



Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences



Introduction to qualitative research

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By the end of the session you will:

- **Be familiar with the difference between different paradigms**
- **Know what characterizes qualitative methods**
- **Know about the pros and cons of semi-structured interviewing**
- **Have created suggestions for how to recruit interview persons**

Paradigms/belief systems



Four characteristics distinguish science from non-science. Science is theory-based, uses systematic research techniques, is cumulative and predictive (Mount 1989).

All science is embedded in different **belief systems** also known as **paradigms, world views or research types**, in for instance choices of method and theory that guide the investigator

One can identify four types of paradigms: positivist, post-positivist, interpretivist/critical theory and constructivist (Guba and Lincoln 1994). The two former paradigms are seen in natural science, whereas the two latter are seen in **SOCIAL SCIENCE**

From "Philosophical perspectives and theories applied in pharmacy practice research" by Nørgaard, L. S. & Traulsen, J. M., 20 jun. 2019, *The Encyclopedia of Pharmacy Practice and Clinical Pharmacy*. Babar, Z. (red.). Elsevier Ltd

Major social science fields:

Anthropology

Archaeology

Economics

Geography

History

Law

Linguistics

Politics

Psychology

Sociology



Paradigms are inconsistent...

These theoretical paradigms differ to such a degree that they are said to be inconsistent (Guba and Lincoln 1994, Launsø 1991).

Research carried out within the positivist/post-positivist paradigm strives towards **objectivity and neutrality**, and typically employs quantitative studies with the focus on numbers, precision and generalizability. These studies.... are characterized by **distance** between researchers and that being researched.

Studies done under the interpretivist paradigm are most often **qualitative studies** focusing on **understanding and grasping** the “**wholeness**” of the study object. There is closeness between researcher and that being researched. The constructivist paradigm and to some extent the interpretivist paradigm cover research (either quantitative or qualitative) whose focus is to **criticize, suggest change, learn and/or develop**. These studies often have an emancipatory agenda for groups involved (might be all kind of groups, but would often be different types of vulnerable patient groups).

“Hard” vs “soft” science

Historically, there has been heavy emphasis on **quantification** in science, and thus research emanating from a positivist/positivist paradigm has traditionally been viewed as “hard”, whereas research carried out under the other two paradigms is often referred to as **“soft”**.

Interpretivist sub-fields are for instance hermeneutics, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, dramaturgical analysis, poststructuralism, and discourse theory.

Paradigm difference illustrated by an example: compliance with medicines

To illustrate the difference between research done in pharmacy practice under the different paradigms, one might consider different theories of compliance/adherence or self-regulation.

From a **positivist point of view**, a theory on how to make a drug user compliant by using different electronic or chemically marked methods would be useful. A researcher with an **interpretivist** view studying compliance would be more likely to employ theories that emphasize the patient's ideas, values and attitudes - most likely interpreting adherence as "self-regulation".

Broadly speaking, the positivist researcher attempts to **predict and control**, whereas the interpretivist researcher focuses on **understanding the patient's reflections** in relation to medication behavior (Nørgaard et al. 2000).

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Qualitative methods

- Emphasize words, rather than numbers
- Understanding the ways in which individuals & groups interpret their world

Characteristics of qualitative research

Depth (rather than breadth) of understanding – hence the **smaller** number of cases / 'thick' description

- From the perspectives of the participants rather than from the researcher's own perspective
 - What are they thinking
 - What do they know
 - What are their assumptions
 - What are their attitudes
 - What are their motives, goals values etc.

Data quality criteria

DO NOT judge qualitative research by the same criteria we use to judge quantitative research

- **Criteria for judging qualitative studies are about understanding; being thorough; trustworthy & creating meaningfulness; creating validity**

Qualitative methods (some)

- **Narratives**
- **Focus groups**
- **Structured interviews**
- **Semi-structured – predetermined questions**



Semi-structured interviews

- A set of **predetermined** questions
 - allows for new ideas to be brought up during the interview as a result of what the interviewee says
- Expect to cover every question in the protocol, however, leave room to explore participant responses by asking for **clarification or additional information**



Semi-structured interviews

What does "semi-" mean?

There is an overall research topic or area – with built-in flexibility

- **with regard to: the order, the form, and possibility for spontaneous questions**
- **room to explore participant responses by asking for clarification or additional information**
- **allows for new ideas to be brought up during the interview as a result of what the interviewee says**

HOWEVER

- **You are expected to cover every question in the protocol**



Advantages

- Respondents can answer questions in as **much detail** as they want
- Possibility of probing
- More valid information about respondents attitudes, values & opinions can be obtained, particularly **how people explain**
- An **informal atmosphere** can encourage the respondent to be open & honest
- **Flexibility** – the interviewer can adjust questions



Limitations

- Only a **small number** can take place
- Difficult to directly compare the results because **each interview is unique**
- Because of small sample results are unlikely to be **representative** of a particular population
- **Time consuming** – in terms of data collection and data analysis

Recruiting

- **Who to recruit?**
- **How to recruit?**



Exercise on recruitment

- * Share ideas about how to recruit patients, physicians and pharmacists to be interviewed in this study?
- * What are the pros and cons of recruiting people you know in advance?
- * How can you use the Internet for recruiting?
- * What characteristics are important for the interview person to “cover”? (age, sex, urban, rural, large/small organisation, others?)