

Hearing the Silenced Voices of Underserved Women



The Role of Qualitative Research in Gynecologic and Reproductive Care

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KEYWORDS

• Qualitative research • Underserved women • Gynecology • Fibroids

KEY POINTS

- Patient-centered care requires that health systems understand the unique needs and values of patients.
- Quantitative research designs provide an important but limited understanding of women's health experiences and needs.
- Limited understanding of women's health experiences and needs can lead to the development of ineffective health care strategies and treatment.
- Qualitative research exploring women's health and lived experiences uniquely helps give a voice to the health experiences of underserved women.
- Qualitative research enables the provision of truly patient-centered care and lays the groundwork for inclusive quantitative studies.

INTRODUCTION

Patient-centered care (PCC) is health care that is respectful, compassionate, equitable, transparent, and responsive to patients' needs and values.^{1,2} Although the concept of PCC has been academically discussed for many decades,¹ it was not until the Institute of Medicine defined PCC as a primary aim for improvement in health care that the concept seems to have been widely integrated into health systems.^{1,2} Since

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that time, predominantly quantitative research has found that PCC is associated with many positive health outcomes, including improved physical and emotional well-being, patient satisfaction, treatment adherence, and patient-physician communication.^{1,3,4} However, in order to achieve these positive outcomes, health systems must first understand the unique needs and values of patients; this likely requires the use of qualitative research designs that can inform subsequent quantitative studies. It is therefore vital for health care research to include qualitative analysis of the perspectives and experiences of patients who have historically been overlooked. The purpose of this article is:

1. To describe the strengths and limitations of qualitative approaches and how they differ from the more common quantitative approaches.
2. To describe why this approach is particularly important for underserved communities.
3. To review application of qualitative studies to various populations of underserved women.

Qualitative Versus Quantitative Research Paradigms

Researchers seek to gain knowledge in order to increase insight and solve problems. They may rely on diverse worldviews or paradigms that guide their beliefs about how knowledge is constructed and how it can be discovered. Two common paradigms are the positivist and naturalistic/constructionist paradigms. These paradigms respectively provide the framework for quantitative and qualitative approaches to inquiry.⁵ Although each approach provides valuable insight and data, the naturalistic approach to data inquiry often provides the richest understandings of women's lived experiences and health behaviors.

First, within the positivist paradigm, knowledge/reality is thought to be objective, measurable, and cannot be socially constructed. As a result of the fixed nature of reality, study results can be generalized to other people and situations. Positivist researchers frequently conduct studies to test theories or models using a deductive approach. The theory is chosen a priori and then hypotheses are developed to be tested. Research within the positivist paradigm typically takes a quantitative approach to inquiry. Quantitative research methods include the collection of numeric or categorical data either through experiment or survey, which are then statistically analyzed to test the relationship between independent and dependent variables (**Box 1**).⁵⁻⁷

In contrast, naturalistic researchers believe that individuals construct knowledge through engagement with others in the world and that knowledge/reality is subjective because the interpretation of data is influenced by the researcher's beliefs. Their approach to data inquiry is inductive and generates a theory or hypothesis following the examination of participant's perspectives. Naturalistic researchers therefore often use qualitative research designs to collect data.^{5,7} Three common qualitative research designs are:

1. Phenomenology, which is used to describe the perspectives of people who have experienced a particular phenomenon.
2. Ethnography, which involves the exploration and understanding of a specific culture or group.
3. Grounded theory, which seeks to construct a theory about how individuals work to resolve problems.⁸

When little is known about a phenomenon, qualitative research may lead to increased understanding and the generation of theories of the phenomenon. Quantitative research is therefore guided by the results of qualitative research. Thus,

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