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Using Qualitative Methods for Monitoring and Evaluation

With a special mini-course on “how to
conduct a focus group”

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Why choose qualitative methods for evaluation?

- Permit evaluator to study selected issues, cases or events in depth and detail
- Can be used to complement quantitative methods or be used alone

Why choose qualitative methods?

- The fact that data collection is not constrained by predetermined categories of analysis contributes to the depth and detail of qualitative data.
- Quantitative methods, on the other hand, use standardized methods that fit diverse opinions and experiences into predetermined response categories (i.e. strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree)
- Nothing wrong with that – the advantage is that you can measure the reactions of many people to a limited set of questions – giving a broad, generalizable set of findings.

Why choose qualitative methods?

- By contrast, qualitative data provide depth and detail through direct quotation and careful description of the program situations, events, people, interactions and observed behaviors.
- To illustrate what is meant by depth and detail and meaning in qualitative methods, here is an example of one teacher's responses to both a close-ended question and a open-ended question in a survey.

Why Choose Qualitative Methods? An Illustration

Quantitative

Accountability as practiced by our school system creates an undesirable atmosphere of anxiety among teachers

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Qualitative

Please add any personal comments you'd like to make in your own words about any part of the school system's accountability approach.

"Fear is the word for "accountability" as applied in our system. My teaching before "accountability" was the same as it is now. Accountability is just a political ploy to maintain power. Whatever good there was in the system has been destroyed by the awareness that the system now has a political motive at its base. Students get screwed. The bitterness and hatred in our system is incredible..."

Why Choose Qualitative Methods?

- The purpose of gathering responses to open-ended questions is to permit the evaluator to understand and capture the perspective of program participants without predetermining their perspective through prior selection of questionnaire categories.
- The task for the qualitative evaluator is to provide a framework within which people can respond in a way that represents accurately and thoroughly their point of view about the program.

Focus Groups

- A little background....
 - Market researchers began using focus groups in the 1950s
 - Public health researchers and evaluators are now using them more and more..

Focus Groups

- Focus groups can be used at any point during the evaluation.
- They can be conducted as part of the needs assessment
- They can be conducted as part of the process evaluation to identify the strengths, weaknesses, and needed improvements
- They can be conducted at the end of the program, or even months before program completion to gather perceptions about outcomes and the impact of the program.
- Key community people can be interviewed in groups when their views of a program may be of interest for evaluation purposes.
- Focus groups can also be used with staff to identify the key elements in a program's implementation and treatment.
- In sum, they can be used for a full range of evaluation purposes.

The Nuts and Bolts: What are focus groups?

- Typically consists of 8-10 participants
- An open discussion in which each participant has an opportunity to speak
- Conversation is guided by a facilitator
- Usually lasts between 60-90 minutes
- Conversation is usually tape recorded, but can also be recorded by a good note-taker

Focus groups...

- Facilitator usually has a topic guide
- Discussion is confidential
- Facilitator usually asks open-ended questions and allows each participant to voice his/her opinion
- Facilitator can't discuss the conversation and mention the names of who was present to anyone

Focus groups...

- Participants are typically a homogenous group
- The object is to high-quality data in a social context where people consider their views in the context of the views of others
- Focus groups can weed out false or extreme views

Focus groups...

- It is not necessary for people to reach a consensus; nor it is necessary for people to disagree.
- Focus groups can provide some quality controls on data collection in that participants tend to provide checks and balances on each other. This can weed out false or extreme views.
- The group dynamics typically contribute to focusing on the most important topics and issues in the program, and it is fairly easy to assess the extent to which there is a relatively consistent, shared view of the program among participants.

The Structure of the Focus Group

- ● ● ●
- Step 1: The Opening

- Introduces him/herself
- Explains purpose of interview
- Encourage participants to have varying opinions
- Explains that opinions will not make him/her feel bad or affect him/her in any way
- Rules of interview are given (one at a time, no interruptions, recording notification, etc.)

A few notes about tape recording...

- A tape recorder is part of the indispensable equipment of evaluators using focus groups

"I'd like to tape record what you have to say so that I don't miss any of it. I don't want to take the chance of relying on my notes and thereby miss something that you say or change your words somehow. So, if you don't mind, I'd like to use the recorder. If at any time during the interviewer, you'd like to turn the recorder off, all you have to do is press this button on the microphone, and the recorder will stop."

A few notes about tape recording...

- Tape recorders do not tune out conversations, change what has been said because of interpretation or record more slowly than what is being said. In addition to increasing the accuracy of data collection, the use of a tape recorder permits the interviewer to be more attentive to the participants. The interviewer (or the facilitator) who is trying to write down everything that is being said as it is will have a difficult time responding appropriately to interviewee needs and cues.
- This is the major justification for using a tape recorder...

