

create workshop 2012

"Qualitative research in perspective: Achieving excellence in qualitative research practice"

"Be informed, critical and reflexive" was the message that resonated in the minds of 32 researchers who came from 12 different countries to attend the CREATE workshop. Held in Prague, Czech Republic, and facilitated by Professor Kerry Chamberlain from Massey University, this year's workshop provided many invaluable insights into the vital components of qualitative research, an approach that remains less common among health psychologists at large.

The 3-day workshop focussed on the complete process of conducting qualitative research from its theoretical assumptions and design, through data collection methods, interpretation of results and finally publishing. The first part of the workshop focussed on the differences in the views and understanding of the world between qualitative and quantitative approaches. Much of this session looked at their complementary as opposed to conflicting aspects. As in any research process, it is essential to select beforehand what pathway one will take to answering one's research questions. Comprehension of the delineation and interaction between epistemology, theoretical frameworks, methodologies and methods outlined during the workshop does not only help 'wrap' a research idea into a coherent concept; it also serves as guide, providing theoretical support. By asking questions about what it is that we want to know and how we can attain the required knowledge, we need to choose or define an epistemological standpoint from which to start. Epistemology is a theory of knowledge that "deals with the nature, sources,

and processes of knowledge" (Baptiste, 2001). The CREATE participants developed understanding of it through exposure to three examples of the many epistemological stances; objectivism, social constructivism and subjectivism. Epistemology affirms theoretical perspectives, or a set of assumptions about the world that we are asking questions about, which provides a primary framework for data interpretation. Theoretical perspectives (e.g. hermeneutics, feminism,...) are further linked to methodologies (e.g. discourse analysis, ethnography,...) which offer more concrete plans of verifying those assumptions by applying specific techniques or procedures to data collecting methods (e.g. interview, document analysis,...) (Crotty, 1998).

Although one could argue that the process of defining of the abovementioned elements of research design could be more deductive than inductive, it is meaningful to set these elements before the actual research takes place, regardless of the direction of the thinking that is employed. Creativity and cross-combination of various elements to best accommodate a research idea is encouraged rather than "getting stuck" with existing theoretical choices. As long as the approach chosen is justified via an informed and thorough manner, there is no reason for it not to be undertaken. Such an approach enables us to justify a particular research design and explain a research rationale, while developing a critical mind at the same time.



The second part of the workshop delved more deeply into qualitative data analysis. Some of the qualitative research methodologies, such as grounded theory, phenomenology, ethnography and thematic analysis were explored. Starting out with an admittedly limited view of qualitative research, our perspectives were broadened as the facilitator provided us with insights into his work by sharing his knowledge and experience of several data collection methods. These ranged from individually-focused to group-based approaches; which included written, audio and visual means of data collection. Furthermore, various issues were highlighted that a qualitative researcher should consider during the process of data analysis, including the distinction between description and interpretation and thinking beyond themes when interpreting information. We soon appreciated the need to challenge our pre-conceived notions of qualitative research. The key factors above all else are that one should be

informed, critical and reflective. By being reflective, we become aware of our own values and assumptions and how they shape and direct our research and we learn to question assumptions underlying research paradigms.

The writing session was defined by the self-explanatory motto "*Invent, compose, revise*". Qualitative studies typically use quotes, transcripts or pictures to pass their message on to their audience and this session, filled with such documentation, was nothing less than an excellent representation of what dimensions of a story are possible to capture via qualitative techniques. Therefore, because of the inherent complexity of many of the findings in qualitative studies, it is essential to make the message as clear as possible, while preserving its richness and meaning. It is also important to be sensitive to any inconsistencies in our data rather than being satisfied by confirmed hypotheses, as it is these incongruities that lead to a better understanding of the "real world".

Undertaking qualitative research can be highly rewarding and the capabilities of a critical mind should be harnessed, refined and confronted so that we are inspired to push the boundaries of qualitative research. Throughout the course the CREATErs were consistently encouraged to be inquisitive and critical, yet sensitive and perceptive.

The 2012 CREATE session on 'Qualitative Research in Perspective' resulted with its delegates walking away with a newly acquired outlook on conducting qualitative research. In addition to its highly informative nature, the workshop also inspired many of us to re-think our ways of approaching qualitative studies and how they could be pursued in a more systematic and informed manner. The organisation of this workshop has provided a highly conducive environment for intellectual exchange between



researchers desiring to conduct potent qualitative work within the field of health psychology, and the rich social programme offered ample opportunities for participants to forge international relationships. We believe that participation in this workshop was an inspiring first step into the waters of qualitative research, and that the discourse on conducting effective qualitative research in health psychology will continue at future group meetings. ■

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References

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