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The use of diaries as a data collection method in qualitative phenomenological research

Abstract

Background: Diaries are an under-used method of data collection within nursing research. The use of diaries for qualitative research can allow for a contemporaneous insight into the lived experience of the person completing the diary.

Aim: The article will allow for an understanding of how diaries can gain the richness required from qualitative data.

Discussion: This article explores the use of diaries as a data collection tool, when undertaking qualitative research. Diaries can provide an unadulterated insight into a phenomenological perspective, to gain perceptions and insights into the required phenomenon. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is explored as a method of data collection when using diaries in qualitative phenomenological research.

Conclusion: This article provides an overview of the use of diaries as a data collection method for qualitative phenomenological research. Diaries are an option for those who wish to collect data in a personal and unique way.

Implications for practice: Diaries can be utilised as a data collection method to gain a rich insight into a phenomenon of interest.

Introduction

This article provides an overview of the qualitative phenomenological approach within research, with the application of the use of diaries as a data collection method. Diaries are demonstrated as a method of data collection that can provide the rich insight that is necessary for qualitative phenomenological research. This article also discusses an appropriate method of data analysis for this research approach.

A qualitative approach

A qualitative research approach has been advocated through all phases of research design by a number of different authors (Corbetta, 2003; Thomas, 2003; Maxwell, 1998). Qualitative data is soft, rich, deep, open and interactive (Corbetta, 2003). Qualitative research reports often contain direct quotes from participants that provide rich illustrations of the study themes, and it is the rich contemporaneous record of experience that can be gained through using diaries. Rich, deep data is often required for phenomenological research as this allows the encompassing of true thoughts and perspectives that qualitative data can provide. A benefit of using qualitative research, unlike its quantitative counterpart, is that it does not lend itself to empirical inference to a population as a whole; rather it allows the researcher to generalise to a theoretical understanding of the phenomenon being examined (Ploeg, 1999).

Qualitative data is used to gather descriptions of the phenomenon of interest. This can be acquired by participant observation and unstructured interviews to information from written sources, such as diaries, autobiographies and novels. Some researchers argue that qualitative data provides a richer, more detailed picture of social life (Taylor et al, 1995). For this reason, to gather deep and detailed data, is why diaries may be a useful choice for researchers wishing to attempt a unique research approach. Support for the use of qualitative methods, which use narrative observation rather than

numerical data, are increasingly being used in health care settings where they are seen to reach the parts other methods cannot reach (Pope and Mays, 2006). A significant advantage of using qualitative research is that it focuses on subjective information and does not attempt to predict or control the phenomenon of interest (Rebar et al. 2011). The aim of generating data which is “real” can be gathered through using diaries.

A phenomenological approach

The theoretical perspective of phenomenology, which is an example of the interpretivist approach, will now be discussed, as this often aids researchers in gaining the thick, rich description that of what they intend with qualitative research. It is important to discuss phenomenology in relation to the use of diaries as a data collection method, as this can assist the researcher gaining the information that they require. Phenomenologists suggest that in order to understand social reality we have to understand peoples experiences of that social reality (Gray, 2010). Husserl, often deemed to be the architect of phenomenology, named his philosophical method ‘phenomenology’, which he believed to be the science of pure ‘phenomena’ (Eagleton, 1983, p.55). Phenomenology is used to discover and develop understanding of experiences as perceived by those living the experience (Rebar et al, 2011).

Gray (2010) suggests that an advantage of phenomenology, is that due to its heavy emphasis on inductive data collection, it is more likely to pick up factors that were not part of the original focus of research. This may have the added advantage of gaining more detailed data. However, a potential disadvantage of this may be that the other factors may detract from the research focus. A benefit of using phenomenology is that it can produce experiences or perspectives of people within their natural settings which are “thick” in description (Gray, 2010).

