Using Qualitative Methods in Your Evaluation

EXAMINING
DATA COLLECTION METHODS

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A Qualitative Perspective

- The experiences of the sample participants, explained using their own words, strengthen both the validity and credibility of the research
  - Patton, 2002
Defining the Qualitative Method in Evaluation

• Intent to gather an in-depth understanding of a program or process
  o Interested in meaning and description
    ▪ Involves the why and the how
  o Allows a deeper look at issues of interest and to explore nuances

• Questions to ask before beginning
  o What do my respondents know that I can discover?
  o How do the respondents classify and describe their experiences?
  o How are these concepts defined by my respondents?
Defining the Qualitative Method in Evaluation

- **When not to do qualitative**
  - You are only interested in numbers and percentages
    - The what and not the why
  - You want to generalize your results to a large population
  - You have a large population of clients and you want to hear from as many as possible
• Data collection methods
  - When to choose
  - Effective use
  - Relevant information
  - Advantages & disadvantages

An opportunity to ask questions will be available at the conclusion of each section
Collection of Data

How can we get the information we need?

- **Content Analysis**
  - Examining public and private documents and materials for themes and concepts

- **Focus Groups**
  - Gathering a small group to discuss an issue using a moderator and a set of questions

- **Interviews**
  - Asking questions of another individual in a one-on-one setting.
Examining Content Analysis

**When to Choose:**
- Want to understand the intentions, projections and/or history of a person, organization, or community
- Number of documents exist that allow you to examine trends and patterns
- Typically not used in isolation, so time must be available and the technique must speak to the goal
  - Allows for triangulation to occur within evaluation
Examining Content Analysis

- **Examples of When to Effectively Use:**
  - Needs assessment
    - Materials and documents speak to your evaluation goal / issue
  - Outcome evaluation
    - What has been the effect of the program on the individual or the community?
Intent is to examine communications in whatever forms are available:

- Program and/or organizational materials, newspaper articles, websites, books, laws, maps, etc.

Useful technique to determine the focus of a person, group, institution, or community

Appropriate topics to explore include:

- “Who says what...
- To whom...
- Why...
- How”
# Content Analysis: Document and Material Review

## Advantages
- Direct reality of participant available
  - Actual words, language, material, etc. obtained
- Usually unobtrusive
- Saves transcription time and expense
- Convenient timing

## Disadvantages
- Follow-up for additional information unlikely
- Information may be incomplete
- Information may not be authentic or accurate
- Accessibility may be limited or protected
Focus on Focus Groups

- **When to Choose:**
  - Want to understand experiences, beliefs, viewpoints, and so forth.
  - Looking to explore an issue or get feedback from multiple individuals
    - More info, broad brush
    - Generate and/or share ideas
  - Information being gathered isn’t sensitive
Focus on Focus Groups

Examples of When to Effectively Use:

- Needs assessment
  - Talk with community members or others to document a need for a particular program or relevant issues within an area
- Process Evaluation
  - How is the program working? Is the program serving as intended and in the manner proposed? How can it do better?
Focus on Focus Groups

• Ideally: moderator, note taker, 6-10 participants
  ○ 2-3 focus groups per topic

• Should develop a list of discussion questions and then let the discussion of the group develop

• While still structured to a certain extent, focus groups are much more free-form than a traditional interview
  ○ Important to let the discussion develop naturally and take its normal course
Focus on Focus Groups

- Find participants that can offer the insight you need to answer your evaluation questions
- Important to take good notes during the focus group session
  - It is crucial to record everyone’s responses so that no one’s perspective is lost
- Start with the general questions first and then move to the specific ones
- Start with the most important questions first and end with the least important
## Focus Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presence of moderator</td>
<td>Dominant individuals can influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Expand or change direction</td>
<td>Lack of anonymity</td>
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<tr>
<td>○ Adapt as necessary</td>
<td>Can’t cover sensitive topics</td>
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<tr>
<td>○ View nonverbal cues</td>
<td>Moderator effects and bias</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group participants can interact</td>
<td>Challenging to analyze</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can be inexpensive</td>
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- Can't cover sensitive topics
Discussing Interviews

- **When to Choose:**
  - Want to gain in-depth individual understanding
    - Identify detailed personal perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and/or attitudes
    - Provide insight about how people perceive a situation
  - Information being gathered is sensitive
Discussing Interviews

Examples of When to Effectively Use:

- Needs assessment
  - Key informants can provide relevant, personal perspective about issue, programming
- Outcome evaluation
  - Understand ways in which the individual has changed, made progress, been impacted, etc.
Discussing Interviews

Quality of information gathered during an interview depends on:

- How questions are designed
  - Structured, semi-structured, unstructured

- How interview session is conducted
  - Interviewer should be prepared and trained
  - Pilot and practice
  - Questions asked as written

- Recording responses accurately
  - Whether interview can be recorded or not
Discussing Interviews

- Avoid questions that use confusing language
  - Clear, straight-forward language and no jargon
- Avoid questions that are too broad or vague
  - Overwhelmed participants provide general or vague responses
- Avoid double-barreled questions
  - Only one gets answered
- Avoid biased questions
  - Be impartial in phrasing and then during the asking
    - Even body language and tone of voice has an impact
Discussing Interviews

- Clarify interview questions if needed
  - Allows for rephrasing or additional explanation
- Ask follow-up questions if the interview is headed in a direction that is productive for your evaluation
  - If participant goes off on an unexpected tangent, can ask more IF information is useful
## Interviews: Telephone

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Real-time interviewer</td>
<td>• Interviewer effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Clarify, explain and expand (flexibility)</td>
<td>○ Age, gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Adapt as necessary</td>
<td>• Nonverbal unavailable</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Easier to access geographically diverse sample</td>
<td>• Limited survey length</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Sample bias</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• May need multiple phone calls to reach subjects</td>
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<td></td>
<td>○ Time and money</td>
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## Interviews: In-Person

### Advantages
- Depth of information obtained
- Presence of interviewer
  - Clarify, explain and expand (flexibility)
  - Adapt as necessary
  - View nonverbal cues
- Complexity allowed
- Higher response rates

### Disadvantages
- Lack of anonymity
- Interviewer effect
  - Age, race, gender
- Interviewer bias
  - Verbal and nonverbal
- Lack of consistency with multiple interviewers
- Cost
  - Time and money
Questions?

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