The Structure of the Focus Group

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- Step 2: The Warm-Up
 - Respondents introduce themselves (optional, and only by first names)
 - Respondents have opportunity to ask any questions to facilitator
 - If it hasn't already been done, respondents hand facilitator with signed consent forms for interview

The Structure of the Focus Group

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- Step 3: The Body of the Interview
 - Usually begins with general questions to more specific questions
 - Three types of interviews:
 - Informal conversational interview
 - General interview guide approach
 - Standardized open-ended interview

The Body of the Interview

- Informal conversational interview relies entirely on the spontaneous generation of questions in the natural flow of the interactions with the participants. This approach relies greatly on the conversational skills of the interviewer...
- The interview guide is a list of questions or issues to be explored in the course of the interview. The interview guide provides topics or subject areas about which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate the particular topic. The issues in the outline don't have to follow a particular order – the guide just serves as a basic checklist to make sure that all the relevant topics were addressed. The interviewer remains free to build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style – but with the focus on a particular predetermined subject.

The Body of the Interview

- The standardized open-ended interview consists of a set of questions carefully worded and arranged for the purpose of taking each focus group interview through the same sequence and asking the same set of questions...This is most appropriate when there are several people conducting the focus group interviews and the evaluator wishes to reduce the variation in the responses (or in other words to minimize interviewer effects). The weakness in this approach is that it restricts the pursuit of topics or issues that were not anticipated when the interview questionnaire was written.
- IT is possible to combine these approaches – can have it more structured in the beginning and leave the latter part of the interview more open..

Interviewing tips: asking the questions

- Questions truly need to be open-ended:
 - How do you feel about the program?
 - What is your opinion of the program?
 - What do you think about the program?
- Ask singular questions
- Probes and follow-up questions

Consider the Question

- “How satisfied are you with this program?”
 - On the surface, this appears to be an open-ended question. On close inspection, however, it is clear that the dimension along which the respondent can answer the question has already been identified. The respondent is being asked for some degree of satisfaction.
 - The truly open-ended question does not presuppose which dimensions of feeling, analysis, or thought will be salient for the interviewee.

Consider the Question

- “We’d like to ask you about your opinions of the program What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the program? What do you like? What do you think could be improved or should stay the same?”
 - Too much.
 - Break it up into singular questions: First, what do you consider to be the program’s strengths? Okay, what about the weaknesses?

Probing

- Probes are used to deepen the response to a question, to increase the richness of the data being obtained, and to give cues to the participants about the level of response that is desired.
- The word “probe” itself is usually best avoided in interviews. “Let me probe that further.” may sound like you are going to perform surgery or conduct an investigation of something illegal.
- A probe is an actual technique used to go deeper into the interview responses. These are questions that are seldom written out – but rather probing is an art and a skill that comes from knowing what you are looking for in an interview.

Tips on Probing

- Common types of probes:
 - Remaining silent
 - Restating what the respondent just said (mirror technique)
 - Repeating respondents' words as a question: "It's good?"
 - Confronting the respondent to clarify: "I'm a little confused. Earlier you said X, now your saying Y."
 - Using the third-person technique: "You seem to feel strongly about this. How do you think others might feel?"

Probing...

- Other commonly used probes:
 - “Can you tell more about that?”
 - “What do you mean by that?”
 - “What makes you feel that way?”
 - “Can you think of an example of that?”
 - “I’d like to know more about your thinking on that issue.”

Structure of Interview

- Step 4: Closure of the Interview
 - Summarize and identify the key themes of the discussion
 - Ask respondents if there is anything else they'd like to say or if they have any more questions
 - Thank them for their time
 - Distribute any incentives that you have offered for being participants

After the focus group...

- Check the tape (or disc)
- Go over notes
- Write down any themes that emerged from the focus group; any additional insights or problems that occurred should also be noted

After the focus group...

- The period after the interview is critical to the rigor and validity of the focus group data.
- If for some reason a malfunction occurred the interviewer should immediately make extensive notes of everything he or she can remember.
- Even if the tape did function properly, you still want to go over the notes:
 - If there was a notetaker present, go over the interview.
 - What were the main themes, the interesting quotes, etc.
 - Where was the interview held? Who was present?

Data Analysis

- There is no one “right” way to go about organizing, analyzing, and interpreting qualitative data.
- The primary goals of analyzing focus group data are to:
 - Identify themes and patterns with regard to the study’s research questions
 - Compare these themes and patterns across different groups

For Example

- A focus group study on college students' perceptions of tobacco prevention and control campaigns would seek to reveal the themes or categories of comments regarding ideas that may help college students quit smoking.
- Analysis of FG data may reveal such themes as restricting access to cigarettes, creating more smoke-free environments, addressing concerns of weight loss and stress reduction, and so forth.
- Furthermore, comparing themes that arise from FGs with smokers to FGs with nonsmokers may reveal that the former place more emphasis on addressing concerns, whereas the latter stress environmental changes.

