

Common Perspectives in Qualitative Research

Marie Flannery, PhD, RN, AOCN®

Flannery is a research assistant professor in the School of Nursing at the University of Rochester Medical Center in New York.

No financial relationships to disclose.

Flannery can be reached at Marie_Flannery@URMC.Rochester.edu, with copy to editor at ONFEditor@ons.org.

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The broad umbrella term *qualitative research* encompasses many different designs and epistemologic positions. Qualitative research is defined by Powers and Knapp (2006) as “a broad cover term for many different traditions concerned with the study of human experiences in and in relation to the natural contexts within which they occur for the purpose of understanding person’s responses and meanings they bring to the experience” (p. 139). The definition by Denzin and Lincoln (2000) is “a humanistic commitment to study the world always from the perspective of the gendered historically situated, interacting individual” (p. 1047).

The primary purpose of this column is to focus on several common core concepts that are foundational to qualitative research. Discussion of these concepts is at an introductory level and is designed to raise awareness and understanding of several conceptual foundations that undergird qualitative research. Because of the variety of qualitative approaches, not all concepts are relevant to every design and tradition. However, foundational aspects were selected for highlighting. Sandelowski (1993) emphasized the contrast in theory in varying qualitative design with a traditional theory placement in a quantitative manuscript and highlighted the integral and scholarly nature of the conceptual orientation shared in qualitative work. The

qualitative researcher’s conceptual orientation is revealed in a myriad of ways; the ways in which the problem under study is framed and the literature presented in the background section provide an orienting framework.

The Context of the Study

One essential concept in all qualitative designs is the context, the natural setting in which the phenomenon or clinical issue of interest is examined. The setting matters because, when an individual is removed from the natural setting in which the problem of interest occurs, it changes. For example, if the topic of interest is how individuals cope with side effects at home, observations and interviews would be made in the home setting. A qualitative study rarely would be done in a laboratory setting; therefore, the plan is to collect data in the natural or field setting. Underlying these design and data collection choices is the conceptual foundation of the importance of context in gaining an understanding of the phenomenon of interest. Closely related to context, a holistic orientation is often present in qualitative research. This conceptual orientation rests on the premise that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. An understanding of a phenomenon does not come from studying its individual parts. The concepts of holistic orientation and