There are two main schools of thought within phenomenology, descriptive phenomenology and interpretive phenomenology. Descriptive phenomenology, first developed by Husserl (1931) focused on the description of the lived experience. Descriptive phenomenologists insist on the portrayal of experiences of things, such as hearing, seeing, believing, remembering, feeling, deciding and evaluating within everyday life (Polit and Beck, 2010). Descriptive phenomenological studies often include bracketing, initiating, analysing and describing (Polit and Beck, 2010). Bracketing, according to Polit and Beck (2010) is the process of identifying preconceived beliefs and opinions and holding them in suspension about the phenomena being studied. Although it is acknowledged that bracketing can never be totally achieved, it is an attempt to assess the data in its purest form. Intuiting, according to Polit and Beck (2010) is the second step in descriptive phenomenology and occurs when the researchers look at the meanings attributed to the phenomena by those who have experienced it. Analysis then takes place and is followed by the descriptive phase when researchers attempt to understand and define the phenomenon.

Whereas interpretive phenomenology’s focus is more on interpreting and understanding the participants lived experiences. This can often be taken further through the interpretive phenomenologist also attempting to experience what the participants are experiencing (Polit and Beck, 2010). Within phenomenology in the study of the lived experience is the research tradition of hermeneutics. This uses lived experiences as a tool for an improved insight in the context of which the experiences occur (Polit and Beck, 2010).

Phenomenology is a theoretical perspective that uses relatively unstructured methods of data collection (Gray, 2010). A criticism of phenomenological research is that it is often built upon small case studies which can give rise to concerns about its generalisability (Gray, 2010). Conversely, a

problem with using data that is from a phenomenological source may be that it is difficult to replicate, especially on a larger scale (Polit and Beck, 2010; Gray, 2010). The implication of this is that if the research was to be repeated, particularly on a large scale, then this may be difficult to achieve.

Using diaries as a method of data collection

Polit and Beck (2010) support the use of diaries as they can provide an intimate description of a person's everyday life. This is particularly pertinent when attempting to gain intimate details of the phenomenon's experiences. This is in line with the phenomenological approach advocated with diaries as a data collection method, in order to gain a rich picture of the phenomenon of interest.

There are many available methods of data collection from using focus groups, unstructured or semi structured interviews and personal diaries. Alaszewski (2006, p1) defines a diary as "a document created by an individual who has maintained a regular, personal and contemporaneous record". Personal diaries have two main benefits; firstly, the data that will be acquired should not be influenced by the researcher which should have a freshness to it. Alaszewski (2011) supports the use of diaries as a way of collecting data that minimises intrusiveness, which is associated with much social research. Secondly, diaries can often be used as a way of reflection for people, particularly for groups such as student or registered nurses', in order to allow them to reflect on practice. An important part of nursing practice is the element of reflection, and the use of diaries may assist with the development of the reflective nurse. Equally, participants' may find the use of completing a diary as a cathartic experience. There has been much literature on the subject of reflective practice with writers arguing that reflection facilitates the linking of theory and practice (Roberts, 2009). Riley-Doucet and Wilson (1997) and Alaszewski (2006) support using diaries particularly for nurse education as they can enhance the personal development and performance of professionals through self-disclosure and self-reflection.

A rationale for using diaries to collect data (rather than other methods such as focus groups or interviews) is that, participants in a focus group may feel that there are issues they cannot discuss in front of others or some participants may be indirectly influenced by others. Consequently the data may not be as rich as that of a private diary. Equally with interviews there may be information missed as it could be a retrospective process that is being discussed. It was noted by Stone et al (2003) how valuable diaries were in research due to them capturing the experience close to the time of its occurrence, likewise often other methods of data collection occur a time post event. Alaszewski (2011) notes that there can be recall or memory problems with the participant, which can inhibit accessing accurate data. Diaries not only identify patterns of behaviour but can also be used to provide a greater insight into how individuals interpret situations (Alaszewski, 2006). By using a diary the researcher can ask participants to describe in detail their ongoing experiences with a phenomenon of interest. This method of data collection can provide continuous and evolving information that cannot be collected in face to face interviews (Rebar et al, 2011).

The use of methods such as interviews and observation involves a considerable investment of both time and energy in building up access and trust. These intrusive methods can either alter the behaviour of the participants which the researcher wants to observe, or compromise the researcher (Alaszewski, 2006). There is no superior method of data collection and different methods are more suitable for different purposes, yet diaries are a relatively under used data collection method. Interviews are more costly and time-consuming and the responses may be influenced by the relationship between the interviewer and the respondent (Polgar & Thomas, 2008; Hulley, Cimmings, and Browner, 2001). Likewise this concern could be shared if the diarist is aware that

their diary would be read by others. As such the diarist should be made aware that their diary will remain anonymous and there would be no identifiable information within the diary. The use of diaries in research certainly captures real experiences, this is due to the evidence being written soon after the event, thus making it more accurate and “real” (Stone et al, 2003). There has been a great deal of support for the use of diaries within research, which promotes their usage for the reasons of it being an accurate personal detailed record.

