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Qualitative Health Research - A Beginner's Guide

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Abstract

Qualitative Research in Health: An Introduction by Carol Grbich is a research text for beginners in qualitative health research. Grbich explicitly and simply introduces the new researcher to the theoretical issues, concepts, methodologies, processes, techniques, approaches, and debates in qualitative research, with a specific focus on the health sciences. Her easily-readable text gives new researchers an overview of the advantages and disadvantages of each qualitative method.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Health, Qualitative Methods

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Qualitative Health Research – A Beginner’s Guide

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Qualitative Research in Health: An Introduction by Carol Grbich is a research text for beginners in qualitative health research. Grbich explicitly and simply introduces the new researcher to the theoretical issues, concepts, methodologies, processes, techniques, approaches, and debates in qualitative research, with a specific focus on the health sciences. Her easily-readable text gives new researchers an overview of the advantages and disadvantages of each qualitative method. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Health, and Qualitative Methods

The application of qualitative research methods has grown rapidly over the years in various health disciplines. Many researchers in health sciences continue to adopt this newer research design in their investigations. Carol Grbich’s (2009) book, *Qualitative Research in Health: An Introduction*, offers a practical, comprehensive, and introductory guide in qualitative health research for beginners. To prepare new users to better understand the application of methods and techniques in health care, she introduces the qualitative methods within historical and ideological contexts. Grbich’s presentation style of the various methods is impartial. She writes in such a way that readers can appreciate the dynamic nature of qualitative research. Each health researcher, based on his/her own ability and expertise, can use this impartial presentation to consider the changing nature of techniques and debates within qualitative inquiry. Her 312-page book, consisting of 11 chapters, is divided into four parts: Theory and Design; Techniques of Data Collection; Methodological Approaches; and Interpretation, Analysis, and Presentation of Data, respectively.

Part 1, Theory and Design, has three chapters that emphasize historical perspectives, definitions, quantitative-qualitative debates, use of the theoretical perspective in qualitative research, and ethical issues. In Chapter 1, Grbich (2009) references and discusses several approaches to definitions, historical trends, and a contemporary orientation in health research. She hopes that the brief history of quantitative-qualitative research provides sufficient background information so that a beginner would be able to formulate some answers to the question, “What is qualitative research” (p. 24)? In Chapter 2, “Theory in Research: Approaches to the Use of Theoretical Perspectives” (p. 26), Grbich looks at various approaches used for conceptual frameworks in qualitative research, including “driven; generating; postmodern/poststructural and feminist” (p. 29). Grbich emphasizes that although a feminist perspective is not a theory as such, it is included because of its valuable contribution to research approaches and its influence on thought within the health field. In Chapter 3, “Research Design Issues,” she investigates historical debates and dilemmas currently surrounding research design. Grbich sums up the usual major issues that affect research design and concludes that “the issues of ‘objectivity,’ ‘subjectivity,’ ‘validity,’ ‘reliability,’ ‘generalisability,’ ‘sampling’ and the ethics and accountability involved in

undertaking research are all highly contentious and have aroused heated debate over the past 400 years” (p. 79). In addition, her discussions also highlight the controversy over rigor and sampling techniques.

Part 2, *Techniques of Data Collection*, is discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. Here Grbich (2009) examines in detail two important techniques of data collection: interviewing and observation. Chapter 4 focuses on interviewing, the most common technique used for qualitative data collection. Grbich specifically gives her attention to person-to-group interviews conducted as focus, nominal, or Delphi group interviews. The focus groups which are now popular in health sciences are “semi-structured, person-to-group interviews that aim to explore a specific set of issues” (p. 108). The Delphi technique is connected to policy development. In health fields, it has been used in “curriculum and policy planning to generate debate, determine priorities and identify role competencies” (p. 117). In this chapter, Grbich matter-of-factly describes each interview technique with its own procedures, purposes, advantages, and disadvantages to the new researcher. Interviewing approaches in qualitative health research are suggested for various groups, which include elite groups and sensitive populations such as children, people with illness, disability, and special needs. An elite group refers to research participants in top positions such as surgeons, medical specialists or judges. She warns that researchers who have attempted to interview this group face obstacles. They are under time constraints and are skeptical of “qualitative data’s lack of scientific orientation” (p. 87). Chapter 5 focuses on the other major data collection technique of observation. Grbich introduces the readers to issues in observation techniques in qualitative research and procedures involved with participant observation approaches. She clearly explains the differences between ethnography and participant observation so that researchers in health would avoid using the terms interchangeably. In summary, she examines participant observation from the perspective of the researcher’s role, procedures, processes, and data gathering with cited examples of its application in the health sciences.

