CHAPTER 7:

INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The term 'qualitative research' encompasses a wide range of different methods. What underpins these is a shared aim of understanding the meaning people attribute to experiences in their lives. It has been defined as an 'interpretive approach concerned with understanding the meanings which people attach to actions, decisions, beliefs, values within their social world' (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Three main types of qualitative research methods were used within the EQUIP programme of work and these will form the focus of the current chapter: in-depth interviews, focus groups and observations. Throughout the chapter, the authors will refer to allied publications resulting from EQUIP as a way of providing examples of real life research to support the description of the methodological approaches provided.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

1. Understand different types of qualitative research methods
2. Understand the factors that influence the choice of appropriate qualitative research method
3. Understand how to carry out research utilising qualitative research methods

INTRODUCTION

What is qualitative research and why and when should we use it?

Qualitative research provides an understanding of a topic in its contextual setting giving explanations and accounts of why people do the things they do. It can also help evaluate the effectiveness of interventions and aid the development of theories and strategies. Qualitative research can be:

- undertaken independently in its own right
- as part of a bigger study or trial, to provide deeper understanding of the quantitative (numerical) results
- be used to support the development of quantitative studies by informing or testing survey content and to explore the implementation of quantitative studies

In relation to EQUIP, qualitative research methods were used to explore current service user and carer involvement in mental health care planning from the perspectives of service users (Grundy et al., 2016), carers (Cree et al., 2015), professionals (Bee et al., 2015) and other relevant stakeholders (Brooks et al., 2015) to inform the design of an intervention to enhance involvement in care planning. They were also used to inform the design of the randomised controlled trial and to examine the barriers and facilitators to the implementation and embedding of the user/carers involved care planning training intervention within the 10 mental health sites included in the trial (Figure 18).

Figure 18 Examples of EQUIP research questions addressed using qualitative research methods

- How do service users conceptualise care planning involvement?
- How can meaningful service user and carer involvement be instilled in the care planning process?
- What is the role and influence of individuals, teams and organisational factors in achieving high quality user-involved care planning?
- What are carers' experiences of the care planning process for people with severe mental illness?
- What are professionals' perceptions and experiences of delivering mental health care planning and involving service users and carers in decisions about their care?
- What factors might promote or inhibit the routine incorporation of user- and carer-led planning within mental health services?

Quantitative versus qualitative research

Quantitative methods relate to numbers. Data is collected in numerical form and presented in terms of descriptive or inferential statistics (see Chapter 4). In qualitative research, the focus is different. Data is often words, text and pictures and focuses on values, processes, experiences, language and meaning.

Quantitative methods of design and analysis are set before the study begins with data collected and analysed against these pre-set parameters. Qualitative methodology is a more iterative process, which is developed and refined during the course of a study. Positivist strategies alone are unlikely to fully address the complex process of service-user and carer involvement in mental health care planning.

Establishing the complex reality of mental health

Qualitative methods are particularly suited to the study of mental health given their ability to explore personal perspectives on illness, and individual experiences of health services and treatments. We know that the experience of mental illness and recovery is a complicated and personal one, but also that wider factors affect it, such as social networks, past experience and the environment in which people live (Brooks et al., 2014). Qualitative techniques can help us to understand this complexity by providing an holistic account and critical understanding of individuals' views and actions within the social world they inhabit.

Service-user and carer involvement in qualitative research

There are a range of ways in which service users and carers can and should be involved in undertaking qualitative research. Involvement enhances the quality of the research undertaken including the data collected and the analysis undertaken (see chapter 8: Introduction to qualitative data analysis). In EQUIP researchers worked closely with trained service users/carers who:

- were involved in the design of the research studies in their role as co-applicants
- conducted data collection through the undertaking of in-depth interviews and the running of focus groups
- contributed as part of the research team to the coding and analytical frameworks developed as part of the research
- led peer-review publications disseminating research findings (Grundy et al., 2016; Cree et al., 2015)

Types of qualitative research

In this chapter we will focus on the qualitative data methods utilised within EQUIP. These are the main types of qualitative methods that researchers are likely to find themselves using in health services research:

- In-depth interviews
- Focus groups
- Observations

Service-user and carer involvement in qualitative research methods

Interviews

Qualitative in-depth interviews are useful for illuminating a range of perspectives from different types of participants. The types of qualitative interviews are illustrated in Figure 19.

