

# Planning and designing qualitative research

Global Health and Social Science Website



# Learning Objectives

- At the end of the session you should be able to:
- use a simple planning framework
- select, analyse and formulate a statement for a research problem
- formulate a research aim and objectives

# Aims and objectives in research studies



- Any kind of investigation must have a focus for its activities.
- When planning a qualitative research study there needs to be a focus for its activities.
- Linked to this broad aim are the specific objectives that the investigation addresses?



# Aim

- Normally a study will have 1 aim: a broad statement of what the study is setting out to achieve or to contribute towards
- Usually identifies the target group or population that is the focus of the study and describes what it is that we are trying to do e.g. *To investigate the perceptions and behaviour of women, men and health workers in Namitambo in relation to pre-term birth and infections in pregnancy*

# Objectives

- Normally a number of objectives in a study
- More specific statement of what the study needs to do to achieve its aim
- *e.g. To explore how women, men and health workers understand pre-term birth and its causes*
- Can start out with broader statements of objectives and make these more specific as the study proceed



# Example of aims and objectives

***Example of a study from Tolhurst (2005) 'I don't want all my babies to go to the grave': perceptions of preterm birth in Southern Malawi***

**Goal:** To reduce pregnancy loss for women in southern Malawi

**Aim:** To investigate the perceptions and behaviour of women, men and health workers in Namitambo in relation to pre-term birth and infections in pregnancy

## **Objectives**

- To explore how women, men and health workers understand pre-term birth and its causes
- To investigate how women and men perceive infections in pregnancy
- To understand the health seeking behaviour of women during pregnancy and pre-term labour

# Another example:

A further example taken from Hamilton, 2005:

**Aim:** To explore the potential for abuse within the counselling setting of Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT) in Kenya

## **Objectives:**

- To describe the counselling experiences of VCT service user and providers in Kenya
- To assess and document service user's and provider's perceptions of abuse and abusive experiences within the VCT counselling setting in Kenya
- To explore perceptions of best ethical counselling practice among key stakeholders in VCT in Kenya
- To contribute options for improving and maintaining quality assurance in counselling during scale-up of VCT in Kenya

# Types of objectives

As discussed in the pervious powerpoint - theory underlying quantitative and qualitative research mean that different objectives are likely to guide different studies

## **Positivist/quantitative**

- To extrapolate
- To count
- To quantify
- To measure
- To determine the effect of A versus B

## **Naturalist/qualitative**

- To identify
- To explore
- To qualify
- To elucidate
- To describe
- To document



# Research questions

- Ask what you want to find out vs. objectives which state what you are going to do
- Usually ask about ‘the big picture’ – i.e. at the level of the aim, e.g. for example 2:
- Is there potential for abuse in the counselling room?
- What are the options for interventions and guidelines for policy-makers in scale-up?

# Research questions

- Sometimes research questions are also developed at the level of objectives, e.g. for example 1:
  - How do women, men and health workers understand pre-term birth and its causes?
  - How do women and men perceive infections in pregnancy?
  - What kinds of healthcare do women seek in pregnancy and pre-term labour and why?



# Research questions

- Can be further sub-divided to give more detail – e.g. for example 1:
- Research question 1: How do women, men and health workers understand pre-term birth and its causes?
  - 1.1. How do women, men and health workers define pre-term birth?
  - 1.2. How do they differentiate it from other types of pregnancy loss such as miscarriage?
  - 1.3. What do they think causes pre-term birth and how?

# Deciding what to research

- **Criteria for prioritising problems for research Varkevisser (1991):**

1. Is the topic relevant?

- How serious; Who perceives it as important? Who will benefit?

2. Does it duplicate other work?

- Check available information; do important questions still remain?

3. Is it feasible?

- Do you have the resources - available participants, skilled personnel, time and money?

# Criteria continued

4. Is it politically acceptable?

- Of interest to policy makers/ include policy makers in the design?

5. How applicable are the possible results and recommendations?

- Is it likely the findings will be used?

6. How urgently is the information required?

- Urgency? Which research topic should be tackled first?

7. Is the topic ethically acceptable?

- Acceptable to participants? Possibility of adverse effects?

# Qualitative research design and application is iterative

- Rather than starting with a research question or hypothesis that precedes any data collection, the researcher is encouraged not to separate the the stages of design, data collection and analysis, but to go backwards and forwards between the raw data and the process of conceptualisation, thereby making sense of the data throughout the period of data collection' (Pope and Mays, 1995:44)

# Tool for helping to plan qualitative research study

Policy

Aim

Secondary  
data

Sub-issues

Objectives

Checklist of  
informants

Informants

Methods

Trustworthiness

Notes

# Utilisation of secondary data/information

- Avoid wasting time in repeating studies or collecting data that already exist
- Reveal gaps or biases in existing data/info
- Stimulate ideas/Suggest paths of investigation for researchers
- Assist in identifying issues and defining study objectives
- Be used in quantitative or qualitative research



# Creating a problem tree/problem analysis diagram from Varkevisser 1991

- Write down the core problem/questions in the centre of a flip chart
- Brainstorm possible issues or factors contributing to the problem/question
- Identify further contributing issues
- Attempt to organise related issues together into larger categories

# References

- de Koning K, Dockery G, and Theobald S (2002) Qualitative Research Planning Framework (unpublished)
- Hamilton C (2005) HIV Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT) in Kenya: Exploring the Potential for Abuse in the Counselling Room, MCommH dissertation, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine.
- Tolhurst, R. Theobald, S. Kayira, E. Ntonya, C. Kafalula, G., Nielson, J. & Van Der Broek, N. "I don't want all my babies to go to the grave": Perceptions of pre-term birth in southern Malawi. *Midwifery* 2007, Jan 19, epub ahead of hard copy PMID 17290496
- Varkevisser C., et al. (1991) Designing and conducting health systems research projects. Vol.2., Part 1, International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada, pp.28, 30-34, 48-56.