Preparing the data for analysis

- Data are typically in two forms: the transcripts and the interview notes
 - Need to separate each speaker's remarks
 - Spreadsheets are often used; each speaker's comments becomes a single cell

Question 2 from survey, September 2003 What is the greatest impact the program has had on the community to date?

ID	Category	Code	Narrative	Notes
1	Service	Parenting info	Increases information on parenting issues	
2	Education	Share info	Sharing knowledge of resources between service providers	
3	Collaborati	Effort	Establishment of an interagency effort	
4	Collaborati	Common goal	Worked to accomplish goal of mutual interest	

Sometimes, the moderator's comments are in boldfaced font; other transcripts will color code the different voices heard in the interview.... It varies.

Data analysis

- Grounded theory (Strauss and Korbin, 1998):
 - Inductive method
 - Generates theory from data
 - Key strategies for grounded theory:
 - Theoretical sampling
 - Theoretical sensitivity
 - Constant comparison

Data Analysis

- One common method for analyzing the data is to use grounded theory... But typically, this term is bounced around a lot and many researchers say they use it, without really knowing what it means.
- An inductive method is one where the theory emerges from the data, in contrast to deductive theory, where the researcher starts with an abstract idea or theory and then tests propositions related to the theory.

Theoretical sampling

- The process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyzes the data and decides what data to collect next and where to find it to develop the theory as it emerges.
- This contrasts with most sampling – where there is usually strict adherence to a sampling plan.
- In grounded theory, the researcher only plans in advance the initial sampling for data collection; after that the sampling process is entirely controlled by the emerging theory.
- For example, to study stages of recovery from drug abuse, researchers have used diverse sample to reflect a range in ethnicity, marital status, SES, drug abuse, and length of time in treatment.

Theoretical Sensitivity

- Defined as simply being sensitive to thinking about the data in theoretical terms, not descriptive or preconceived terms.
- Most researchers begin a study with a certain set of assumptions that they have developed from their experiences and reading.
- A risk for researchers is that they will impose those assumptions on their interpretations of the data.
- The challenge is for researchers to attend to all possible explanations related to the preconceptions.

Constant comparison

- In traditional quantitative research, analysis does not occur until data collection is complete; in grounded theory, the process begins at the same time the data is collected.
- Constant comparison, the simultaneous collection and analysis of data is the cornerstone of grounded theory.
- The process is not linear, but is circular and involves constantly going back to the data and returning to the participants.
- Some researchers using this approach use transcripts from previous studies to trigger follow up interviews to develop the theory in greater detail.

Data analysis

- Coding:

- If using a spreadsheet, each cell is reviewed and coded
- Codes can be combined to broader categories

Drugs and alcohol

Lack of teacher support



Risks

- Revise codes
- Continue until no new themes are identified

Whatever approach to coding you use, codes will change and develop as you get more into the analysis.

Data analysis

- Identify patterns and connections within and between categories
 - What are the key ideas being expressed within the category?
 - What are the similarities and differences in the way people responded?
 - Are there relationships between categories?

Data Analysis

- You may be interested in summarizing all the information pertaining to one theme, or capturing the similarities or differences in people's responses within a category.
- To do this, you need to assemble all the data pertaining to the particular theme (category).
- Ask yourself:
 - What are the key ideas being expressed within this category?
 - What are the similarities and the differences in the way people responded?
- Write a summary for each category that describes these points.

Data Analysis

- You may find that two or more themes (categories) occur consistently together; whenever you find one, you find the other.
- For example, youth with divorced parents consistently list friendship as the primary benefit of the mentoring program.
- Such connections are important because they help to explain why something occurs.
- Some researchers like to develop matrices and tables to see how things relate.

Interpretation: Bringing it all together

- Track your choices
- Involve others
- Avoid generalizing
- Choose quotes carefully

Point of View

- Everyone sees data through his or her own point of view.
- It is important to recognize and pay attention to this.
- The analysis process should be documented so that another person can see the decisions that you made, how you did the analysis, and how you arrived at the interpretation.

Feedback

- Getting feedback from others can help in both the analysis and interpretation.
- You may have another person code the data separately and then compare how you coded and identified themes.

The Goal

- The goal of qualitative work is not to generalize across a population.
- Rather, a qualitative approach seeks to provide understanding from the respondent's perspective.
 - What is unique about this group?
- Narrative data provide for clarification, understanding and explanation, not for generalizing.

Quotes

- While using quotes can lend valuable support to data interpretation, often quotes are used that only directly support the argument.
- This can lead to using people's words out of context or editing quotes to make a point.
- When writing a final report, think about your reasons for using quotes.
- Do you want to show the differences in people's comments, give examples of a typical response relative to a given topic?
- In any case, include enough text to allow the reader to decide what the respondent is trying to convey.

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