

Qualitative Research in Nursing and Health Professions Regulation

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Qualitative research is critical for studies about regulatory issues in nursing and across all health professions. When in-depth stakeholder perspectives are needed, qualitative approaches are often the best methodological choice to ensure their viewpoints and experiences are captured when evaluating the consequences of policy implementation or when informing regulation design. Unlike traditional qualitative health care studies that involve patients or providers in single settings, regulatory studies often have complex challenges related to the available sample sizes, sampling strategies, and data collection approaches. Reporting qualitative findings in ways that are informative, useful, and dialogue provoking about regulatory issues must go beyond inserting long quotes with a single sentence explanation. Artfully capturing the participants' stories within the regulatory matter under study is vital for understanding potential and actual consequences of regulations. This article provides an overview of common methodological challenges researchers encounter when conducting qualitative research on professional regulation issues and offers solutions to enhance the quality, rigor, and trustworthiness of the findings. The recommendations may prove useful to researchers examining regulatory issues in nursing and other health professions.

Keywords: Credentialing, government regulation, licensure, policy, professional autonomy, qualitative research

Objectives

- Explain the importance of qualitative research for studies about regulatory issues in nursing.
- Discuss the core concepts of qualitative research.
- Describe common methodological challenges researchers can encounter when conducting qualitative research on professional regulatory issues.
- Identify solutions that can enhance the quality, rigor, and trustworthiness of the findings for regulatory studies.

Health profession regulation is defined as the local and national government oversight needed for professional practice to avoid a risk of harm to the public if practiced by an unprepared or incompetent person. In this paper, we use “regulation” to refer to any activities related to this definition.

Whether examining the consequences of regulations on stakeholders or bringing their voice into the development of regulations around health issues—patient safety, credentialing, competency, scope of practice, transitions to practice, disciplinary actions, etc.—qualitative research is critical for providing exploratory and explanatory data in concert with quantitative results. Qualitative research plays an important role in ensuring the stakeholders' voices are represented and their experiences inform the evaluation of regulations and associated policies when studying nursing and other health professions (Blackman, Wistow, & Byrne, 2013; Bradley, Curry, & Devers, 2007; Evans-Agnew,

Johnson, Liu, & Boutain, 2016; Griffith, Shelton, & Kegler, 2017). On its own and with sufficient replication, qualitative research can provide supporting evidence for the creation, modification, or elimination of regulations.

As qualitative research evolved over the past four decades, standards for rigor and trustworthiness have grown (Bartlam et al., 2016; Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003; Saunders et al., 2018; Tufford & Newman, 2012; Vandermause et al., 2016; Yardley, Watts, Pearson, & Richardson, 2014). Subsequently, the quantity and quality of qualitative research studies published in most health care journals have increased substantially. New methodological advancements around minimum sample sizes, sampling strategies, and techniques for integrating mixed-methods studies are advancing this approach to research. Qualitative research in the 21st century plays a critical role in solidifying the evidence-base and foundation for quantitative studies.

Despite the need for solid qualitative evidence on regulatory topics, the *Journal of Nursing Regulation* receives few qualitative studies of sufficient rigor and trustworthiness to merit publication. A review of published studies shows that in the near decade since the journal's inception, only 12 qualitative studies have been published as compared to over 300 quantitative studies, which is less than 5% of the evidence overall. In an effort to encourage high-quality qualitative submissions on regulatory issues, this article provides an overview of common methodological challenges researchers may encounter when conducting qualitative research on nursing and health profession regulation issues.

A Review of Core Qualitative Research Concepts

Qualitative studies have historically been derided for their analyses because most researchers did not understand standards for qualitative research rigor (Bochner, 2018). To meet this need, experts developed and refined four key concepts to help ensure the rigor of qualitative research findings.

