**Evidence Series**

**Understanding Research**

**4 Qualitative research methodologies: nuances between phenomenology grounded theory and narrative research**

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Understanding research is a series of articles aimed at dispelling the myths around research theories and practices, and exploring just what is meant by the different terminologies encountered when reading and using research articles. On alternate months we explore different aspects of research to make this knowledge accessible and relevant. It forms part of the Evidence series, and aims to help midwives understand, use and engage with research, and consider how research matters to their practice.

**Let’s begin with a recap…**

In article 3 of our series we presented the differences between qualitative and quantitative research paradigms. We said a paradigm was a set of beliefs that can be used for the research 1. This implied that there are two types of research, that research is either quantitative or qualitative. However, we would like you to think about research as a continuum. Over the course of the next few articles we will help you see where the different methodologies fit within this continuum and how one methodology can lean more towards the qualitative or quantitative spectrum according to which methods are employed.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **More qualitative** | | | **More quantitative** | | |
|  |  | **Mixed methods** | |  |  |
| Phenomenology |  |  |  |  |  |
| Grounded theory | |  |  | Randomised controlled trials | |
| Narrative | |  |  | Retrospective cohort studies | Prospective cohort studies |
| A qualitative approach | | | Surveys with descriptive statistics | |  |
|  | Ethnography | |  | Surveys with inferential statistics | |
|  | Action Research | |  |  |  |

The qualitative paradigm aims to analyse situations and events and seeks to examine individuals’ experiences and perceptions. These are subjective natures that cannot be measured objectively. So, the paradigm is an umbrella term that groups ways of conducting research. There are several types of qualitative research called specific methodologies (some are demonstrated in the box above). Methodology is a term that can sometimes be muddled with method, so it is important to define what they both mean at the beginning. A methodology refers to the theories or philosophical stances that direct the way in which the research will be carried out 2.Whereas, a method is the tools that are used for data collection 2.. While we state this definition, we recognise that different textbooks use these terms interchangeably. To help your understanding we suggest you keep our distinction in mind.

Within this article we are going to further explore three of the methodologies that are commonly used within qualitative research. There are some characteristics that are common across qualitative methodologies such as small sample sizes, purposive sampling and the use of interviews as the method of data collection. It is therefore easy to see why students new to research sometimes wonder what the differences are between these approaches. So, we are highlighting some specific characteristics that are specific to each of these methodologies that readers should be aware of so they can look out for these within the study. As usual, we draw on actual studies to help demonstrate out point, and our views are just that, one interpretation of the research quality.

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology usually aims to explore the ‘lived experience’ of the participants that it is researching. There are two main approaches, so you will be expecting to see which approach a study has followed because this has implications for how the research is conducted. The founder of phenomenology was Husserl who created descriptive phenomenology. The main aim of descriptive phenomenology was to study human **consciousness** and experience and to try and gain the **essence** of the **phenomena** 3.Phenomena being the subject or event that is being researched. A fundamental principle within Husserl’s theory was that the researcher must begin the study with **bracketing.** Bracketing refers to the idea that a researcher should be able to recognise what their preconceived ideas about the research topic may be, and that these are then put aside – bracketed – so that they do not affect the data collection or analysis 4 .The final step would then be to **describe** the phenomena being studied. Not everyone believes bracketing off one’s own experiences is possible, including one of Husserl’s students therefore there is another phenomenological philosophy.

Heidegger, believed that the researcher had to recognise that their experience could have an impact on the research 4 . In fact, most qualitative researchers believe this and there is a specific term called reflexivity for this 2. Having **reflexivity**, can improve **credibility** within qualitative research – meaning the findings are more likely to be reflective of those studied 5. Heidegger believed that the focus should be put on gaining the **interpretation and understanding** of the phenomena – this can also be referred to as **hermeneutics** 3. Heidegger founded **Interpretative Phenomenology** based on these ideas. So, the first feature you may look for in a phenomenological study is which approach has been used.

Purposive sampling is often used within phenomenology, because it is important to select participants that have experienced the phenomena that you are wishing to study 3. The sample sizes are generally quite small due to the fact that the researcher seeks to gain rich in-depth data. The researcher may choose to base their sample size on the point that **data saturation** is reached. Data saturation means that there is no new data emerging from the participants so continuing is not needed 6. Due to the aim of seeking to get rich data and seeking to really understand the phenomena from the participants point of view, the method used within phenomenology is often in-depth interviews, mostly semi-structured or unstructured interviews 3. Once the interviews have all been completed, the interviews will then be transcribed verbatim (written word-for-word) and analysed, to create codes and concepts and form categories of themes.

**Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory is another methodology that can explores experiences, perceptions or attitudes. However, grounded theory specifically aims to look at **symbolic interactionism.** This means to study the way in which people behave and interact with each other and their environment, to make sense of it 5. Grounded theory was developed in the 1960’s by Glaser and Strauss 7 but since then, they have decided they have different ideas for how to analyse the data and Strauss and Corbin 8 further wrote about their ideas of grounded theory. A significant difference between grounded theory and other methodologies is the use of literature to inform the study. Most research will begin with a thorough review of the literature to find a focus and there will then be a clear aim of the research to explore an area or question, grounded theory does not do this. Instead, it will only use a small review of the literature to first justify the study and use of the methods at the beginning of the study and will enter the study without any theory of what they may find. This is because the aim of grounded theory is that the theory that will be developed will come grounded from the data collected 5. It is often difficult to ascertain whether a researcher has adhered to this tradition because journal articles are often set out in one style with the literature review presented prior to the methodology. Some authors will state the literature was consulted after the theory was developed and this helps the reader.

