informational contents of that data (Altheide, 1987; Morgan, 1993).[2] In contrast to quantitative content analysis, in which the researcher systematically applies a pre-existing set of codes to the data, qualitative content analysis is data-derived: that is, codes also are systematically applied, but they are generated from the data themselves in the course of the study. Qualitative research is generally characterized by the simultaneous collection and analysis of data whereby both mutually shape each other. Qualitative content analysis is similarly reflexive and interactive as researchers continuously modify their treatment of data to accommodate new data and new insights about those data. Although researchers might also begin the qualitative content analysis process with pre-existing coding systems, these systems are always modified in the course of analysis, or may even be wholly discarded in favor of a new system, to ensure the best fit to the data. Miller and Crabtree (1992, p. 18) described this approach to analysis as the ''template analysis style.''

Both quantitative and qualitative content analyses entail counting responses and the numbers of participants in each response category, but in qualitative content analysis, counting is a means to an end, not the end itself. Researchers may use a ''quasi-statistical analysis style'' (Miller & Crabtree, 1992, p. 18) by summarizing their data numerically with descriptive statistics. But the end result of counting is not a quasi-statistical rendering of the data, but rather a description of the patterns or regularities in the data that have, in part, been discovered and then confirmed by counting. Qualitative content analysis moves farther into the domain of interpretation than quantitative content analysis in that there is an effort to understand not only the manifest (e.g., frequencies and means), but also the latent content of data. Yet qualitative content analysis is the least interpretive of the qualitative analysis approaches in that there is no mandate to re-present the data in any other terms but their own. For example, Smeltzer (1994) described the concerns of pregnant women with multiple sclerosis by asking them about their concerns and then organizing her findings to catalog these concerns. Geller and Hotzman (1995) described physicians' perceptions concerning genetic testing by eliciting this information from them in focus groups and then summarizing their perceptions. In these studies, concerns remained concerns and perceptions remained perceptions. They did not become, for example, conditions for or consequences of some event in a theory, nor a ''strategic'' representation of self in a narrative rendering (Riessman, 1990).

Data Re-Presentation

The expected outcome of qualitative descriptive studies is a straight descriptive summary of

[2]In a larger, generic sense, all human analyses of texts entail the analysis of content. Accordingly, constant comparison, phenomenological, and the varieties of statistical analyses are all examples of content analysis. In the research literature, though, the term 'content analysis' is a technical term designating specific approaches, including quantitative and qualitative content analysis (e.g., Altheide, 1996).

the informational contents of data organized in a way that best fits the data. For example, Smeltzer (1994) arranged her summary by time in pregnancy; that is, she described the pregnancy-related concerns of women with multiple sclerosis as they appeared pre-conceptionally, antenatally, intrapartally, and post-delivery. Geller and Holtzman (1995) arranged their summary in two major categories reflecting the major topics about which they elicited information: (a) perceptions of obligations for disclosure, nondirectiveness, confidentiality, and the gender and specialty differences in these perceptions and (b) perceptions of barriers and incentives to incorporate genetic testing into primary care practice, including confidence, financing, patient demand, and, again, the gender and specialty differences in these perceptions. Other ways to arrange data include: (a) actual or reverse chronological order of events; (b) most prevalent to least prevalent theme; (c) progressive focusing, whereby researchers choose to move either from describing the broad context of an event to particular cases, or from particular cases to the broad context; (d) a day-, week,- month-, or year-in-the life approach of actual person(s); and, (e) the Rashomon effect, whereby the same event is described from the perspective of more than one participant (Sandelowski, 1998; Wolcott, 1994, pp. 17–23).

Although such summaries might easily lend themselves to more penetrating (as opposed to surface) re-presentations of data, these are not required for a qualitative descriptive study to be considered methodologically ''good'' or practically valuable. For example, the Rashomon effect approach lends itself to further researcher interpretations of different participants' versions of the same event, but the mandate for the researcher conducting a qualitative descriptive study is comprehensively and accurately to detail these versions. Accordingly, such summaries are valuable primarily as end-products and, secondarily, as entry points for further study.

There is no mandate to produce anything other than a descriptive summary of an event, organized in a way that best contains the data collected and that will be most relevant to the audience for whom it was written. But such summaries may themselves yield the working concepts, hypotheses, and thematic moments for future grounded theory or phenomenologic study, or themselves contain early versions of them.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the qualitative descriptive study is the method of choice when straight descriptions of phenomena are desired. Such study is especially useful for researchers wanting to know the *who*, *what*, and *where* of events. Although foundational to all qualitative research approaches, qualitative descriptive studies comprise a valuable methodologic approach in and of themselves. Researchers can unashamedly name their method as qualitative description. If their studies were designed with overtones from other methods, they can describe what these overtones were, instead of inappropriately naming or implementing these other methods.

So, whatever happened to qualitative description? The method is alive and well, but needs only to be re-discovered as a valuable and distinctive component of qualitative research and recovered for health sciences research.

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