

# Qualitative Methods to Advance Care, Diagnosis, and Therapy in Rheumatic Diseases

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## KEYWORDS

- Qualitative • Focus group • Interview • Patient perspective • Phenomenology
- Coding • Ethnography • Conceptual framework

## KEY POINTS

- Qualitative research is an indispensable form of research vital information that impacts the biopsychosocial burden of chronic illness and in improved health care operations.
- Qualitative research is often used as a foundation or to complement more traditional quantitative research methods to augment knowledge of rheumatic diseases.
- Qualitative research, although inherently subjective, is a robust process that can be evaluated and held to a high standard of quality.

*Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.*

—William Bruce Cameron, Professor of Sociology, 1963

## INTRODUCTION

The last 2 centuries of medical research advancements were driven by the systematic collection of measurable assessments relying on quantifiable constructs and

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Disclosure Statement: Neither author has any conflicts of interest to disclose relevant to the contents of this article.

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Rheum Dis Clin N Am ■ (2018) ■–■  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rdc.2018.01.004>

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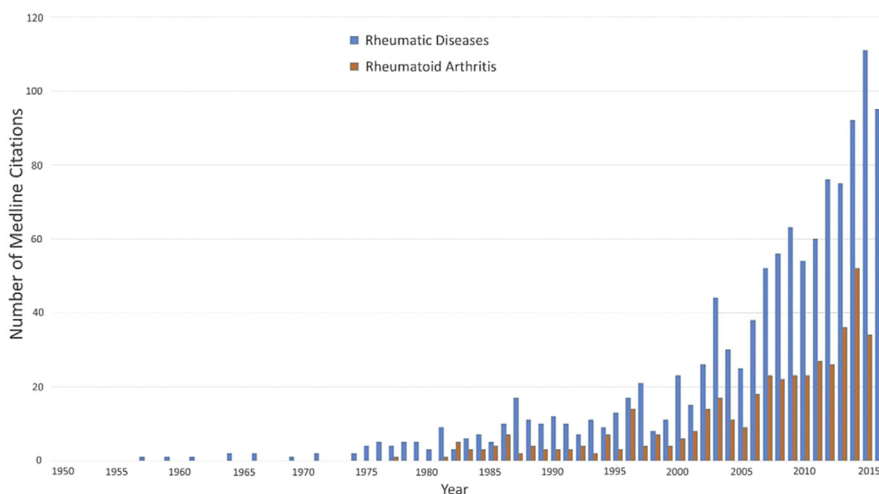
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producing measurable variables within populations. Quantitative research has far progressed medical science, but tells us little about the opinions and experiences of living with disease that could provide actionable insight but are less amenable to quantification. Qualitative research, in contrast, provides valuable insight into patient experiences, attitudes, behavior, meaning, and thoughts, and broadens our understanding of human disease. Thus, in recent years, qualitative research has carved a bona fide position as valuable science in health care operations and understanding of disease (Fig. 1).<sup>1,2</sup> This position has been hard won for a science that inherently relies on subjectivity in both data collection and analysis, and, although it endeavors to be free of bias, will always be guided by investigator perception and sensitivity. Although recently less so, qualitative research still faces challenges in obtaining research funding and a difficulty publishing in high-impact journals persisting to some extent.<sup>3</sup>

This article reviews the underpinnings, usefulness, and validity of qualitative methods; punctuated with examples of how they have been applied in rheumatic disease research. To optimally define qualitative methodology, it is contrasted in this article with its counterpart, quantitative methodology, to which all readers have an acquaintanceship, hopefully making it easier to assimilate the less familiar ideas of qualitative research, revealing how these seemingly diverse schools are, in fact, interdependent, with high-quality research often using both approaches. This review is addressed to a broad spectrum of readers, ranging from those wishing to better appraise the burgeoning number of published qualitative studies to researchers considering the role qualitative methods might play in answering their own research questions. We hope to inspire serious interest—and perhaps dedicated careers—in applying these methods to deciphering a deeper understanding of the biopsychosocial burden of rheumatic disease and how qualitative research methods might support the development of incremental management strategies<sup>4</sup> to improve health-related quality of life, and perhaps even survival.<sup>5</sup>

## WHAT IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

Qualitative research explores the meaning attached to health-related experiences, cultures, views, opinions, and practices by individuals within their personal social



**Fig. 1.** Number of Medline citations identified for a search of qualitative research and rheumatic disease from 1950 to 2015.

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