

Introduction to qualitative nursing research

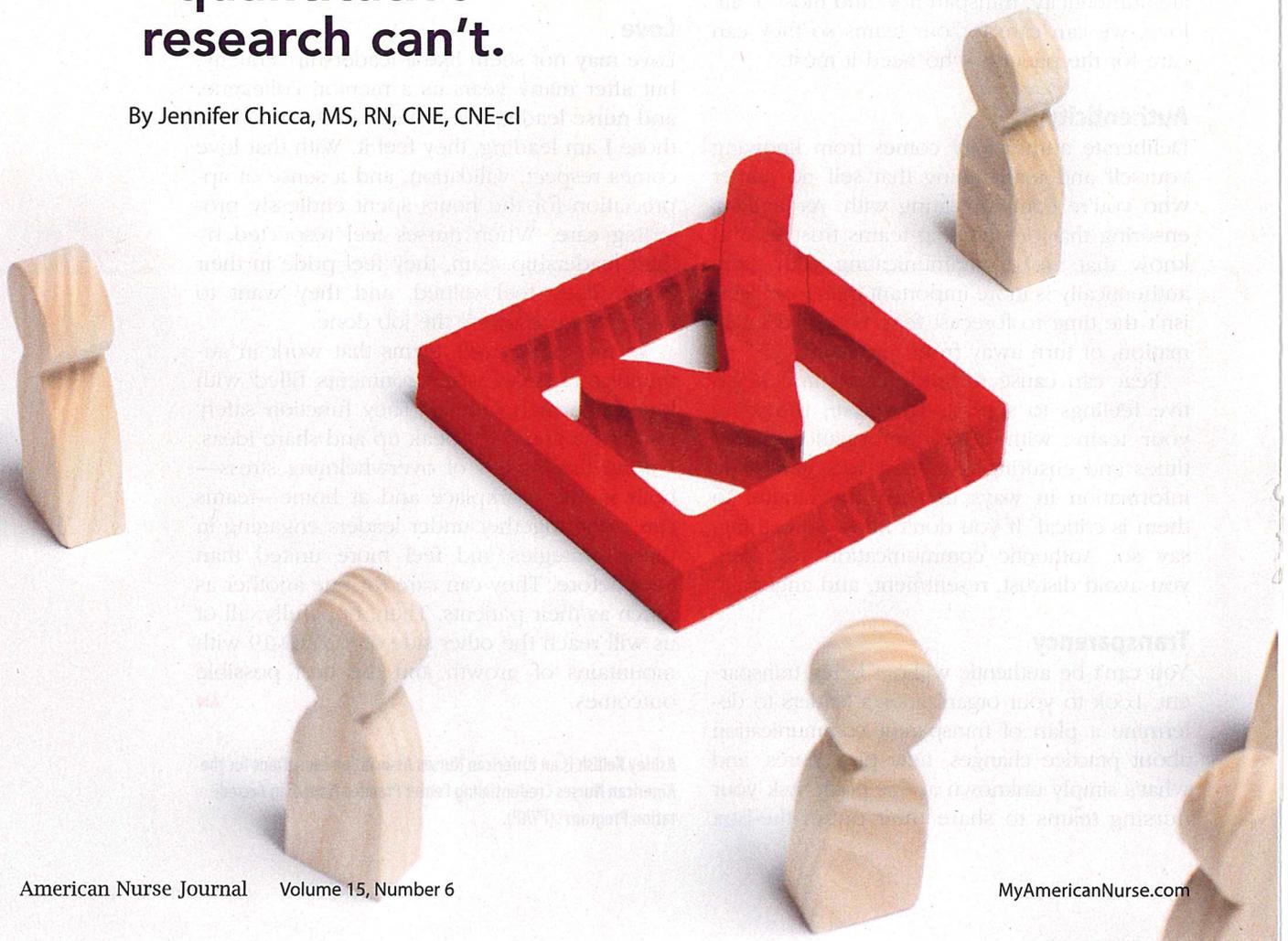
**This type of research
can reveal important
information that
quantitative
research can't.**

By Jennifer Chicca, MS, RN, CNE, CNE-cl

ALL NURSES are expected to understand and apply evidence to their professional practice. Some of the evidence should be in the form of research, which fills gaps in knowledge, developing and expanding on current understanding. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods inform nursing practice, but quantitative research tends to be more emphasized. In addition, many nurses don't feel comfortable conducting or evaluating qualitative research. But once you understand qualitative research, you can more easily apply it to your nursing practice.

What is qualitative research?

