Chapter 7
Qualitative Research:
Designing, Implementing, and Publishing a Study

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ABSTRACT

This chapter takes the reader on a step-by-step journey through the process of conducting a qualitative research study using research conducted with Traditional Healers (THs) in Malaysia and how they diagnose and treat cancer. Upwards of 80% of Malaysians consult traditional healers before seeing a medical doctor, resulting in late-stage diagnoses and thus higher mortality rates. However, prior to our research, little was known about the role of healers and their willingness to work with, rather than outside, the Western medical system. Within this context, the theoretical framework, the specific research problem and the research questions were identified. Next, the author discusses purposive sampling and data collection strategies, which included interviews, documents, and observations. She then presents a data analysis exhibit showing how they captured specific data from the interviews to address the research questions. Finally, the author discusses writing and publishing the results of the research.

INTRODUCTION

The roots of qualitative research or qualitative inquiry can be traced back to the early decades of the twentieth century when anthropologists and sociologists were asking questions about people's lives and the worlds in which they lived. In addition, professional fields of practice such as law, medicine, counseling, journalism and education have always been interested in "cases," and people's experiences for understanding behavior and specific social contexts. A book by sociologists Glaser and Strauss in 1967 titled *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* in which they made a case for inductively building theory from observing social phenomenon, interviewing people, and examining written documents, is usually credited with giving rise to what we now call qualitative research. Their book was followed by a growing number of publications in the 1970s and 1980s defining qualitative research, as well as journals outside of anthropology and sociology that began accepting the occasional report of a qualitative

research study. By the 1990s, qualitative research was well established as a mode of inquiry in the social sciences.

Today there are hundreds of books, numerous journals and regularly held conferences devoted exclusively to qualitative research. On the one hand this is good news for those who want to understand the meaning of a particular phenomenon as there are seemingly endless variations, resources and tools available for such an inquiry; at the same time, making sense of all the approaches and options and knowing just how to conduct a qualitative study can be daunting to not only novice but also seasoned researchers. Thus the purpose of this chapter is to take you, the reader, by the hand and walk you through how I and my colleague, Dr. Mazanah of University Putra Malaysia, conducted a qualitative study of Malay traditional healers. First I discuss how we became aware of the "problem" of the study and how we articulated the problem and why we selected a qualitative research methodology. Next, I discuss how we selected our sample, how we collected our data, how we analyzed the data, how our analysis led to findings that addressed the research questions, and finally, how we wrote up the findings for publication.

DEFINING THE RESEARCH "PROBLEM"

All research starts with a question. We wonder about something, why it is the way it is, what it is, the extent to which a particular phenomenon is unique or widespread, and so on. So too, with qualitative research. Only we don't wonder about how many, or how a particular characteristic is distributed among a group of people, or which intervention brings about a certain reaction. These are all questions for survey or experimental designs or what are loosely grouped under the term "quantitative." This type of research draws from a more positivist worldview in which reality is assumed to be stable and measurable; prediction,

control, and hypothesis testing are key. In contrast, the questions that drive qualitative research are about the nature of the phenomenon, the meaning or understanding people construct regarding some phenomenon. Thus qualitative research draws most heavily from a constructivist worldview where what is important is how people construct the meaning or understanding of a phenomenon. Discovery, description, meaning and understanding, not how many, are important. Qualitative research can *build* hypotheses, that is a qualitative study may conclude with tentative hypotheses; however, when it comes to testing these same hypotheses you have crossed into the quantitative paradigm.

The Research Context

Our "question" arose from the context in which I was working as a Visiting Scholar at a university in Malaysia. I was assigned to a unit under the Social Sciences Institute called CaRE which stands for Cancer Research and Education. My colleague Dr. Mazanah was Director of the Center as well as a professor in the Lifelong Education Department of the University. CaRE is essentially an outreach, education and support center for cancer patients, survivors, caretakers, healthcare workers and the general public; about an equal time was spent on social science research related to cancer.

Malaysia is a country of 26 million people in Southeast Asia. Peninsular Malaysia is bordered on the north by Thailand and on the south by Singapore. The two states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo constitute what is known as East Malaysia. It is a multicultural society consisting of approximately 60% Malays, 30% Chinese and 10% Indian.

While it is difficult to get an accurate assessment of the prevalence and morbidity rates of cancer in Malaysia, it is widely considered to be on the rise. The National Cancer Registry (NCR) has been in existence only since 2002 and reports are based on sometimes erratic hospital epidemiology data. Further, the NCR has statistics from

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