

# Why, When, How, and Where to Find an Experienced Qualitative Researcher

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**T**he suggestion to seek out an experienced qualitative researcher is often added on to the end of articles designed to teach readers about qualitative research. For example, in the *Journal of Graduate Medical Education* Qualitative Rip Out Series, 5 of 8 articles in the series include advice to find an experienced qualitative researcher. For instance, in the commentary that closes the series, the authors recommend: *[Those interested in qualitative research] are well-advised to find collaborators skilled in qualitative research to assist them in conducting their investigations.*<sup>1(p155)</sup>

Although well-intended, this advice may go unheeded if readers are not sure *why, when, how, or where* to find qualitative research collaborators. Because physicians and graduate medical education (GME) leaders are being asked to do more with less time, establishing collaborations with qualitative researchers is critical. In this editorial we provide answers to those questions.

## Why

Why are guides for qualitative research even necessary? Most physicians and GME leaders have clinical backgrounds and are schooled in quantitative research traditions, if not formally trained in these traditions. Critical distinctions between quantitative versus qualitative research traditions, and the philosophies that underlie those traditions, can feel foreign.

Experienced qualitative researchers can help physicians and GME leaders access different insights that qualitative research uniquely affords, for example, lived experiences or complex and unfolding processes. Once the research question and phenomenon of interest are set, a qualitative researcher can drill down on useful methods. Because they are likely aware of diverse ways to rigorously collect qualitative data, experienced qualitative researchers can go beyond interviews and focus groups and suggest methods like audio diaries, photo elicitation, rapid ethnography, and more.

Experienced qualitative researchers can suggest various sampling strategies and discuss sufficient sample sizes.<sup>2</sup> They can help prepare would-be qualitative researchers for managing, coding, and analyzing large data sets. Experienced qualitative researchers can encourage others, who are curious about qualitative research, to build checks on trustworthiness into their study. For example, if or when to member check, code independently, and iteratively collect and analyze data. Finally, they can help to translate findings from qualitative research into a coherent manuscript that could be accepted for publication.

## When

When is a good time to consult an experienced qualitative researcher? Based on our experience, it's never too early! Doing qualitative research may require a different way to think about research altogether, so consulting early, when ideas are just percolating, is ideal. Another important aspect to timing is the length of the study. Qualitative research is a marathon, not a sprint. Experienced qualitative researchers can provide perspective on how much time may be needed to collect and analyze qualitative data, and then write up the qualitative research manuscript. They can help those who want to embark on qualitative research set realistic timelines and manage that time.

## How

There are different ways that experienced qualitative researchers might handle a consult. Based on our experience, physicians and GME leaders looking for qualitative research advice would be well served if they come to the consult with the following:

1. Be able to state the pressing problem in medical education that they want to address, the problem that keeps them up at night.
2. Be ready to speak to the extant literature—the current line of thinking—relevant to that

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TABLE

## Resources for Qualitative Research Support

| Local/Regional Resources                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Medicine, health system                                                       | Find someone who has published qualitative research in your department or larger health system.                                                                                                                                      |
| Medicine, health system                                                       | Contact PhDs in other departments in the health system (eg, clinical psychology).                                                                                                                                                    |
| Medicine, health system                                                       | Inquire about in-house qualitative resources (eg, Qualitative and Mixed Methods Learning Lab <sup>3</sup> ).                                                                                                                         |
| Schools of nursing, social work, public health, etc                           | Partner with colleagues in nursing and other health-related programs.                                                                                                                                                                |
| Schools of nursing, social work, public health, health policy, etc            | Search course catalogs at your affiliated university or a local university for qualitative research courses; take a course or reach out to the course instructor and ask about potential collaborators, including graduate students. |
| Library                                                                       | Reach out to librarians at your institution; they may know about qualitative research support.                                                                                                                                       |
| Engineering, education, communication, business, sociology, anthropology, etc | Consider reaching out to potential collaborators in schools/disciplines outside of the health sciences; they might have expertise about the phenomenon you want to explore.                                                          |
| National/International Resources                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Qualitative research course                                                   | Take for-profit (eg, ResearchTalk <sup>4</sup> ) or not-for-profit (eg, Medical Education Research Certificate Program <sup>5</sup> ) courses that may or may not be specific to health professions.                                 |
| Qualitative research conference                                               | Attend a conference specific to qualitative research.                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Qualitative research workshop                                                 | Attend sessions at specialty-specific conferences where workshops/seminars include qualitative research; reach out to workshop/seminar leaders and ask about collaboration.                                                          |
| Virtual/Low-Cost Resources                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Enduring materials                                                            | Explore listservs or websites (eg, Non-Physician Professional Educators <sup>6</sup> ).                                                                                                                                              |
| Online education                                                              | Tap into resources for qualitative data analysis (eg, Delve tools for qualitative analysis <sup>7</sup> ).                                                                                                                           |
| Books, journals                                                               | Check out textbooks <sup>8,9</sup> or journal series. <sup>10-17</sup>                                                                                                                                                               |
| Virtual communities                                                           | Consider joining special interest groups within clinical specialties (eg, Academic Pediatrics Association's Qualitative Research Special Interest Group <sup>18</sup> ).                                                             |

pressing problem, as well as the gaps in the literature. Also, what will happen if that gap is not filled?

3. Be open to new ways of thinking about and doing research.

At the same time, physicians and GME leaders looking for qualitative research advice should stand strong in asking a research question that they want to answer, not what the consultant finds interesting. Finally, they should clarify upfront if there will be a charge for qualitative research consultation.

## Where

As displayed in the TABLE, there is a wide range of resources for qualitative research support. Some are within the field of medicine; some are in other schools or colleges. Some are national programs; some are specialty specific. Some physicians and GME leaders will have funds to cover the cost of qualitative research training; some will not. Some will be open to travel; others will need to stay close to home.

However, the most important characteristics are curiosity and tenacity as a researcher. These characteristics cut across specialties and disciplines and are essential.

In this editorial we have tried to answer the questions of why, when, how, and where to look for advice from experienced qualitative researchers. More than ever, time is a precious commodity for physicians and GME leaders. We hope this editorial provides a useful starting point for those who want to explore and potentially engage in qualitative research.

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