Defining qualitative research can be challenging. In fact, some authors suggest that providing a simple definition is contrary to the method's philosophy. Qualitative research approaches a phenomenon, such as a clinical problem, from a place of unknowing and attempts to understand its many facets. This makes qualitative research particularly useful when little is known about a phenomenon because the research helps identify key con-





Deliberate leadership during COVID-19

Three strategies nurse leaders can use

By Ashley Kellish, DNP, RN, CCNS



FEAR, resilience, unprecedented, unknown. These are just a few words now circling our vocabulary with the onset of COVID-19. In a short time, we've implemented national social distancing, started homeschooling our children, and shared the biggest news of our lives through glass windows to protect our family and friends. In the workplace, nurses face an inadequate supply of personal protective equipment to safely care for patients with COVID-19. How do we as nurse leaders engage our teams, prevent burnout, and heal the stress this pandemic has created for our workforce?

We can apply three strategies to weather this storm. In my experience, through deliberate authenticity, transparency, and most of all, love, we can care for our teams so they can care for the patients who need it most.

Authenticity

Deliberate authenticity comes from knowing yourself and maintaining that self no matter who you're communicating with. As leaders, ensuring that our nursing teams trust us and know that we're communicating with them authentically is more important than ever. This isn't the time to forecast fear, withhold information, or turn away from our teams.

Fear can cause misinformation and negative feelings to spread. Therefore, providing your teams with honest information at set times and ensuring that they, too, can share information in ways that are meaningful to them is critical. If you don't know something, say so. Authentic communication will help you avoid distrust, resentment, and anger.

Transparency

You can't be authentic without being transparent. Look to your organization's leaders to determine a plan of transparent communication about practice changes, new procedures, and what's simply unknown at this point. Ask your nursing teams to share their out-of-the-box

ideas to manage unique patient situations. For instance, some teams are keeping infusion pumps outside of patient rooms and entering COVID-19-positive rooms as little as possible to avoid exposure. Instead of avoiding the barriers to this type of care, discuss how to manage it and what might go wrong in open staff forums to gain as much insight and input as possible. Lack of sufficient masks is another topic of concern and fear. Look to one another, your teams, and other organizations to work through this challenge. Procedures and guidelines are changing literally every shift, but if your teams have transparent leaders they trust, they will more readily carry out these changes.

Love

Love may not seem like a leadership strategy, but after many years as a mentor, colleague, and nurse leader, I've found that if I truly love those I am leading, they feel it. With that love comes respect, validation, and a sense of appreciation for the hours spent endlessly providing care. When nurses feel respected by their leadership team, they feel pride in their work. They feel valued, and they want to come to work to get the job done.

In my experience, teams that work in authentic, transparent environments filled with love have high morale. They function safely and aren't afraid to speak up and share ideas. During this period of overwhelming stress—both in the workplace and at home—teams can come together under leaders engaging in these strategies and feel more united than ever before. They can care for one another as much as their patients. Then, hopefully, all of us will reach the other side of COVID-19 with mountains of growth and the best possible outcomes.

AN

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Research design characteristics

Most qualitative research designs share the following characteristics.

Characteristic	Description	Example
Emergent	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Flexible• Adaptable• Changes to reflect realities and viewpoints, which may not be known at the outset	A researcher completing a grounded theory study changes the interview questionnaire, based on preliminary findings, to include more focused questions to help saturate theoretical categories
Holistic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Considers the whole	A researcher completing a historical research study analyzes artifacts, journals, interviews, documents, photographs, and records to understand a past event
Intensely involved researcher	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Detailed study	A researcher completing an ethnographic inquiry spends time (sometimes years) interviewing, observing, and perhaps even participating in the studied culture
Merging data collection strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Many strategies are used to capture holism	A researcher completing a case study analyzes interviews, observations, documents, and records to understand the identified case

cepts and constructs. Qualitative research sets the foundation for future quantitative or qualitative research. Qualitative research also can stand alone without quantitative research.

Although qualitative research is diverse, certain characteristics—holism, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and situated contexts—guide its methodology. This type of research stresses the importance of studying each individual as a holistic system (holism) influenced by surroundings (situated contexts); each person develops his or her own subjective world (subjectivity) that's influenced by interactions with others (intersubjectivity) and surroundings (situated contexts). Think of it this way: Each person experiences and interprets the world differently based on many factors, including his or her history and interactions. The truth is a composite of realities.

Qualitative research designs

Because qualitative research explores diverse topics and examines phenomena where little is known, designs and methodologies vary. Despite this variation, most qualitative research designs are emergent and holistic. In addition, they require merging data collection strategies and an intensely involved researcher. (See *Research design characteristics*.)

Although qualitative research designs are emergent, advanced planning and careful consideration should include identifying a phenomenon of interest, selecting a research design, indicating broad data collection strategies and opportunities to enhance study quality, and considering and/or setting aside (bracketing) personal biases, views, and assumptions.

Many qualitative research designs are used in nursing. Most originated in other disciplines, while some claim no link to a particular disciplinary tradition. Designs that aren't linked to a discipline, such as descriptive designs, may borrow techniques from other methodologies; some authors don't consider them to be rigorous (high-quality and trustworthy). (See *Common qualitative research designs*.)