Rigor in qualitative research is defined as how the researcher establishes the trustworthiness of the findings (Morse, 2015). Rigorous qualitative research reflects how well the study was implemented and managed unforeseen circumstances. It has four, well-established dimensions that have equivalent conceptual counterparts in quantitative research. Table 1 provides the definitions and equivalent quantitative terms for establishing rigor in qualitative research studies. While Morse (2015) argues that qualitative and quantitative terminology for rigor should use the same terms, the qualitative specific terms for rigor were developed over 30 years ago and have shaped the field's language. Thus, for most qualitative studies, demonstrating explicitly or implicitly how the researcher ensured the rigor of the study is an important part of the dissemination process. Tracy's (2010) eight criteria for "excellent" qualitative research also offer authors clear guidance for enhancing the rigor of their studies.

Part of ensuring rigor in any research study is mitigating bias. Bias is an important concept for qualitative research because it pertains to the central concern about the possible influence of the ideas and opinions of the researchers conducting the research study. For example, how does the reader know the researchers maintained as much objectivity as possible during the interview process? How much do the readers know about the process of results analysis? Mitigating bias is an important part of the analysis process of qualitative data. Bias in qualitative research occurs when researchers ask leading questions during interviews or impose views during the analysis process, guiding the findings to reflect their own beliefs instead of staying objective. It is the same phenomenon as when quantitative researchers stretch statistical analyses to obtain the results they want rather than the true results. Additionally, mitigating bias helps ensure study reproducibility, which is an important concern for most funding bodies.

Qualitative rigor is also established through data saturation. Data saturation occurs when a researcher has conducted enough interviews that no new information is being gathered from participants (Patton, 2015). It is often underreported in most published qualitative studies. Data saturation is an important concept in qualitative research because it indicates when no additional interviews are needed and data collection can end. Poorly planned qualitative studies, for example, budget only for a certain number of interviews and assume data saturation will happen within that number, rather than continuing the study until data saturation is achieved. In effect, data saturation happens within a range of participants (Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi,

2017; Saunders et al., 2018). Sample homogeneity vs. heterogeneity, contextual factors, and the complexity of the phenomenon of interest can all influence when data saturation occurs.

The final rigor-related core concept in qualitative research is trustworthiness. For research findings to be trustworthy, they need to meet the four criteria associated with research rigor, and they should have a common truth that resonates with individuals with similar experiences.

An additional step to help authors illustrate the rigor of their studies is to use a critical appraisal checklist. Majid and Vanstone (2018) reviewed the strengths and limitations of eight qualitative-focused critical appraisal checklists. When preparing a qualitative manuscript, a checklist can assist researchers with organization of the paper and help ensure all required content is included.

A Note on Cross-language Qualitative Research on Regulatory Issues

In international studies or those with stakeholders who may not speak the same language as the researcher, it is critically important for researchers to systematically manage language barriers between participants and themselves. Language translation places data at risk for semantic, conceptual, technical, and content-related issues due to potential translation errors (Squires, 2008). For qualitative data, poorly translated interview data mean findings become untrustworthy, or, as in the quantitative lexicon, not reliable or valid (Squires, 2009). Using qualified interpreters, multi-language coding processes, and independent checks on the translation and coding processes can help lessen these risks (Chapple & Ziebland, 2018; Chiumento, Rahman, Machin, & Frith, 2017; Croot et al., 2011; Lincoln, Gonzalez y Gonzalez, & Aroztegui Massera, 2016; MacKenzie, 2015; Santos, Black, & Sandelowski, 2014; Suurmond, Woudstra, & Essink-Bot, 2016; Temple, 2002; Wong & Poon, 2010).

An Overview of Qualitative Study Designs Appropriate for Regulatory Studies

A qualitative approach to research is not a design in and of itself. Like quantitative research, there are different types of qualitative study designs that inform study implementation, sampling approach, analysis, and study goal. For regulatory studies, some approaches may be more appropriate than others. Table 2 provides an overview of different types of qualitative study designs and highlights their strengths and limitations in regulatory studies (Patton, 2015).

Choosing the appropriate study design for a regulatory issue is the most important first step a researcher can take to generate a study that provides quality evidence (Carter & Little, 2007). The qualitative study designs most researchers are familiar with—grounded theory, phenomenology, qualitative descriptive—all have merits for studying regulatory issues. Ethnography,

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