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Importance of Qualitative Research: Experience from my career in public health

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In our tertiary education system, students are mostly taught on quantitative method, a process which deals with numeric values and can create all these detailed information into an interactive one (just like telling a story) through analyzing and interpreting in a precise way. Experience was no different for me. It all changed during my MPH, where I learned about qualitative method and its application to public health. While doing theoretical course of qualitative methodology, the whole idea was quite confusing and abstract due to my quant background. During MPH thesis, I embedded qualitative with quant to answer my research question. Though data collection and extraction in qualitative can be a tedious process, I was surprised that how qualitative data complemented where quantitative data was unable to provide insights.

Qualitative research is a process which answers the question related to pattern of human behavior such as concepts, experiences and opinions. This research design answers these issues by collecting non numerical data to get insights of the problem or provides new ideas for further research. On the other hand, quantitative method deals with numerical data as well as objectivity of research finding. In healthcare research, whether its testing out new drug or a disease progression in hospital setting or community, to answer "how" and "why" question, data collected numerically for statistical analysis. Structured questionnaire designed with specific question by researcher is a main tool for quant studies whereby in qualitative studies open ended question leads by respondent's depth of knowledge and experiences to provide social and cultural dimension.

In recent years, globally, more and more researcher is adopting qualitative approach to their methods for subjective insights. It allows them to capture client perspective of healthcare as well as helps to understand how clients perceive health care services. Qualitative method is an important tool in primary health care when researchers want to ask questions about why patients and healthcare professionals behave in a particular way and to focus on participants' feelings, meanings and experiences. For an example, in a drug trial, quantitative method can assess how many patients are not consistent with the drug ingestion. However, this information itself doesn't help to solve the problem (inconsistent drug ingestion), only highlights the extent of the problem. Interestingly, qualitative research can explore why is this happening and may able to provide ideas to solve the problem.

In Bangladesh, most researcher are quant oriented. Moreover, my last five-year experience in different research projects at IPH, BBF, and currently at the icddr, yielded a basic information that qualitative research is much less practiced in medical research in Bangladesh, if not in public health. Based on these, I do believe, students involved in health care should have pretty much access in both research methodologies such as quantitative and qualitative. Thus, when they will come out as health professionals they will acquire in the depth hunch, interest, to devote to themselves in academic and research issues in a for more effective manner.

For further reading

1. Cropley, A. J. (2021, 3rd updated, revised, and enlarged edition). Qualitative research methods: A practice- oriented introduction for students of psychology and education. (open access – doi: 10.13140/RG.2.1.3095.6888/1)
2. Tenny, S., Brannan, G. D., Brannan, J. M., & Sharts-Hopko, N. C. (2017). Qualitative study.

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