Sampling approaches

Sampling approaches depend on the qualitative research design selected. However, in general, qualitative samples are small, nonrandom, emergently selected, and intensely stud-

ied. Qualitative research sampling is concerned with accurately representing and discovering meaning in experience, rather than generalizability. For this reason, researchers tend to look for participants or informants who are considered "information rich" because they maximize understanding by representing varying demographics and/or ranges of experiences. As a study progresses, researchers look for participants who confirm, challenge, modify, or enrich understanding of the phenomenon of interest. Many authors argue that the concepts and constructs discovered in qualitative research transcend a particular study, however, and find applicability to others. For example, consider a qualitative study about the lived experience of minority nursing faculty and the incivility they endure. The concepts learned in this study may transcend nursing or minority faculty members and also apply to other populations, such as foreign-born students, nurses, or faculty.

A sample size is estimated before a qualitative study begins, but the final sample size depends on the study scope, data quality, sensitivity of the research topic or phenomenon of interest, and researchers' skills. For example, a study with a narrow scope, skilled

Common qualitative research designs

Qualitative nursing research can take many forms. The design you choose will depend on the question you're trying to answer.

Design	Originating discipline	Description	Sample nursing research question
Action research	Education	Conducted by and for those taking action to improve or refine actions	What happens to the quality of nursing practice when we implement a peer-mentoring system?
Case study	Many	In-depth analysis of an entity or group of entities (case)	How is patient autonomy promoted by a unit?
Descriptive	N/A	Content analysis of data	What is the nursing role in end-of-life decisions?
Discourse analysis	Many	In-depth analysis of written, vocal, or sign language	What discourses are used in nursing practice and how do they shape practice?
Ethnography	Anthropology	In-depth analysis of a culture	How does Filipino culture influence childbirth experiences?
Ethology	Psychology	Biology of human behavior and events	What are the immediate underlying psychological and environmental causes of incivility in nursing?
Grounded theory	Sociology	Social processes within a social setting	How does the basic social process of role transition happen within the context of advanced practice nursing transitions?
Historical research	History	Past behaviors, events, conditions	When did nurses become researchers?
Narrative inquiry	Many	Story as the object of inquiry	How does one live with a diagnosis of scleroderma?
Phenomenology	Philosophy Psychology	Lived experience	What is the lived experience of nurses who were admitted as patients on their home practice unit?

researchers, and a nonsensitive topic likely will require a smaller sample. Data saturation frequently is a key consideration in final sample size. When no new insights or information are obtained, data saturation is attained and sampling stops, although researchers may analyze one or two more cases to be certain. (See *Sampling types*.)

Some controversy exists around the concept of saturation in qualitative nursing research. Thorne argues that saturation is a concept appropriate for grounded theory studies and not other study types. She suggests that “information power” is perhaps more appropriate terminology for qualitative nursing research sampling and sample size.

Data collection and analysis

Researchers are guided by their study design when choosing data collection and analysis methods. Common types of data collection include interviews (unstructured, semistructured,

focus groups); observations of people, environments, or contexts; documents; records; artifacts; photographs; or journals. When collecting data, researchers must be mindful of gaining participant trust while also guarding against too much emotional involvement, ensuring comprehensive data collection and analysis, conducting appropriate data management, and engaging in reflexivity.

Reflexivity involves systematically analyzing each step of the research process. Unlike quantitative researchers, who use validated instruments, qualitative researchers themselves are the instruments. They must strive to attain and manage high-quality data. Journaling can help researchers identify and manage how their behaviors and thoughts influence their study findings. When researchers bracket their preconceived notions when collecting and analyzing data, they help increase study rigor.

Data usually are recorded in detailed notes, memos, and audio or visual recordings, which

frequently are transcribed verbatim and analyzed manually or using software programs, such as ATLAS.ti, HyperRESEARCH, MAXQDA, or NVivo. Analyzing qualitative data is complex work. Researchers act as reductionists, distilling enormous amounts of data into concise yet rich and valuable knowledge. They code or identify themes, translating abstract ideas into meaningful information. The good news is that qualitative research typically is easy to understand because it's reported in stories told in everyday language.

