

Successes and Challenges in Longitudinal Qualitative Research with Older Adults

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INTRODUCTION

Longitudinal qualitative research methods have been used to study the experiences of successful aging among older adults. However, longitudinal studies involving older adults have had challenges in retaining participant numbers over time, particularly in rural settings. Few studies identify supports to minimize attrition and encourage rural older adults to continue to participate in longitudinal research. There are also challenges in developing an analytic strategy that will effectively cover the nuanced understanding of the experiences of older adults within the context of kin, community and policy supports. The objectives of this poster presentation are to: 1) describe key strategies to enhance retention of rural older adults in longitudinal studies; and 2) identify methodological and analytic successes and challenges in qualitative research conducted over time.

HEALTHY AGING IN PLACE STUDY

The purposes of this study were to identify the policy, community and kin social support systems that influence health outcomes for rural older adults and to create an assessment framework to monitor the range and impact of these interventions in supporting seniors' health outcomes in rural areas. Data was collected over 3 years (2011-2014) through 5 waves of in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured



interviews with 40 rural older adults in three rural communities in Saskatchewan, Canada. In this presentation, we highlight key strategies employed to facilitate retention of rural older adults in this longitudinal qualitative study and discuss the theoretical framework that is guiding our qualitative data analysis strategy.

Retention Strategies

Ongoing attention to relationship building: The lead researcher and research staff must be regularly visible in the communities. Activities to nurture this relationship throughout the course of the study included: regular communication with community partners to update on progress; annual face-to-face meetings of the full research team to share study progress; collaborative decision making on methods and shared learning across communities and organizations.



Active and genuine community engagement: A Rural Seniors Advisory Committee was established with local community partners to include them in all stages of the research process. Other strategies included face-to-face interviews, a toll free number for participants to contact researchers, traveling to participants' homes, researcher attendance at community events, thank you cards, holiday cards, fridge magnets in place of business cards and bi-annual newsletters.



Responsive and flexible methods: Study modifications were made based on participant feedback including moving from closed to open-ended interview guides, reducing repetition between interview waves, evaluations of participant satisfaction, and increasing data collection frequency to better identify rural seniors' changing needs over the aging process.

Multiple communication and knowledge exchange methods: Regular reporting on study progress, highlighting benefits to the community and outlining next steps in the research process were critical to retention. A range of methods included plain language community reports, briefing notes, journal articles, newspaper stories, radio interviews, community workshops and presentations and a regularly monitored Facebook page.



Longitudinal Qualitative Data Analysis

GUIDING CONCEPTS

- ▶ Data analysis focuses on the concept of change, both in issues/phenomenon and processes over time (Corden & Millar, 2007)
- ▶ Methodological flexibility enables the research processes and study questions to evolve with the research over time. Participants can offer new and alternate perspectives on the study topic as their lived experience evolves for the duration of the study (Koro-Ljungberg & Bussing, 2013)
- ▶ Common approaches for longitudinal data analysis include thematic analysis to identify key patterns and themes in the study, and comparative analysis to document narrative changes between case and group comparisons (Lewis, 2007). A deeper contextual understanding of the topic can be further achieved by utilizing multiple data analysis approaches.
- ▶ Cross comparative analysis used to examine individual participant change over time and also study other variables in depth such as gender (Adalbjarnardottir, 2002)
- ▶ Longitudinal research highlights ethical challenges related to continuous informed consent (Corden & Millar, 2007).
- ▶ During thematic analysis, multiple coders and frequent team meetings recommended to support inter-rater reliability, discuss emerging findings and resolve issues during coding process (Calman, Brunton, & Molassiotis, 2013; Goldade et al. 2008; Lawton, Ranking, Peel, & Douglas, 2009)

STRATEGIES

Our analytic approach highlights the importance of identifying findings that are reflective of rural seniors' experiences and that also address the program and policy responses that are necessary to support healthy aging for older adults in rural settings.

First stage (initial 2 waves of data)

- ▶ Utilization of Cantor's (1989) model of hierarchical compensatory theory of social supports and social care as a beginning framework for data analysis
- ▶ Two researchers coded interview data independently using thematic analysis
- ▶ Frequent team meetings to review coding categories
- ▶ Initial coding of the first 2 waves of data yielded identification of interventions at the kin, community, and policy levels (Jeffery et al., 2013)
 - Policy interventions: public transportation, home care services, built environment, health services, housing
 - Community interventions: physical activity, social activities, yard and home services
 - Kin interventions: meals, social interaction, transportation, care giving, finances

Second stage (5 waves of data)

- ▶ Continued use of thematic analysis for consistency
- ▶ Two researchers compare codes from all 5 waves of data and in consultation with full team will develop a final list of codes
- ▶ Discussion of links between themes
- ▶ Used detailed code books and documented all data analysis decisions made over time
- ▶ Integration of narrative approach to capture the experience of aging over time with 12 participants from all three rural locations
- ▶ Inclusion of researcher reflections in narrative analysis between case comparison through creation of a narrative profile

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