Designing Qualitative Research 1

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Aims of session

- To briefly revisit the assumptions of quantitative and qualitative research
- To introduce the different stages of qualitative research design
- To consider ethical issues in qualitative research design
Differences between qualitative and quantitative research

- Both have very different theoretical assumptions
- Quantitative research tends to be driven by theory – ‘top-down’ approach
  - Tests hypotheses
  - Reductionist
  - Research methods aim to be scientific
- Qualitative researchers approach research with no fixed ideas – ‘bottom-up’ approach
  - Focus on construction and negotiation of meaning
  - No reduction of data
Participants

- Deciding on participants is closely linked to deciding on your topic.
- Careful consideration must be given to how access to participants will be gained.
  - What ethical clearance will you need?
  - How time consuming will access be?
  - Will participants be able to give their own consent or will they need a representative?
  - Are you going to work with individuals or groups?
Method and Analysis

- The majority of the rest of course is tied up exploring issues around these two
- They are closely interwoven in qualitative research and choices about one will always inform choices about the other
- You can start by making a firm decision about either – you might like a particular type of analysis or you might want to try a specific method
- Both will also be informed by your topic
Research questions

- Qualitative researchers don’t work with hypotheses
- Research questions are set which are based loosely around questions we want to think about
- These depend on the type of methodology employed
- E.g. in looking at managing diabetes:
  - A grounded theorist would set a question such as ‘What factors do diabetics consider important in managing their treatment?’
  - A discursive theorist would ask questions like ‘How do diabetics construct their experiences of diabetes?’
Ethical considerations

- Whatever research is conducted, ethical considerations must be taken into account.

- This is often of even more importance in qualitative work than in quantitative research.

- The ethical considerations discussed here are informed by the BPS code of ethics (www.bps.org.uk).
Ethical considerations

- Informed consent – participant should be able to give full consent to research process based on informed choice (all the more important when dealing with vulnerable groups)
- Deception – participant should be aware of what the study is looking at and should not be deceived in any way
- Right to withdraw – participant should be given the right to withdraw at any time
- Debriefing – participant should be given any relevant further information about the study and their own role in it
Ethical considerations

- Confidentiality and anonymity – data should be treated as confidential with all participants names and identifying features changed.

- Protection of participants from physical and psychological harm – ensure you consider the types of things which might cause stress:
  - Different viewpoints
  - Religions
  - Cultures
Ethical considerations

- Observational research – difficulty of informed consent in naturalistic observation
  - Must respect privacy and psychological wellbeing of participants
  - Must only take place where participants are in public place and would expect to be observed by strangers
  - Must take account of cultural values
Ethical considerations

- Observational research as a participant-observer raises a number of issues extending beyond formal consent for research
  - You may choose to be as open as possible with the ‘team’ thus enabling more freedom in asking questions as the fieldwork progresses
  - You should be aware that your presence may affect behaviour of those being observed – especially if you are a regular part of/known to the team prior to the research
Ethical considerations

- Internet-based research – poses unique difficulties
  - Informed consent, offering right to withdraw and debriefing difficult to implement with ‘unknown’ participants
  - Robinson (2001) argues that if a message is posted in a password protected site then the postee can reasonably expect it to be private
  - If publicly accessible then it can be disseminated to a much wider audience
  - Robinson suggests that if already existing, publicly accessible data is used then the need to obtain informed consent is no longer applicable
  - Should still protect anonymity/confidentiality e.g. by removing ‘signature’ lines and changing usernames
Ethical considerations

- Media-based research – focuses on publicly accessible data
  - Either written (newspapers, magazines etc) or spoken (TV, radio etc)
  - With the development of the Internet the wealth and diversity of material available has grown e.g. parliamentary debates, international news items, historical documents, etc
  - As long as it is in the public domain then it is available for analysis
Summary

- I have looked at different aspects of designing research such as choosing participants and formulating research questions.
- I have briefly touched on method and analysis which forms the basis of the rest of the course.
- I have particularly focused on ethical considerations in doing different types of qualitative research.
Further reading