Evaluating a qualitative study

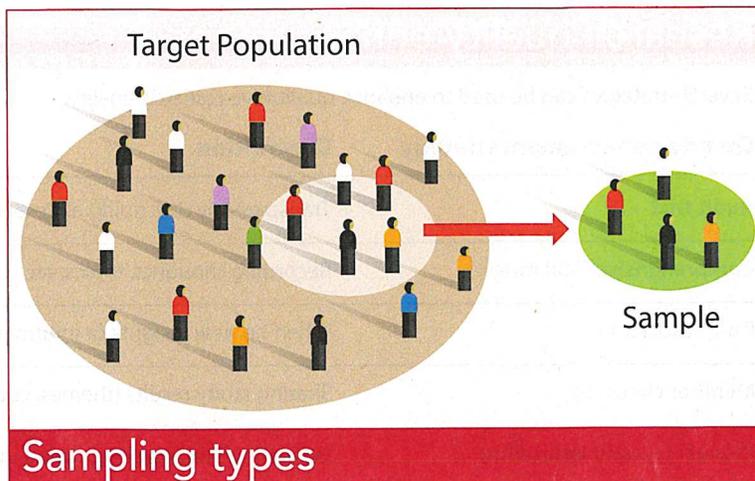
Evaluating qualitative research studies can be challenging. Many terms—rigor, validity, integrity, and trustworthiness—can describe study quality, but in the end you want to know whether the study's findings accurately and comprehensively represent the phenomenon of interest. Many researchers identify a quality framework when discussing quality-enhancement strategies. Example frameworks include:

- Trustworthiness criteria framework, which enhances credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and authenticity
- Validity in qualitative research framework, which enhances credibility, authenticity, criticality, integrity, explicitness, vividness, creativity, thoroughness, congruence, and sensitivity.

With all frameworks, many strategies can be used to help meet identified criteria and enhance quality. (See *Research quality enhancement*). And considering the study as a whole is important to evaluating its quality and rigor. For example, when looking for evidence of rigor, look for a clear and concise report title that describes the research topic and design and an abstract that summarizes key points (background, purpose, methods, results, conclusions). (Visit myamericannurse.com/?p=66448 to learn what other questions to ask when evaluating a qualitative study.)

Application to nursing practice

Qualitative research not only generates evidence but also can help nurses determine patient preferences. Without qualitative research, we can't truly understand others, including their interpretations, meanings, needs, and wants. Qualitative research isn't generalizable in the traditional sense, but it helps nurses open their minds to others' experiences. For example, nurses can protect patient autonomy by under-



Several sampling types guide qualitative research, and because designs are emergent, sampling may change as a study progresses. In grounded theory, for instance, sampling moves into more focused theoretical sampling as a study progresses. The researcher may return to a participant and question him or her more specifically about a theoretical construct, such as the concept of "making it work" in a study about having a child with a disability. This sampling approach helps ensure theoretical categories become saturated.

Sampling type	Comments
Convenience or volunteer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants readily available • Easy, efficient • Might not be "information rich"
Purposive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants selected because they benefit the study (for example, selecting for varying demographics or ranges of experience)
Shadow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants speak of others' experiences in addition to their own
Snowball or chain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early participants refer others • Easy, efficient • Might not be "information rich"
Theoretical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants selected based on manifestation of theoretical constructs

standing them and not reducing them to universal protocols or plans. As Munhall states, "Each person we encounter help[s] us discover what is best for [him or her]. The other person, not us, is truly the expert knower of [him- or herself]." Qualitative nursing research helps us understand the complexity and many facets of a problem and gives us insights as we encourage others' voices and searches for meaning.

When paired with clinical judgment and other evidence, qualitative research helps us implement evidence-based practice successfully. For example, a phenomenological inquiry into the lived experience of disaster

Research quality enhancement

Several strategies can be used to enhance qualitative research quality.

Quality-enhancement strategy	Description
Audit trial	Transparently describing all research processes (data collection and analysis methods)
Comprehensive field notes	Recording thoughts, topics, etc., before, during, or after data collection
Data saturation	When no new insights or information are obtained and redundancy is achieved
Member checking	Sharing study results (themes, codes) with participants and obtaining critical feedback
Peer review and debriefing	Evaluating study processes and outcomes by peers (other investigators)
Prolonged engagement and persistent observation	Spending sufficient time (scope) and focus (depth) in study efforts to gain complete understanding of the phenomenon of interest (for example, through extended field observations)
Recording transcription	Transcribing audio and/or video recordings of data (for example, interviews, observations) verbatim
Reflexivity	Systematically analyzing all steps of the research process (for example, via journaling)
Theoretical sampling	Sampling on the basis of manifestation of theoretical constructs to further develop a theory
Triangulation	Obtaining and using multiple data sources, methods, investigators, theories, analysts
Vivid descriptions	Making the phenomenon studied explicit by providing detailed accounts

workers might help expose strengths and weaknesses of individuals, populations, and systems, providing areas of focused intervention. Or a phenomenological study of the lived experience of critical-care patients might expose factors (such dark rooms or no visible clocks) that contribute to delirium.

Successful implementation

Qualitative nursing research guides understanding in practice and sets the foundation for future quantitative and qualitative research. Knowing how to conduct and evaluate qualitative research can help nurses implement evidence-based practice successfully. **AN**

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