

## *Qualitative methods for health research*

**Métodos qualitativos para pesquisa em saúde**

***Métodos cualitativos para la investigación en salud***

Cardano, Mario<sup>1</sup>

According to Catherine Pope and Nicholas Mays<sup>1</sup>, qualitative methods have a lot to offer to health research. It is hard to imagine understanding the subjective experience of patients without recurring to in-depth interviews, to access their illness narratives. Likewise, it seems very hard to grasp the organizational complexity of the practices of care without committing in a long-lasting close observation. Well, although in the last decades the legitimacy of qualitative methods in health research has been consolidated<sup>2</sup>, there still are doubts about their capacity to offer a valid contribute to scientific research. In this short contribution, I mean, firstly, to identify the pertinent and distinctive traits of qualitative research, and then discuss its strength and weakness. I will conclude by elaborating some reflections on the conditions that would consent the full acceptance of the qualitative research results as evidence, in a context more familiar with the randomized controlled trials.

Qualitative research is everything but a monolith, a compact set of practices of research that are chiseled in the same theoretical and epistemological matter. Qualitative research is a plural set of research styles, different by theoretical ascendancy and research practices. With who decide to dive into a social context, to decrypt its culture, there are who ones that prefer getting involved in long tape-recorded conversations, with singular individuals or with small groups. In addition, there are the ones that look for an answer to their questions of research through an intentional perturbation on the studied context, carried out with a clear experimental disposition. Other acknowledge in the perturbation of phenomena studied the condition to be avoided and, with the sensitivity of the historian or that of the archaeologist, they focus on texts and artefacts that may be acquired without altering the observed social context. Undoubtedly different from one another, these ways of doing research show some important “family resemblances”<sup>3</sup>. These resemblances, besides identifying the pertinent and distinctive traits of the qualitative research, help to recognize what distinguishes qualitative from the quantitative research. Three - in my view - are the traits of qualitative research in which this family likeness is shown: the harmonization of the data collection procedures to the context of its application; the close observation of a little numbers of cases; and the multivocality of the writing.

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<sup>1</sup> Researcher and professor from Department of Culture, Politics and Society, University of Turin, Turin, Itália. Email: [mario.cardano@unito.it](mailto:mario.cardano@unito.it) <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0268-3020>

In qualitative research, the procedures of data collection assume different configurations according to the interactive context in which they take form. Tim Rapley clearly expresses this vocation of the qualitative research on the advice that he suggests to whom is about to perform a study based on the use of in-depth interview: “You don’t have to ask the same questions in the same way in each interaction”<sup>5:18</sup>. The wording of a question, in an in-depth interview; the way in which, in an ethnographic research, the researcher will observe and, somehow, participate in the interactive practices in the field, will vary from time to time, by harmonizing with the changing contingencies of the field<sup>ii</sup>. To put it with a slogan: in qualitative research, participants do not need to fit the proposed method, but is the method that must fit the participants. In quantitative research, on the other hand, the data collection procedures are uniform, governed by a set of operational definitions that, for example, guide the way in which the questions of a questionnaire must be asked to the individuals in a survey.

The second pertinent characteristic of the qualitative research is its vocation, accordingly to James Clifford<sup>7</sup>, to a close observation, to a research style that prefers the deepening of details instead of the reconstruction of an overall picture, that favours intensive studies performed on a reduced number of cases, instead of extensive studies. In the quantitative research, on the other hand, the tendency to work in populations or big samples prevails (even if there are quantitative studies carried out on small groups, such as lab experiments in psychology or economics).

The last trait that deserves highlighting is the polyphonic, multivocal character of the texts with which the results of a qualitative research are delivered to the reader. With few exceptions, the texts that represent the results of a qualitative research are based at an “orchestration” between the researcher and participants’ voices, modulated on a scale that goes from the commitment to give voice to the participants<sup>8</sup>, to a more modest exercise of “ventriloquism”<sup>6:122</sup>, in which a voice, that of participants, is, so to say, subdued to that the author. In quantitative research, I would say without exceptions, the texts that present the results of a research are monovocal, crossed only by the author’s voice.

