

Qualitative research in medicine

The scope of this thematic edition is to give visibility to qualitative research developed in the field of health practices. The justification for this choice is the low value attributed to this method by most health professionals, especially physicians. Quantitative studies are hegemonic in this field and comprehensive approaches are scantily considered.

The qualitative studies published in health journals are in the minority, especially those that are conducted by physicians. On the other hand, the few health professionals who concentrate on the qualitative method are often criticized for the superficiality with which they address the social reality and for their inability to debate empirical data and apply theory in a consistent and in-depth manner.

Over the years, greater value and openness has been attributed to publications of a qualitative nature in journals in the medical area, albeit still far below the desirable level. There is also acknowledgement of the contributions that the studies developed with this method have contributed. Health in any age, place, and social class has distinct representations and also depends on individual, religious, and philosophical values. Thus, concepts of health and illness are based on the social, economic and cultural context of each historical period. This perspective demands that the non-quantifiable aspects of the experience of becoming ill or maintaining health should be addressed.

However, the process of incorporation of the qualitative method into health research, especially with respect to medical practice, has not been straightforward. This can be due either to the myth of quantification as a single parameter of scientificity and almost synonymous with truth, or to lack of knowledge about the scope of qualitative research. It is a mistake to think that qualitative research is directed at capturing singular experiences which, by definition, cannot be generalized. In fact, one of the main potential benefits of qualitative studies is the revelation of the significance that orients human actions and interactions. Arising from this, another great advantage of qualitative studies is the possibility of deconstructing the dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity: human achievements demand the objectification of subjectivities; similarly, the values attributed to and the conditions of possibility of these achievements, including Science, are human, historical, and social constructs.

The understanding of illness as also being a social object does not exclude the materiality of bodies. It is therefore a matter of integrating knowledge that comes from different fields – the biomedical sciences and the social and human sciences – to take into account the continuities, discontinuities and intercessions that exist between the *health, disease and illness* objects.

Qualitative researchers complain about the difficulty of publishing the results of their work in journals in the health area. This difficulty lies both in the lack of training of health professionals in themes of the human sciences, resulting in works that are often limited from a theoretical or methodological standpoint, and in the reluctance of some editors to acknowledge their worth.

Several journals in the medical area are still skeptical and sometimes downright hostile regarding the publication of articles that include results derived from qualitative studies. It is as if medical practice could dispense with studies focusing on disease, suffering and adherence to therapies as a result of social dynamics, including the policy and organization of practices and services.

This edition features articles resulting from qualitative investigations conducted by teams that include physicians. The participation of physicians in studies of a qualitative nature together with researchers from other areas can contribute to the reduction of the distance that exists between public health and clinical practice and also to the elaboration and implementation of health policies. We trust it will be of interest to the readers.

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