Figure 19 Types of qualitative interview

Semi-structured interviews are the most commonly used type of interview and were used frequently in the EQUIP programme. By their nature, semi-structured interviews are less confined than more formally structured ones and require more improvisation on the part of the interviewer, but they also allow pre-set questions relating to the research aims and objectives to be explored. Semi-structured interviews still require significant preparation to be undertaken prior to the interview in the form of drafting of interview schedules. Care should be taken to ensure that the language used is simple and easy to understand to reduce ambiguities and that the questions and prompts included are sufficient to address the research aims and objectives. The schedule is usually refined during the course of data collection to explore emerging themes in more depth during subsequent interviews.

There is a range of different types of questions that can be utilised in semi-structured interviews which will elicit different responses from research participants (Figure 20). Interviews will generally involve a mixture of these different types of questions and will be used within schedules to address specific research aims and objectives.

Figure 20 Types of interview questions with examples

Open/closed questions

- Closed question: Do you currently give service users a copy of their care plan?
- Open question: What do you think the benefits are of involving service users and carers in the care planning process?

Behaviour or experience

- Can you give me an example from your experience of where involving service users and/or carers in the care planning process has worked well?

Feelings

- How did your experience in a recent care-planning meeting make you feel?

Knowledge

- What are the current drivers of service-user/carer involvement in mental health care planning within your Trust?

Prompts

- Can you tell me a little bit more about that?
- How does that relate to...?
- Why do you think that might be?

Background demographic

– used to provide contextual information for the data presented (e.g. age, role, sex, diagnosis)

Interviews are most often carried out in person in a one-to-one format. For practical reasons, however, or if it is the preference of the participant, interviews can also be carried out over the phone or via secure Internet platforms. Interviews should be offered at a location and time that is convenient for the participant, although it is preferable for interviews to take place in a quiet location, free from interruptions and background noise. Getting the interviews, contents, structure and relationships right within qualitative interviews is critical to the success of any qualitative research project.

There are various strategies researchers can employ to increase the quality of data collected during interviews (Figure 21). Careful consideration should be given to the design of the study prior to commencing the project and sufficient flexibility should be factored into the design to allow for the iterative approach inherent in qualitative research methods.

Figure 21 Interview strategies

Funnelling

start with a broad, open question and then focus down

Story-telling

put the researcher in the role of active listener, rather than questioner

Reassuring

provide visual cues such as eye contact, head nods and supportive responses

Probing

further explore issues raised by participants with insightful follow-up questions

Linking

make links between a current comment and earlier ones

Naïve positioning

get clarification when something doesn't make sense

Acknowledging/ understanding

show your growing understanding and position yourself as a 'learner' and not an 'expert'.

Qualitative interviewing exercise

Develop an interview guide on the topic of mental health and wellbeing. Conduct the interview with a willing friend or colleague. Your interview guide can be written as an aid to hold a 'conversation with a purpose'. You want to understand what mental health and wellbeing might mean from an insider perspective. Write down the key points arising during the interview. You might want to consider and reflect on:

- the challenges of defining wellbeing:
 - What is it?
 - Could it be viewed differently from diverse points of view?
 - How would you find out about conceptualising mental wellbeing?
- where and when the interview should be carried out
- how did you find the process of undertaking an interview:
 - What types of questions did you use and what responses did these elicit?
 - Did you utilise any of the strategies for interviews detailed in Figure 21?
 - How might you change your approach in future interviews?

