

Study design 5 - Qualitative research

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Learning points

- Qualitative research provides insights and understanding of people's experiences.
- It may also be used in informing the development of interventions or in understanding barriers and facilitators to their successful implementation.

Qualitative research furthers understanding of clinical decision-making and patient care and is a valuable method of enquiry in obstetrics and gynaecology. However, there is no one concise definition of qualitative research. It is as much a perspective as it is a method of enquiry, and it encompasses a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches. This is not a drawback, but a reflection of the long history, and development, of the approach. A simple description would be that qualitative research considers why individuals think or behave the way that they do and how they come to understand these complex thoughts and actions within their lives. It also allows the voice of patients and carers to be included in research. So, for example, an interview study of barriers to accessing termination of pregnancy services in a rural area of Scotland found that the physical and emotional journey to the clinic compounded the difficulties that women face when contemplating termination of a pregnancy (Heller et al., BJOG 2016;123:1684–91). Whereas quantitative research can tell you what happened, the aim of qualitative research is to provide insight and understanding of that experience, and the meaning that is attached to it.

What qualitative research is not:

- Quantifiable: Surveys, even those that include open-ended questions, are never qualitative, neither is putting numbers to frequencies of word occurrences.
- Generalisable: Qualitative findings are not generalisable (extending findings from study sample to the population at large); however, they are not intended to be. In the study cited above the findings are specific to the sample population in rural Scotland, but may provide insights that are useful for clinicians in similar locations.
- A poor substitute for quantitative research: As the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, qualitative research is sometimes seen as less rigorous than quantitative research.
- Simple research that anyone can do: Just as with quantitative research, it takes skill and expertise to collect and analyse qualitative data.

The importance of qualitative research is increasingly recognised by clinical researchers, evidenced by the inclusion of qualitative studies alongside randomised evaluations, either to inform development of the intervention or to understand barriers and facilitators to its success (Smith et al., BJOG 2016;123: 279–84).

Useful resources

- The Qualitative Research Guidelines Project provides guidance on designing, reporting and reviewing qualitative research, available at www.qualres.org/.
- A BJOG article on methods of qualitative research in women's health: Pope et al., BJOG 2001;108:233– 7.