

Qualitative research: a valuable contribution to midwifery knowledge

This edition contains a discussion paper on evaluation research methods and four research papers on descriptions of traumatic birth, women's experience of early motherhood, postnatal support in the community and the philosophical foundations of normal birth.

Most papers presented use qualitative research approaches, the aim of which is to: 'Produce a coherent and illuminating description of and perspective on a situation that is based on, and consistent with detailed study of the situation' (Ward-Schofield, 1993: 202).

Qualitative researchers try to understand the meaning individuals ascribe to their life experience and in this case their experience of birth, life after birth and the role of the midwife in their lifeworld. These studies describe, map, analyse and detail the patterns of everyday experiences for the women who come to us for care during their childbirth experience – narratives and stories that are embedded in the social fabric of the everyday world of midwives. As midwife researchers there is a burden of truth-telling to bear for each insight gained and it is the researcher who is ultimately responsible for the rigour of the research.

Every qualitative account is unique yet the findings and interpretations must be sufficiently detailed to allow the reader to walk through the research process – 'walk the talk'. The reader must be convinced by the written word that conveys insightful descriptions of the data trail, veracity and confirmability of meaning attributed to the insight gained from the complete research process.

The written quality of the work is a key component in the value judgements attributed to individual pieces of research. Hammersley (1987) alluded to this factor when stating that qualitative data is often judged on how well it represents the features of the phenomenon that it sets out to describe.

Descriptive accounts are foundational pillars for those who are charged with the task of resource allocation and capital planning. Outcomes from health services research will be used by the government to shape and target services and therefore it is worth investing in evaluation research that will enable us to develop frameworks and processes for reporting and analysing qualitative research that will maximise impact.

Sandelowski and Barroso (2003) would argue that despite the prominence and applicability of health service research using qualitative methodologies, the value of this research is limited due to the need to integrate the findings from the collective research. They propose that the future value of qualitative research will be greatly enhanced through a rigorous and analytic process of qualitative meta-synthesis. This approach values the unique contribution of individual research studies, while combining their collective outputs.

Moving midwifery forward requires us to focus on improving public, professional and organisational confidence in the outputs from qualitative research and therefore we need to begin to write about our research with the expectation that it will be subject to analytic techniques such as meta-analysis and meta-synthesis.

References

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