Focus groups

Focus groups are a form of qualitative interview in which a group of people, often with similar experiences, are brought together to speak about a given topic. The rationale for undertaking a focus group is that as a group, participants may generate data that they may not have during a one-to-one interview by virtue of the fact that they are discussing the topic with other people in a social interaction. The use of focus groups as a sole method of data collection has been discouraged because people may be uncomfortable discussing certain things in front of others (Mitchell, 1999). Therefore interviews and focus groups are often used in conjunction with each other, with participants being given the option of which they would prefer to attend (Cree et al., 2015; Grundy et al., 2016; Bee et al., 2015).

Observation

Observations are periods of intensive social interaction with people in their environment and are defined as 'the systematic description of events, behaviours, and artefacts in the social setting chosen for study' (Marshall and Rossman, 1989, p 79). Observations allow researchers to explore events that participants may not wish or may not be able to express during in-depth interviews. To qualify as research, observation should:

1. serve a focussed research purpose
2. relate to existing literature or theories
3. be systematically planned
4. be recorded systematically
5. be refined into general propositions or hypotheses
6. be subject to checks and controls on validity and reliability

During observations, researchers take field notes on participants, the setting, the social behaviour and the frequency and duration of events. They may also access other sources of data such as minutes of meetings observed or field interviews. The stages in observational work are illustrated in Figure 22.

In EQUIP, observations were used during the process evaluation as part of the trial to observe how patients and staff adopted and used the new user/carer involved care planning intervention. Observation included attention to how the new system fitted into the everyday routines of management and care practices for patients and professionals, and how data collected through the one-to-one interviews was supplemented.

Figure 22 Stages in observational work

Exercise in observation

- Think about a topic that would warrant using observational methods rather than say a questionnaire or interview.
- Consider your reasons for this choice and why other methods would be less suitable.
- How do you think you could negotiate access into the setting related to your chosen topic?
- Who do you think would be the main focus of your observation?
- What might you want to record during the observation?

Qualitative sampling

Sampling refers to the process of selecting participants for a research study from the wider population. Qualitative sampling is purposive in nature and unlike quantitative sampling does not try to be representative. Instead it focuses on a depth of understanding and the principle that the smaller the number of participants a study has, the deeper the engagement with the participant and the greater level of understanding will be developed about the phenomena under consideration. Three common types of sampling are described in Figure 23.

Interviews This Way

Figure 23 Commonly used types of sampling in qualitative research

Purposive sampling

the most commonly used approach which group participants in line with predefined criteria relevant to the research question (e.g. service users under the care of a community mental health team)

Quota sampling

form of purposive sampling where it is decided in advance how many people with different characteristics will be recruited to the study and recruitment continues until the quota has been reached.

Snowball sampling

form of purposive sampling where existing contacts or participants identify other potential participants. Particularly useful for identifying hard-to-reach populations.

Saturation can help you know when to stop collecting data. Data saturation is reached when it is agreed amongst the research team that no new themes are arising from the data.

PPI stories from EQUIP

Next, Lindsey is going to describe her experiences of taking part in qualitative research as part of EQUIP.

LINDSEY'S STORY

I was a member of the EQUIP research team and was trained to conduct qualitative interviews and focus groups. I worked with colleagues to code and analyse the data we collected.

I really felt that my background as a carer helped me to understand and identify with many of the issues and setbacks that our research participants had experienced with mental health services. I had to work hard not to let my own views colour their opinions and perspectives.

This is an important skill that every qualitative research needs to develop. The themes that came out of our data were all too familiar to me and sometimes I'd come away feeling frustrated at not being able to wave a magic wand.

Running the focus groups was different. There were so many opinions all similar in nature, but there much less time to go into every one in depth. Everybody there wanted and needed to have their say. I learnt to manage this and had to wear a number of different hats. I was an observer, a notetaker and interviewer. Being able to stay empathic and professional, and being able to listen without jumping on board in agreement with someone else's story, was a big learning curve.

REFLECTIVE EXERCISE

- **What is qualitative research and when should it be used?**
- **List three types of qualitative research methods.**
- **List 3 strategies to be employed during qualitative interviewing.**

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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