

## Qualitative research in collective health: input for health systems

Nowadays, the qualitative approach is used as an increasingly widespread benchmark in the scope of scientific activity. In recent years, studies based on the qualitative approach have actively participated in the production of evidence for reforms in the health sector in different countries and social contexts. This approach is now recognized as highly relevant to health systems in the region, such as the Brazilian Unified Health System, with an undeniable impact on the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of Public Policy in health.

Despite its increasing recognition, we are also aware that in the field of (public) health, there is still strong hegemony of quantitative investigations or of those based on biomedicine. This leads to a certain degree of exclusion of other forms of knowledge production and a resulting lacuna with respect to information for decision-making in key sectors. This is particularly true of those related to the innovation and development of health management technologies for which it is essential to study the processes involved in the subjective dimension of socio-sanitary processes. In addition to this, there is a lack of training opportunities and the rare events of a technical/scientific nature in this research tradition.

However, the complex challenges that we face in the contemporary world, despite the almost limitless technological advances, call for a new rationale and new ethics; and this includes the production of knowledge. More than ever we know that the development of technology without parallel reflection and efforts in the ethical, political, cultural and symbolic spheres, prejudices human survival and renders the scope of any merely technical progress of relative value. In this sense, the investment in research into humans – the domain of qualitative research – should be a priority item on the agenda of any social project, be it in health or in any other sector, which is an aspect that calls for opportunities for discussion about innovative training and research in this specific context.

Based on the foregoing and in order to foster some advances in this direction, counting on an extensive network of institutions at national and international level, we accepted the challenge of hosting the Ibero-American Qualitative Health Research Conference (2010), for the first time in Brazil and indeed in South America, though already in its fourth edition. It is internationally acknowledged as being the most important conference on this topic in the Ibero-American region. This thematic edition publishes a series of work of participant researchers in the organization of the aforesaid event, the topics of which were some of the many themes and subjects of debate conducted in that forum. Its structure blends articles of a conceptual nature geared to elicit reflection on training and ethical aspects, as well as methodological considerations that still reveal themselves as challenges. In addition to this, there is considerable empirical research on priority issues in Public Health, namely mental health, neonatal care, eating habits, among others.

In essence, this edition arises from the desire to offer a further contribution to the discussion aimed at capacity building, in-depth study and updating of this approach, revealing yet again the potential of qualitative research within the scope of health services, programs and systems.

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