

Qualitative Research Proposal

Morse: points out that qualitative methodology is used when little is known about a topic, the research context is poorly understood, the phenomenon under investigation is not quantifiable, the nature of the problem is not clear.

- Researchers need a clear picture of the issues and questions that they want to investigate, as well as ideas of how they are going to go about investigating them, but always with an openness of mind to improvise, revise and adjust.
- Writing a proposal for a qualitative study is therefore a challenge, as the qualitative researcher "designs studies by conducting them as opposed to conducting studies by design"
- Quantitative researchers generally believe they know what they do not know (i.e. knowing the type of knowledge they expect to obtain by doing a study and then striving to obtain it). A qualitative researcher, by contrast, enters the study "not knowing what is known" (i.e. not knowing the phenomenon that will drive the inquiry forward).
- qualitative proposal writer can only anticipate how the study will proceed.
- Qualitative research begins by accepting that there is a range of different ways of making sense of the world (truth is only valid in a specific context) and is concerned with discovering the meanings seen by those who are being researched and understanding their view of the world not the researchers'

Process of the qualitative proposal

• Morse and Field remark that "clearly, developing a rigid plan for a qualitative project, including detailed plans for data collection and analysis, becomes impossible when writing qualitative proposals". Unlike positivist research, there is no single accepted framework for a qualitative research proposal.

• The questions a research proposal must answer, are:

- Why should anyone be interested in my research?
- Is the research design credible, achievable and carefully explained in other words, is it logical?
- Is the researcher capable of doing the research?

Silverman suggests that the researcher (qualitative or quantitative) answers these questions properly, this can be achieved by focusing on the following guidelines: be practical, be persuasive, make broader links, aim for crystal clarity and plan before you write.

1) Be practical

• Indicate to members of the proposal evaluation committee or funding agency reviewers how your research will address the identified research problem or solve an issue, for example, patients' perceptions of quality of care.

2) Be persuasive

• Morse explains that "the proposal must take a case to the proposal evaluation committee or funding agency that the research question is interesting and that the study is important. Thus the proposal must be written persuasively."

- you must be balanced, with a realistic understanding of what you can achieve.
- "you must convince other people, like other researchers, funding agencies, educational institutions, and supervisors that your research is worth spending scarce resources on, by showing them how your research will make a difference to the world, or by identifying a dilemma in existing theory which your research will help resolve" .

3) Make broader links

- The researcher should demonstrate in the proposal the understanding of the broader implications of the proposed research.
- Morse suggests that one way of achieving this is "place the problem in context to show, for instance, that when we understand this, we will be able to work on that". EX, indicate how your research will improve practice or influence policy.

4) Aim for crystal clarity

- The aim of the researcher should be for clearly stated, in simple language that describes the research in a way that non specialists can comprehend.
- Silverman gives advice to the researcher and states that the proposal should be concise, using short, simple sentences.

5) Plan before you write

- Remember the saying "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail."
- It is important that the writer plans the process, as the proposal should not only demonstrate that it is based on an intelligent understanding of the existing literature, but it must also show that the writer has thought about the time needed to conduct each stage of the research.
- Time management is embedded in the planning process.
- The proposal will also be judged on the researcher's account of how time will be used. Arber notes that one needs "to adopt a systematic and logical approach to research, the key to which is the planning and management of your time".

Structure of the qualitative proposal

Cover page: Formal documents usually have a cover page.

- format is often provided by proposal evaluation committee or funding agency.
- If no format is provided, create a cover page and include the following (Morse)
- Title of the proposal.
- Name and affiliation (include the type of degree, as well as the name of the university where the study will be conducted) of the researcher (principal investigator) & coinvestigators (if relevant).
- Lines for the signatures of the researcher as well as the university authorities.
- Contact detail information address, phone and fax numbers, and e-mail address.

Abstract: a synopsis of the proposal; yet it is important that it is comprehensive enough to inform the evaluators or reviewers, and to introduce the project.

- It should include a short introduction to research problem, the research Q, research purpose and objectives, followed by research design and method.
- usually 250-300 words long, but this is often dictated by the committee guidelines or the funding agency.

• First impressions count, and this is also true for the abstract.

It is advisable to leave the writing of the abstract until the end, as it will be easier to write after you have clarity of the research process.

- The inclusion of no more than five keywords is advisable at its end.
- Structure can be given to the abstract by adding headings, i.e. Background, Aim (Purpose and specific objectives), Data Source, Method, followed by Keywords.

Introduction: Begin with something interesting that immediately catches attention.

- Introduce the question and what it is that you want to know or understand, and explain the interest in the topic.
- it must get the attention of the reader and convince him of the study value Sandelowski describes it, it must "set the stage".
- At the beginning of the proposal the significance of the study should be stated and it must be made clear why there is a need for the study.
- Burns and Grove provide Qs that can be used to assess the study significance:
 - (i) Who has an interest in the domain of inquiry?
 - (ii) What do we already know about the topic?
 - (iii) What has not been answered adequately in previous research and practice?
 - (iv) How will this research add to knowledge, practice, and policy in this area?

Review of the literature

- Relevant literature should be cited that demonstrates the need for the research study in such a manner that it convinces the evaluators or reviewers that the study is worthwhile. "Literature consists of all written sources relevant to the topic you have selected" [or the phenomenon under investigation] (Burns & Grove)
- not necessarily a separate heading, as it could be integrated in the introduction, providing a rationale for the planned study
- It is often a challenge to include all relevant or most supportive literature as data, knowledge and information availability expand daily in the digitally enhanced knowledge environment, doubling every eighteen months in 2008.
- It is therefore suggested that the researcher critique previous research, and demonstrates how the present study will clarify or compensate for shortcomings in previous research and how the study will add to the existing body of knowledge.
- Apart from simply offering an account of the research that has been carried out previously, the author should describe how he searched the literature.
- This involves describing the computer search engines used and the keywords entered into those engines. EX "Searches were performed using the following resources: Nexus database, South African journal".

