

**Just Because You Can't Count It  
Doesn't Mean It Doesn't Count:  
Doing Good Research with Qualitative Data**

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*"Not everything  
that can be counted counts,  
and not everything that counts  
can be counted."*

*– Albert Einstein*

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**Overview**

- Introductory Exercise
- What is Qualitative Research?
- Qualitative and Quantitative
- Some Examples of Qualitative Research
- Qualitative Research and the IRB
- Qualitative Resources
- Discussion

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**Introductory Exercise**

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**What is Qualitative Research?**

“Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting.”

Cresswell (1998)

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**What is Qualitative Research?**

“Useful qualitative research provides a window into lives and worldviews that we might not otherwise access.”

Kearney (2005)

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### **Qualitative Research: Myth vs. Reality**

Myth: "It's a quick and easy way to crank out a study."

Reality:

Framing the research question; selecting the appropriate method(s) of gathering data; getting IRB approval to talk to people about sensitive topics; identifying and recruiting participants; gaining their trust; gathering their stories; transcribing interviews; reading and re-reading hundreds, even thousands of pages of questionnaires, transcripts and fieldnotes; coding data on paper or with a computer program; tentatively identifying patterns; cross-checking and comparing interpretations among the research team for consistency; formulate conclusions and writing up the results...

- takes a lot of time
- is very hard work
- cannot be done by a computer program.

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### **Multiple Traditions of Inquiry**

- *Biography* develops an account of another person's life
- *Phenomenology* attempts to understand multiple individuals' lived experiences of a particular phenomenon
- *Grounded theory* seeks to generate theory from field data
- *Ethnography* describes and interprets a social or cultural group
- *Case study* examines a system bounded by time and place

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### **Qualitative and Quantitative**

- Represent two distinct research perspectives that provide *different* types of information
- Neither is inherently "better"
  - Selection depends on the question being asked
- "Mixed methods" research
  - May be used together to gain more comprehensive understanding to answer the research question

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### Qualitative and Quantitative

- Some advantages of quantitative methods
  - Parsimony
  - Estimates of precision
  - Ease of analysis
  - Statistical/graphical portrayal of data
  - Oriented to hypothesis testing
- Some advantages of qualitative methods
  - Holistic (the whole is greater than the sum of its parts)
  - Support description of complex relationships and interdependencies
  - Greater attention to nuance, subjective meanings
  - Provide information on setting and/or context
  - Oriented to theory/concept generation

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### Qualitative and Quantitative

- Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches
  - *Program evaluation and process improvement* projects often use a combination of interviews and surveys to understand/correct problems and evaluate change over time
  - Interview or focus group data can be used to create or refine a theory/conceptual framework which in turn can be used to guide quantitative research
  - Interviews can be conducted to better understand the thinking and context behind a survey response

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### Example: Gay Prostate Cancer Study

Lack of control in disclosing sexual orientation:  
"Outed" to surgeon by friend

*"When I went to see the doctor at Mass General I brought a girl with me with a big mouth. Which I didn't find out until I read my reports and when I called up there I said, 'How did this get on my report?' And I said, I didn't do it personally. Did she? And they told me, yeah. That this, this person she told me, she says, 'You have to tell them that you're gay,' and I said, 'What does that have to do with the price of eggs?' It has nothing to do with my surgery."*

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### Example: Gay Prostate Cancer Study

Partner's role in recovery

*"There are many reasons to have a partner and having been a single man until my early 50's I can tell you that one of the saddest aspects about being a single gay man is when you are sick, it is hell, because if you are sick you can't cook, you can't shop until it's over. To have someone who could come to the hospital and bring me home, who would help me with the necessities of life, who was simply there, and who was concerned, made all of the difference. I don't think that this was any different from any other time but it made all the difference in the world."*

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### Example: First Nation (Canada)

- Qualitative approaches can accommodate changes in midstream without compromising data integrity
  - Flexibility, implemented thoughtfully, can strengthen findings
- The power of listening
  - *"It's good to be able to talk to somebody about these things."*
  - Open-ended questions allow participants to tell you what is important to them
    - Improves quality of data
    - Participants who feel "heard" may be willing to share more
- Qualitative researchers have ethical obligations
  - Toward participants: respect what they share with you
  - Toward future researchers: don't poison the waters

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### Example: "Chem Demil" (U.S.)

