A qualitative longitudinal approach to addiction research
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Background: Addictions research is overwhelmingly quantitative in approach and qualitative methods are less well explored and utilised4. Furthermore, people with drug and alcohol problems experience health care provision over time, not as a point in time.

Longitudinal qualitative research (LQR) is a methodology in which participants are interviewed several times over a period of time. LQR is a novel research method that seeks to identify critical moments of change, which can then be explored in-depth.

The method allows for a rich, narrative exploration of peoples’ experiences of healthcare and/or illness processes.

To draw an analogy with movies, LQR could be described as an arthouse vignette movie, whereas large quantitative longitudinal research studies are the epic blockbusters. The arthouse movie has the time and focus to develop complex characterisation of the subjects of the story.

The use of LQR is advantageous in addictions research as it can identify moments of change in the dynamic process of recovery, aiding in the generation of theories from which potential treatment approaches can be derived3.

My research, which is exploring the experiences of individuals with non-illicit pathways to dependence on pharmaceutical opioids in New Zealand, will be using an LQR approach.

How is LQR different from other qualitative research methods? There are 3 critical elements: change, time and process3.

Qualitative research is cross-sectional, giving an understanding of the range of experiences in health. Analysis is conducted with respect to a specific time and place or participants’ recollection of specific events4.

Prospectively collected qualitative data (LQR) enables the development of insight into the longitudinal experience of participants (change) that differs from that described by cross-sectional data. The narrative nature of LQR analysis can identify critical moments in the trajectory of experience which may be further analysed cross-sectionally (process)4.

Advantages: The context in which change occurs can be described, and participants’ own conceptions of causality can be explored.

The researcher can gain insights into the internal conversations of participants by comparing intra-individual agreement in data between time points.

The impact of recall distortion on data is minimised because of the close temporal relationship between the interview and the experience.

LQR studies can be analysed in multiple ways and from different perspectives, with alternative explanations for the data able to be derived.

Challenges: The greatest weakness of LQR is considered to be its time intensive nature, which also inevitably renders it expensive to conduct.

References:
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