Again, it is likely that a purposive sampling will be used initially for grounded theory due to wanting to explore an area or topic. However, a key feature of grounded theory is that data collection, data analysis and sampling of participants all occur simultaneously. This is because, once an initial sample has been gained, then data collection will start. Common methods used within grounded theory are in-depth interviews, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, to again allow for collection of rich data 3. Within grounded theory though a process called **constant comparison** is used. This is where data is analysed as it is collected and continuously compared back to the data already collected 5. This can then lead to **theoretical sampling** – which is also specific to this methodology. This is where as theories start to emerge from the data, participants are selected to try and consolidate this theory 3.The researcher then needs to have **theoretical sensitivity** and be able to fully immerse themselves in the data to recognise the theory that is developed from the data 5. Strauss and Corbin 8 described three types of coding that should be used to analyse the data, **open, axial and selective coding.** This coding would then be used to form categories and a core theme that is the theory from the data. This can also be shown in a diagrammatic form within grounded theory 3. When reviewing grounded theory research, you may want to look to see whether the features we describe in bold are present.

**Narrative research**

Narrative research is sometimes called **story sharing** 9. Since starting your midwifery course, we are convinced people will have told you significant stories about their pregnancy and birth journeys, or desire to become a parent. Narrative enquiry is a subset of qualitative research that uses stories to describe human action 10. The story can be considered one of the most universally understood ways of sharing human experiences and people can often relate to other’s stories. Think about when you meet a friend for coffee who is experiencing something new or ordinary. She starts to tell you the story of what is happening, then adds in an aside, stops and reminds you of that important detail from five or even ten years ago that you know but may have forgotten, then adds in yesterday’s update. As her friend you know her, her family members and friends and the story makes sense, mostly. You do have to ask a few questions to help you clarify some of the events, their order or significance.

Narrative researchers ask participants about their general or specific experiences. The participants may offer their thoughts as a child, family story or other aspect of their life to contextualise their experience. Narrative researchers analyse what in the story is key. Like all qualitative methodologies narrative inquiry can be criticised for its credibility, but we will argue in the data analysis paper that it is not necessarily the methodology that lacks credibility but the method of analysis that needs to be described to raise this form of research. The chosen example, we believe, demonstrates how stories can be powerful.

**Examples:**

Using the table below see if you can identify the nuances between the three following qualitative studies – summaries of the studies follow:

Feeley 11**,** Borrelli et al 12 and Reed 9

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Paradigm** | **Qualitative approaches** | | | | |
| **Methodology** | Phenomenology | | Grounded Theory | | Narrative |
| **Founders/ authors** | Husserl | Heidegger | Glaser and Strauss | Strauss and Corbin | No ‘seminal’ authors |
| **Nuances** | Descriptive  Bracketing | Interpretive  Hermeneutics | Constant comparison between data collection and analysis  No pre-research literature review | | Storytelling, narrative or biographical |
| **Sample size/ method** | Small/ purposive | | Theoretical sampling | | Small/ purposive |
| **Reflexivity** | Researchers question the affect their presence has on the research and participants and vice versa (except perhaps Husserl phenomenology due to bracketing) | | | | |
| **Method of data collection** | Interviews  These may be considered on a continuum too from unstructured and semi structured to structured. | | | | |

Feeley 11 is an example of research carried out exploring ‘the lived experiences’ of decision making for women who choose to freebirth, using interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology. This was Heidegger’s form of phenomenology. The study contained a small sample size of ten participants. Feeley 11 explains within her study how the analysis was carried out using phenomenology (we revisit analysis in article 10). It is important as midwives that we are able to understand what may cause a woman to freebirth and choose to not access maternity care. This study shows that women’s backgrounds and experiences of maternity care impact upon their decision making.

Borelli et al 12 examined 14 first time mother’s expectations and experiences of what they felt made a good midwife during childbirth. This used semi-structured interviews to gather the data and refers to the constant comparison method to develop the core metaphor – the kaleidoscope midwife. This was to encompass the factors that were reported to make up a good midwife; this is shown in diagrammatic form within the article, showing the themes and how they linked to together; often used within grounded theory. This study provided valuable insights for midwifery practice in how to enhance midwifery care for the woman to have a positive experience.

Reed 9 used narrative inquiry to explore midwifery practice during physiological birth using women and midwives’ stories. Each of the ten mothers and ten midwives engaged in a single in-depth interview lasting on average one hour. Within the findings examples of the stories are presented to show the reader how the researchers developed their themes. The nature of the mother midwife relationship was explored within the paper.

Confusingly, but interestingly and one reason why we wanted to write this series, Feeley 11 states she used narratives with follow up semi structured interviews for her methods of data collection. We point this out to help you see that there is an overlap between elements of qualitative research. Research may not always follow every step of one single methodology.

**Conclusion**

This article has outlined the key characteristics of three qualitative methodologies that can be used for research, with similarities recognised and differences highlighted. All methodologies can be used within healthcare research and can provide some valuable insights into providing midwifery care that we can learn from. The methodology will have been chosen based on the viewpoint of the researcher and what they were aiming to explore and find out. More methodologies will be considered in the next article.

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