- Qualitative research allows exploration of underlying issues affecting decisions
  - U.S. Army planned to incinerate chemical weapons onsite
  - Focus groups revealed fundamental differences in risk perception: "the six nines"
- Qualitative approaches can reveal perceptions of risks, decisions and expectations about their health
  - *"You say your asthma is not too bad. Tell me how it affects your daily life."*
  - *"What made you decide to go with surgery instead of radiation?"*
  - *"What do you think Wonder Drug as Seen on TV will do for you?"*

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### Qualitative Research and the IRB

- Most IRB members are trained in and/or familiar with only quantitative research
  - Panels may have few members with qualitative background
- As a result, IRBs often misunderstand qualitative methods
  - May attempt to assess qualitative studies by quantitative criteria
- When preparing IRB applications:
  - Help educate IRB reviewers via the application
  - Request a reviewer familiar with qualitative methods

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### Tips for Submitting Qualitative Research to the IRB

- Clearly describe how the interviews/focus groups will be recorded
  - Ex: handwritten notes, audio/video recording
- Separately address plans for maintaining confidentiality and destroying:
  - identifiable information
  - notes/audiotapes/videotapes/digital files
  - transcripts from recordings
- Indicate clearly whether transcripts will contain identifiable information or will be anonymized
- Attach either a formal interview guide or a list of topics to be covered in interviews/focus groups

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### Tips for Submitting Qualitative Research to the IRB

- Sample size justification is often challenging for qualitative researchers
  - Qualitative sampling is purposeful and designed to generate rich narrative
    - Power calculations do not apply
  - Studies may continue to sample subjects until "saturation" of themes/information occurs
    - Estimate and justify initial sample size with the understanding that it may need to be increased later via an IRB amendment
  - Sample size can be justified based on feasibility
    - Time available to conduct interviews
    - Money/staff resources available
    - Expected saturation point based on similar studies
- Description of sampling criteria/key sampling factors also helpful

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### Tips for Submitting Qualitative Research to the IRB

- Curtis and colleagues (2000) recommend that qualitative sampling:
  - be relevant to the research question
  - be likely to generate rich information
  - represent the experiences of the population under study (e.g., gay male prostate cancer survivors)
  - produce believable descriptions
  - use an ethical approach
  - be feasible

Curtis, S., Gesler, W., Smith, G., & Washburn, S. (2000). Approaches to sampling and case selection in qualitative research: Examples in the geography of health. *Social Science and Medicine*, 50, 1001-1014.

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### Tips for Submitting Qualitative Research to the IRB

Partnered Gay Prostate Cancer Survivors				Unpartnered Gay Prostate Cancer Survivors			
White		Non-White		White		Non-White	
≤ age 70	> age 70	≤ age 70	> age 70	≤ age 70	> age 70	≤ age 70	> age 70
3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3

3 for each stratum/Total: 24 men + 3 Straight Men: 27

Trost, J. (1986). Statistically non-representative stratified sampling: a sampling technique for qualitative studies. *Qualitative Sociology*, 9 (1), 54-57.

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### Learn More

- BU School of Public Health offers two courses:
  - SB 818: Qualitative Research Methods
  - PM 828: Advanced Methods of Qualitative Research
  - See BUSPH website for more information: <http://sph.bu.edu/>
- BU Division of Graduate Medical Sciences also offers:
  - MA 710: Medical Anthropological and Qualitative Research Methods and Design
  - [Course # TBA]: IRB Proposal Development and Writing (focuses on developing an IRB application for a qualitative study)
  - See GMS website for more information: <http://www.bu.edu/bhlp/pages/masters/courses/index.html>
- Handout with suggestions for further reading

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## Discussion

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