Part 3 consists of three chapters which explore methodological approaches that have been used frequently in health sciences research. Chapter 6 covers library-based methods. Three research approaches for this method are documentation, historical method (to establish a document’s authenticity) and discourse analysis (study of language and written document). Grbich (2009), in summary, writes that though the different approaches provide the researcher with useful choices, it is only the researchers themselves who can achieve reliable outcomes. Chapter 7 is based on field-based methods. Grbich describes six additional theory-generating approaches: ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, biography, memory work, and case studies. Grbich examines each approach, describes the processes, cites examples, and highlights advantages and disadvantages. At the end of each approach she provides a clear summary that enhances the reader’s understanding of the methods. Grbich succinctly reminds the readers that the research topic, researcher’s position, and preferred theoretical/conceptual perspectives all together influence the researcher’s choice of method. Chapter 8 covers action-based methods, namely, evaluation and action research. While exploring the two methods, Grbich says that in health, “evaluation research is used in major investigations of needs assessment, program evaluation, and evaluations of organizations, of health products and of individuals” (p. 213).

Part 4 has three chapters. It focuses on major issues of interpretation, analysis, and presentation of data that have been collected. Grbich (2009) outlines the major issues and processes in framing the data, the interpretive focus and the role of the reader. She enlightens the reader about the concepts of frames and framing dating back from inception to current popular works. In the same manner she continues to explore and describe the researcher's interpretive focus and the reader's position in relation to collected data. She states that four ideal modes of analytical procedures can be conducted: enumerative, investigative, iterative, and subjective, and that there is overlap among them. Each mode is identified with its analysis and explained, described, and exemplified according to popular researchers' works. Enumerative mode is described in relation to quasi-statistical content analysis and qualitative content analysis with forms of ethnographic content analysis and transcendental realism. In the investigative mode Grbich draws the attention of the reader to semiotic analyses but indicates that they have limitations. She explains that the "focus on units of signs and codes means that the rich ethnographic description in which these are embedded tends to become diluted, and the broader holistic view is lost" (p. 230). Iterative mode is viewed and discussed through ongoing preliminary analysis, thematic analysis, and coding. Finally she gives an overview of subjective mode in relation to the researcher, the researched, and the field with a focus on power differences, editing, and author's voice. Chapter 10 includes information on computer-assisted analysis. Grbich provides an overview of various available qualitative computing packages and offers a critical assessment of each software package. She warns the reader that it is imperative to understand the limitations of the computer packages and emphasizes that the process of interpretative analysis is the researcher's responsibility. Chapter 11, the final chapter, is on presentation of data. Grbich gives the reader different ways of presenting qualitative data through the use of visual displays, quotes, layering, and alternative modes (e.g., poetry, drama, and dialogue).

Grbich's (2009) book is an excellent text for new learners of qualitative research. She gives a comprehensive overview of the methodologies and techniques of qualitative research data, interpretation, and research presentation in a manner that gives the new researcher both an understanding of general qualitative research theory and of its application in health sciences. It is quite memorable how she organizes the information as a well-outlined recipe (i.e., what is needed and how to do it). Another plus for the book is the comprehensive listing of websites and e-mail discussion groups in the appendix. It should serve as an invaluable tool for anyone who wishes to network with others in this research area.

As a pharmacy practitioner in the health arena of both practice and education, I would recommend the book as a learning and reference tool to colleagues who are new to qualitative health research. Grbich's (2009) book explores the factors involved in qualitative research and relates them to health research using simple language with detailed descriptions in a systematic manner. From her book I have come to understand that qualitative methods require as rigorous an approach as quantitative methods. To this end, Grbich cites many examples from the medical field. Her comprehensive, open-minded overview of qualitative health research leaves the student-researcher with guidelines for success while plainly informing the researcher about the debates and issues that surround this research approach. The referred readings at the end of each chapter are

useful. In addition, the detailed list of websites and e-mail discussion groups at the end assist qualitative health researchers in networking with other colleagues who share this interest.

References

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Author Note

Feroza Sircar-Ramsewak obtained her Doctor of Pharmacy at Albany College of Pharmacy. She joined Nova Southeastern University, College of Pharmacy, in July 2005 as an Academic Facilitator at the West Palm Beach Campus. She teaches Pharmaceutical Compounding and mentors pharmacy students in their research projects. Prior to joining Nova Southeastern University, she was affiliated with The University of the West Indies, Pharmacy School, Trinidad & Tobago, where she was a Lecturer and a founding member of the Pharmacy School Degree Program and the Pharmacy Public Education Program. She still maintains an affiliation at the Pharmacy School as voluntary curriculum advisor. Dr. Sircar-Ramsewak's areas of research interest are Pharmacy Education, Health Education, and Pharmacoeconomics and Health Outcomes. She is a consultant for Caribbean Pharmacy News and a Co-Editor of the Caribbean Pharmacist Journal. Contact Information: Nova Southeastern University, College of Pharmacy, 3970 RCA Boulevard, Palm Beach Gardens, FL, 33410; Phone: 954-262-5653; Email: sircar@nova.edu.

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