



Pacific Rim International Journal of Nursing Research

Editorial:

Qualitative Descriptive Research: An Acceptable Design

The goal of qualitative descriptive studies is a comprehensive summarization, in everyday terms, of specific events experienced by individuals or groups of individuals. To some researchers, such a qualitative design category does not exist. Unfortunately, this has forced other researchers, especially novices to the methods of qualitative research, to feel they have to defend their research approach by giving it ‘epistemological credibility.’ This has led to the labeling of many research studies as phenomenology, grounded theory, or ethnography, when in fact these studies failed to meet the requirements of such qualitative approaches.

There are a number of researchers who believe and support the fact that ‘qualitative descriptive’ is a viable and acceptable label for a qualitative research design. While phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography also are descriptive qualitative approaches, by nature, they are not exclusively in the descriptive domain because they also tend to explain phenomena. Thus, a basic/fundamental qualitative descriptive design is a valuable method in and of itself. According to Sandelowski,¹ qualitative descriptive research: should be seen as a categorical, as opposed to a non-categorical, alternative for inquiry; is less interpretive than an ‘interpretive description’ approach because it does not require the researcher to move as far from or into the data; and, does not require a conceptual or highly abstract rendering of the data, compared to other qualitative designs.

Qualitative descriptive studies are the least “theoretical” of all of the qualitative approaches to research. In addition, qualitative descriptive studies are the least encumbered studies, compared to other qualitative approaches, by a pre-existing theoretical or philosophical commitment. For example, phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnographic are based on specific methodological frameworks that emerged from specific disciplinary traditions. By comparison, qualitative descriptive studies tend to draw from naturalistic inquiry, which purports a commitment to studying something in its natural state to the extent that is possible within the context of the research arena. Thus, there is no pre-selection of study variables, no manipulation of variables, and no prior commitment to any one theoretical view of a target phenomenon. Although qualitative descriptive studies are different from the other qualitative research designs, qualitative descriptive studies may have some of the overtones of the other approaches. In other words, a qualitative descriptive study may have grounded theory overtones, because it used constant comparative analysis when examining the data. However, a qualitative descriptive study is not grounded theory, because it does not produce a theory from the data that were generated.

Regarding the use of sampling in a qualitative descriptive design, virtually any purposeful sampling technique may be used. Like any other qualitative research design, the goal is to obtain cases deemed rich in information for the purpose of saturating the data. Of basic importance is for researchers to be able to defend their sampling strategies to meet the purposes of their studies.

Data collection of qualitative descriptive studies focuses on discovering the nature of the specific events under study. Thus, data collection involves minimal to moderate, structured, open-ended, individual or focus group interviews. However, data collection also may include observations, and examination of records, reports, photographs, and documents. Data analysis of qualitative descriptive research, unlike other qualitative approaches, does not use a pre-existing set of rules that have been generated from the philosophical or epistemological stance of the discipline that created the specific qualitative research approach. Rather, qualitative descriptive research is purely data-derived in that codes are generated from the data in the course of the study. Like other qualitative research approaches, qualitative descriptive studies generally are characterized by simultaneous data collection and analysis.

The presentation of data from a qualitative descriptive study involves a straight forward descriptive summary of the informational contents of the data that is organized in a logical manner. How the data are organized depends upon the researcher and how the data were rendered. For example, data presentation can be arranged by: time of occurrence; categories/subcategories; actual or reverse chronological order of events; most prevalent to least prevalent themes; moving from a broad context of an event to a more narrow context (i.e. specific cases); or, describing an event from the perspective of more than one participant.¹ The outcome is the production of a descriptive summary of the selected event(s) organized in such a way that the findings will be presented, in the most relevant manner, for the audience for whom it was written.

In summary, a qualitative descriptive approach needs to be the design of choice when a straight forward description of a phenomenon is desired. It is an approach that is very useful when researchers want to know, regarding events, who were involved, what was involved, and where did things take place. Researchers can unashamedly name their research design as qualitative descriptive. If their studies had overtones of the other qualitative research methods, those overtones need to be described, instead of incorrectly naming the research approach used by another method (i.e., phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography). It is amazing how many researchers will indicate their studies used a grounded theory, ethnographic or phenomenological approach when, in fact, the design was actual qualitative descriptive.

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