

Employing Qualitative Research in Medical Education Research

Dear Editor,

Medical education research has played a crucial role in the advancement of medical education, and has provided the researchers with the best evidence to help them in making a better decision about important areas.^[1,2] Currently, in the field of medical education research, qualitative research has gained immense importance due to its wide scope and applicability.^[2] The only reason for lack of employment of qualitative research was due to the lack of exposure of students or faculties to the same.^[2,3]

Qualitative research methods have found their application in medical education, such as understanding the reasons that how learning occurs through a small number of learners (with focus being on the individual), how teacher attributes impacts student learning, and reasons for selection of a specific specialty by the undergraduate students.^[1-3] It is the best approach when researchers have limited knowledge about a new phenomenon to gain a deep insight with the help of respondent's perspective.^[2,3] Further, in the absence of a theory, qualitative research can be adopted to generate a theory.^[2] In addition, it plays an important role in the understanding of sensitive issues, human intentions, and motivations.^[2,3]

The qualitative research employs a flexible approach to identify more answers, and it is done with an objective to describe variation and describe and explain relationships.^[2] It commences with the respondents' experiences, and then, a hypothesis or theory is framed (induced), which is further grounded in the real-life experience of the respondents.^[2] In other words, qualitative methods employ a constructivist/naturalistic approach, where knowledge is socially constructed using interaction between the researcher and study participants.^[1-3] For ensuring the credibility of the results and evaluation of qualitative studies, the concepts of precision, transferability, dependability, and trustworthiness (which can be established through triangulation by obtaining information from multiple data sources) should be assessed.^[2,4]

The process of data collection and analysis occurs simultaneously right from the first interview, and based on the results, next interview is planned, and the process continues till no new themes are identified.^[1-3] A wide range of methods (such as interviews, written responses to open-ended questions, written narratives, focus group discussions, observations, in-depth interviews, field notes, review of documents, etc.) can be employed for data collection.^[2,5] This is followed by use of standard methods (viz. coding or transcribe the recorded conversations, etc.) to interpret the collected data.^[2]

Qualitative research methods have been associated with a number of advantages, such as the opinions of both researcher and the respondents are accounted, each respondent's view is given importance, can be used to discuss sensitive issues, and is flexible in nature (regarding data collection and analysis).^[1-3] At the same time, it has many limitations, such as its success lies in the careful planning, time-consuming, requires more workforce (during data collection, categorization, recoding, etc.) and is difficult to assess causality.^[2] As qualitative research focuses on personal interaction for data collection, there is a definite possibility to deviate from the main issue.^[2,3]

Further, the process of analysis of results and its interpretation is difficult, and it requires the researcher to be trained otherwise important domains can be missed either due to poor or variable interpretation by different researchers, and there is a potential scope that the researcher's personal experience might influence the observations and conclusions pertaining to the research problem.^[1-3] In addition, it is extremely difficult to verify the obtained results, and the findings of a study cannot be generalized to other settings.^[2,3]

To conclude, qualitative research has an extensive scope in the field of medical education research, and an appropriately planned study is expected to deliver deeper insights into the research problems.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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