



# Qualitative Research Theoretical Orientations

**ScWk 240 – Week 10 Slides**

# Why Qualitative Research?

- Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research relies on reasons behind various aspects of behavior.
- Simply put, it investigates the why and how of decision-making, as compared to what, where, and when of quantitative research.
- Hence, the need is for smaller but focused samples rather than large random samples, which in qualitative research categorizes data into patterns as the primary basis for organizing and reporting results.

# Why Choose Qualitative Research?

- Qualitative research is a *reaction against positivism*
- Positivism is the perspective that an objective reality exists and that the scientific method (deductive methods) can be used to know that objective reality
- Qualitative research is based on subjectivism, relativism, constructivism, etc.. which embrace the notion that reality is self-and culturally determined
- Therefore inductive methods are used in qualitative research to understand “reality”

# The Limits of Empiricism

- Though **necessary**, empiricism is **not sufficient** in itself to build knowledge.
- No array of **statistical techniques** can produce **cumulative knowledge**.
- Empirical **data** becomes knowledge when **referred to theory** for understanding.

# History of Qualitative Research

- Qualitative research approaches began to gain recognition in the 1970s.
- The phrase 'qualitative research' was until then marginalized as a discipline of anthropology or sociology, and terms like ethnography, fieldwork, participant observation and the Chicago school (sociology) were used instead.

# Fields Using Qualitative Research

During the 1970s and 1980s qualitative research began to be used in other disciplines, and became a dominant - or at least significant - type of research in the fields of

- women's studies,
- disability studies,
- education studies,
- social work studies,
- information studies,
- management studies,
- nursing services studies,
- human services studies,
- psychology, and others.

# Characteristics of Qualitative Research

- ***Designs*** rely on participant observation, case studies and the focused interview.
- ***Sampling*** is non-random; subjects are recruited; studies cannot be easily replicated; findings cannot be generalized.
- The *researcher* – is the *instrument* of data collection.
- ***Data is non-numerical*** –field notes, audio tapes. video tapes, photographs, documents/reports.

# Qualitative Research Designs

- ◆ **Narrative Research  
(aka: biography)**
- ◆ **Phenomenology**
- ◆ **Grounded theory**
- ◆ **Ethnography**
- ◆ **Case Study**

# Types of Narrative/Biography

## *Life History*

– refers to the experiences a person has lived through

## *Life Story, Biography*

– someone's narrated, personal life story as related to another in conversation or as written down in present time

## *Life Course*

--involves study of the social patterns in the timing, duration, spacing, and order of events and roles of human life trajectories recognizing that these elements are consequences of plans that people carry forth within the constraints of their social world.

# Biographical “Glasses” in Social Work

- Possible even in *short* encounters.
- A question of *relating* to the client?
  - ❖ Seeing that the person has an identity and a biography, which are thus validated even if not known?
  - ❖ Understanding that biography has been lived in a context, psychological as well as social (micro / macro)?
  - ❖ Noticing a possible need for a longer biographical interview?
- *Other than verbal means* of storytelling
- Uses a *life-span* perspective

# Biographic Interviews as Intervention

- Just **telling your life story** to someone can have psychological effects
- Helps **integrating and making sense**
- Furthers **self-understanding** without much interpretation
- Gives ideas for **planning the future**

# Examples of Life Stories in Social Work

- Psychosocial Assessments
- Vocational Rehabilitation
- Substance Misuse
- Chronic Illness, Disabilities
- Elderly and Dying
- Bereavement
- Peer Support Groups

# Ethical Considerations of Biographies

- For what purpose?
- When and when not?
- Raises expectations of help that cannot be met?
- Analysis and interpretation – by whom?
- How will it be used? By whom?
- Confidentiality?
- Informed consent?

# Options for Qualitative Research



- **Participant Observation**
- **Key Informant Interviews**
- **Open-ended Interview**
- **Focus Group Discussions**

# Creating a Topic Guide

- Avoid close-ended questions: go for experience and perspectives
- Issues based on your research questions
- Topic areas, then questions within each topic, list probes
- Start with icebreakers and “easy” question

# Qualitative Research Summary

- **Qualitative methods aim to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them**
- **Qualitative research may define preliminary questions which can then be addressed in quantitative studies**
- **A good qualitative study will address a clinical problem through a clearly formulated question and**
- **Analysis of qualitative data can and should be done using explicit, systematic, and reproducible methods**