Research purpose and objectives

- The research purpose is a concise, clear statement of the specific goal of the study that gives a broad indication of what the researcher wishes to achieve.
- The purpose usually indicates type of study (identify, describe, explain, or predict).
- EX: "The aim of this research is to develop best practice guidelines for counselling for HIV testing during pregnancy" achieved by means of the following objectives:
 - explore and describe the factors that influence pregnant women's decision to be tested for HIV in selected antenatal clinics in the North West Province;
 - explore & describe the factors that influence counselling for HIV testing during pregnancy according to counsellors who practice in selected antenatal clinics in North West Province;
 - describe the current practices regarding counselling for HIV testing during pregnancy in selected clinics in the North West Province.
 - describe the evidence regarding counselling for HIV testing during pregnancy by means of systematic review

Research Method: includes the steps of population and sample, data collection, ensuring rigor and data analysis

Population and sample

- Population: all the elements that meet an inclusion criteria for in a given universe
- Describe the composition of the population (N) in your study. Explain how you will select participants and gain entry into the research context (if relevant).
- Then continue with a description of the sample, and sampling technique and defend its use (for example motivate why you would use purposive sampling).
- A sample: a subset of the population that is selected for a particular study.
- State the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and lastly project sample size (n).
An example from a study by Mchunu and Gwele: "The population consisted of community health centers, health professionals in these centers, and the surrounding communities, in the different community settings in the Ethekeeni health district".

Data collection

- It is important that the researcher describes the kind of data that will be collected, e.g. examination of existing documents , field notes, audiotapes, focus groups, videos, internet based data and how it will be collected(method) in details (interviews).
- It is inadequate to simply refer to data that will be collected using "participant observation, field notes or diaries".
- A description with the justification of each method and how the method contributes to the understanding of the phenomenon under study must be presented. If an interview guide will be used, include the questions in the proposal or attach as an appendix.
- Explain in detail how interviews will be conducted, inclusive of the role of the facilitator and moderator, and how responses to questions will be elicited.
- An example from Morolong and Chabeli: "Observation and questioning were preferable data collection methods. For the main study, the researcher was assisted by an experienced expert clinical accompanist who was purposively selected for data collection. The researcher and the assistant used the developed instrument and its related manual, to evaluate the competence of newly qualified registered nurses

Rigor (Soundness of the research): must be reflected throughout the proposal.

Data analysis

- Describe the intended data analysis procedure (coding, sorting, etc.).
- In explaining data reduction the researcher provides detail of write-ups of field notes, transcription procedures and the use of computer programs (if planned)
- For the description , relevant methods with citations must be included.

Ethical considerations

- refer to the protection of the participants' rights, obtaining informed consent and the institutional review process (ethical approval).
- Qualitative research introduces special moral and ethical problems that are not usually encountered by other researchers during data collection; perhaps due to the unstructured conversational tone of interviews and the intimate nature of the interaction between the researcher and participants .
- It is therefore very important that the researcher take special care in ensuring that ethical standards are met.
- The researcher needs to provide adequate information on each aspects.
- Protection of participants' rights include the right to self-determination, privacy, autonomy and confidentiality, fair treatment and protection from discomfort and harm.
- Informed consent needs to be obtained from the participants, as well as the research site and the relevant authorities

Dissemination plan

- The researcher should provide a condensed description of the plan that will be utilized to disseminate results, i.e. publication in peer reviewed journals and paper or poster presentations at conferences.

Timeline: a schedule or work plan for the completion of the research.

- includes all the research activities to be completed, the predicted length of time that each activity will take to complete and when it will be performed.
- The plan can be described as text, but as several tasks may be conducted concurrently, it is often presented as a table or graph.
- A possibility is the use of the Gantt chart. standard tool that can be used by the researcher to structure the timeline of the project, i.e. specific activities with target dates.
- Qualitative researchers are often very optimistic about the time to be allowed for the research activities, but the qualitative researcher can experience numerous delays, for instance; delays with interviews and time consuming process of qualitative data analysis.
- Morse and Field advise that the researcher should estimate how long each activity will take and then triple the time. Such leeway is important when funds are requested, to ensure that there is adequate funding for staff and for the completion of the project.

Budget: A notion which interferes with the positive perception of qualitative inquiry is the idea that qualitative research is inexpensive to conduct.

- This is a myth. Qualitative research is not predictable; when the researcher prepares a budget, he should predict and cost all aspects of the research, and then add an additional allowance for unpredictable disasters, delays and rising costs.

- Morse and Field specific aspects that should be included in the budget:

The number of participations cannot be predicted, because data will be collected until saturation, but an estimation must be included; recording of data (audiotapes, recorder, batteries, microphone) transcripts of interviews (on average, a fast typist will need three hours to transcribe a clearly

recorded 45 minute interview); personnel budget); supplies (telephone, stationary); travel; cost of attending a conference for dissemination.

****All items in the budget should be justified.**

Appendices: documents that support the proposal and application.

- specific for each proposal, but documents that are usually required include: informed consent form; telephone consent; verification of ethical approval; letters of approval from research site; letters of support (in case of funding application); curricula vitae of researcher (principal investigator) and others members of the research

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