Alaszewski (2006) advocates that diaries are flexible ways of gaining information about activities, thoughts and feelings. Alaszewski (2006) also discusses how diaries have two major advantages over other methods, the first being that they facilitate hard to observe phenomena and secondly, they help overcome memory problems. Coxon (1999) when completing a comparative study assessing the use of diaries versus questionnaires found that although the two sources of data were similar the diaries were more likely to provide accurate data. However, diaries do have limitations, mainly with regards to selection bias and diary cost, although this can vary depending on the diary used. It must be acknowledged though that the cost of the diaries is minimal compared to using focus groups and interviews, as there would not be any cost for time and transcription. However, researchers using solicited diaries may incur costs for the delivery, collection and support of the diarists when completing the diary (Alaszewski, 2006).

Diaries can be either solicited or unsolicited (Jordanova, 2000; Corti, 2003), Alaszewski (2006) asserts that researchers who choose unsolicited diaries, which are diaries that are already available and have relevant information, have no control over the ways in which these diaries are created. Whereas, researchers who use solicited diaries have an opportunity to influence how the diarist keeps the diary. Alaszewski (2006) and Clarkson (2003) do acknowledge though that this can create tension, as although the diarist may want to produce their accounts in their own words the researcher may want to provide some guidance which could inhibit this. Examples of data that could be collected could be text, feelings, pictures, this would though depend on what was being explored. However, for example pictures could allow levels of creativity, and may suit some diarists and researchers alike rather than written text.

It is often useful for a researcher to provide some guidance to participants in order to gain relevant data, and keep the diary focussed on the issue to be researched, this is a key point with solicited diaries. Plummer (2001) acknowledges that researchers who use solicited diaries are undoubtedly intruding into the naturalness of the setting. Often, in order to acquire a richness of data, diaries are left unthemed and blank for the participants to write. The untheming of the diaries may assist in allowing the participants to provide a real and personal account of their feelings, so as not to be guided by the researcher. However, in terms of providing adequate guidance it could be suggested that participants are given an outline page to the diary which explains in simple terms when the diaries should be completed (minimum and maximum frequency per day etc) and what you like them to write about from their day. For example, is there anything specific that you would like them to focus upon such as their emotions, experiences, interactions. It may also be worth highlighting to participants also that names should be omitted from diaries and pseudonyms should be used if they are writing about their interactions with others

Corti (1993) analyses how researchers who use solicited diaries face dilemmas, such as they want the diarists to record what they see as relevant and important. Therefore, inevitably the diary design will be that of an open format which allows the diarists to “free write”, this will allow the participant to write providing a personal comprehensive account. However, the “free writing” may incur problems as the researcher may be interested in a specific aspect of the diarists experience, which may be missed if guidance is not given prior.

There are different methods of qualitative data analysis, which can be advocated when utilising diaries, as a method of data collection in conjunction with a phenomenological approach such as; Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1996), discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), conversational analysis (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). The main aim of IPA is to explore in detail the personal and lived experiences of participants (Lyons and Coyle, 2007). This closely aligns with the lens of phenomenology, and so makes it the most appropriate method of data analysis to discuss. The aim of IPA is an exploration of how participants make sense of the personal and social world, including particular experiences or events for participants (Smith and Osborn, 2008). The use of IPA is growing within qualitative research, particularly within social and health sciences, due to its commitment to examining how people makes sense of life experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) and so would be advocated when using a qualitative phenomenological approach and when using diaries as a data collection method.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has provided an insight into the use of diaries as a data collection method in qualitative phenomenological research. The article has provided an overview to qualitative research. A discussion around utilising a phenomenological approach within research has been provided, and further demonstrated how using diaries as a method of data collection can provide a rich insight that is necessary for qualitative research. The purpose of this article was to allow for an understanding of how diaries can align to the richness required from qualitative data in an under used method of data collection.

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