Using Shampoo to Explore Qualitative Research With Undergraduate Students

This activity was conducted in a senior-level undergraduate research course and focused on helping students understand qualitative analysis and the purpose of qualitative research.

Prior to the in-class activity, students were e-mailed an anonymous, optional survey titled, “How do you choose your shampoo?” The topic of shampoo choice originated from a “ways of knowing” activity published by Herrman (2016, p. 250) that was centered on understanding types of evidence used in nursing practice. Students were asked basic demographic information, as well as two open-ended questions:

- How did you decide to purchase and use the shampoo you currently use the majority of the time?
- If you had to switch shampoo brand, how would you decide what new shampoo you would choose?

An online survey prior to class was used to conserve time and allow for more classroom discussion. In-class responses to the survey were used to conduct qualitative data analysis. Of a total of 23 students, 13 participated in the survey, which was a perfect number for obtaining data saturation.

In-class, the instructor initially read through all of the responses, asking the students to keep in mind their reaction to the responses and perhaps even to write small memos to themselves about the responses. The instructor then returned to the first response from the survey, and the students began open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) of the responses. Three different individuals were asked to suggest what they thought was key from each individual response, and the idea of triangulation and interrater reliability was brought out in the discussion.

Many of the same ideas emerged in the responses. When a key idea from a response was identified, the students decided how they would code that idea. For example, some respondents reported individuals asked their hair stylist for input or talked with their friends about what works well for them. These responses were coded as “trusted other.” Other common codes included price, fragrance, previous experience, spontaneity, quality (of the shampoo), convenience (e.g., two-in-one shampoo and conditioner), packaging (of the bottle), characteristics (of the shampoo), necessity (dermatologic conditions), and tradition (having used it since childhood).

After the initial open coding process, axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) took place. Finally, the codes were reduced to more overarching themes, such as Personal Factors and Brand Characteristics. The students began to put the big picture together, ultimately describing shampoo selection by their classmates.

What seemed to work especially well with this activity was making the subject relatable, nonthreatening, and entertaining. Because most students have purchased shampoo at some point in their lives, this was an activity that students could relate to. In addition, students expressed that making this a simple, understandable topic helped them comprehend what was occurring during the analysis. Using a topic like shampoo selection also is not typically a vulnerable area. Thus, data could be analyzed without significant concern for privacy violations.

Although this activity itself was not specific to health care, after this experience, the class readily transferred the knowledge they learned to nursing situations. Students discussed many situations where qualitative methods could be applied in health care settings. One example was how patients may make the decision to take or not to take their medications as prescribed.

After this simple activity, students found it easier to conceptualize qualitative research. Students expressed that this activity was surprisingly engaging, and by the end of the analysis, they really wanted to “know the answer” about how their class chooses shampoo. They were surprised the coding process was not as straightforward as they initially assumed it would be, but they also were amazed that so many of the same ideas were found in each of the responses—which was discussed in the context of data saturation. Rich engagement and debate helped students make sense of the emerged themes.

References


John R. Blakeman, MSN, RN, PCCN
jblakeman@mail.millikin.edu
Millikin University,
School of Nursing, Decatur, Illinois

The author has disclosed no potential conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise.

doi:10.3928/01484834-20160516-12