The strengths of qualitative research come from the distinctive traits mentioned above. The close observation and the harmonization of data collection procedures allow to grasp with particular accuracy the participants’ “definition of the situation”, which steers the actions of individuals and contributes to define their meaning. Distinctive, as well, is the capability of qualitative research to unpack, so to speak, the social processes, opening the proverbial black box that links the events that take place in the social contexts analyzed. The opening of the theoretical and methodological tools, typical of this style of research, is moreover what allows the formation of new concepts, rooted not on theoretical speculations, but on empirical materials, accordingly to Mary Morgan<sup>9</sup>, «evidence based».

The traits that determine the virtues of qualitative research also are responsible for its (presumed) weaknesses: subjectivity of the acquired knowledge, non-replicability of research results; in a nutshell: lack of rigour.

In my view, however, this charge is formulated by assuming a specific conception of rigour as the only possible, that of randomized controlled trials, and, more generally, that of quantitative research. This conception of rigour is based on the standardization of data collection and analysis procedures and on the study of big, if not titanic samples. These conditions allow proceeding with the construction of knowledge using the "logic of inference"<sup>10</sup> and the theory of probability. These conditions allow proceeding with the construction of knowledge using the "logic of inference"<sup>10</sup>, and the theory of probability. Unfortunately, due to its constitutive traits, the qualitative research cannot satisfy these conditions and - in this (defeasible) view - it is excluded from the set of scientific practices. The indisputable fact that qualitative research cannot be subjected to the logic of inference does not imply that this way of doing research does not allow the defense of the rigour of its conclusions. In this line of thinking, there are numerous methodological contributions that insist on the need to use criteria and procedures to defend the soundness of the results of qualitative research different from those proposed for quantitative research. My most recent work moves in this direction, by maintaining that the role covered, in quantitative research, by the theory of probability, in qualitative research, can be covered by the theory of argumentation<sup>4</sup>. This line of reasoning is - in my opinion - the only viable, given the profound differences separating the quantitative and qualitative versions in the "game of science", opens to a problem tackled in the final part of this text. The issue is that of communication and mutual recognition between different "communities of practices" working in the health research field, among those who carried out research in accordance with the canons of the randomized trial, using quantitative methods, and those that, in a broader sense, decide to be inspired by another Muse, the qualitative research.

In order to ensure that different criteria and evaluation procedures (such as theory of argumentation vs. theory of probability) can produce, not the rancorous separation between alternative forms of science, but their integration, a thorough rethinking of the notion of method is necessary. Instead of being thought as a collection of rules that act as orders, the method should be meant as a set of principles that receive a different interpretation according to the context in which they are applied. These are principles that, according to Gary Brent Madison<sup>10</sup>, are more similar to the laws of law than to those of physics; principles for which not just one correct interpretation is given, but more than one, according to the context of application, and whose implementation, not different from a court's judgment, must be defended with adequate arguments<sup>11</sup>.

In the wake of the reflection proposed in these pages, all this translates into the recognition that the general principle of rigor can be considered respected by procedures that assume different forms in quantitative and qualitative research. For example, the principle of accountability, that - legitimately - requires the members of the scientific community to describe how the results of their study were obtained, will be satisfied: in quantitative research, with an illustration of the operational definitions adopted and the statistical models adopted; in qualitative research, with the elaboration of a reflective account, which - when the research is completed -

describes in detail how the researcher experienced his own object<sup>4,12</sup>. With a stance underpinned on these critical bases, and not on a generic ecumenism, for which anything goes, it is possible to fully express the potential of qualitative research in the area of health.

**Descriptor:** Qualitative Research.

**Author's notes:**

<sup>i</sup> In the text, I refer to the most common qualitative research methods: observation, participant or naturalistic; shadowing; in-depth interview; focus group; field experiments; games; documentary research methods; analysis of conversations. For a map of qualitative research methods<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>ii</sup> Barbara Czarniawska writes in *Narrative in Social Science Research*: "If there is one general rule on field research it is that all techniques must be context-sensitive"<sup>6:44</sup>.

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