Using Qualitative Methods to Evaluate School-Based Youth Programs

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Overview

• Experience with qualitative methods
• Qualitative methods: What are they? Why do we use them? Strengths and limitations
• “How to”... develop questions and decide who to ask
• Tips and Tricks: for data management, analysis and reporting
• Your Questions
What is qualitative research?

- Collection of methods used to gain an in-depth understanding of human behavior

- Investigation of the *why* and *how* of behavior, not just *what, where, and when*

- Useful to gain insight into people's attitudes, behaviors, value systems, concerns, motivations, aspirations, culture or lifestyles
Qualitative Questions Can be Helpful for Understanding….

• **Behaviors**: what a person does or has done.
• **Opinions and Values**: what a person thinks about an experience or issue.
• **Experiences and Feelings**: what a person feels about an experience or issue. Elicits emotions.
• **Knowledge**: factual information about a program.
• **Background/ Demographics**: concerns specific demographic information about who you are interviewing.
Qualitative Methods

**Strengths:**
- Can provide context and depth to questions of interest
- Useful for examining a question or construct about which little is known
- Documents individuals’ responses in own words, thoughts, phrases – can be powerful and persuasive

**Limitations:**
- Usually includes small samples
  - Difficult to generalize
- Labor intensive – especially transcription and analysis
- May have limited “reliability”
  - Questions are not necessarily asked in the same way or in the same sequence
Determining When to Use Qualitative Methods

“Qualitative methods are most appropriate for situations requiring depth, detail, and meaning, and for answering ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions.” (Coehlo, 2008)

• Provide in-depth information about a topic of interest
• Gather formative information to develop structured (survey) questions
• Further explore quantitative research findings
• Validate research findings
• Obtain feedback/input on intervention ideas and designs
Qualitative Methods

- **Interviews**
  - Informal
  - Unstructured
  - Semi-structured/guided
  - Formal/structured

- **Focus groups**

- **Observation**
  - Participant observation
  - Unobtrusive observation

- **Document review/ analysis**

- **Participatory photography & videography**
Interview types

Informal Interviews
• Information is gathered through conversations “in the field”
• Can uncover new topics of interest
• Helps establish rapport

Unstructured Interviews*
• Exploratory in nature
  – Life histories, experience living with an illness
• Interviewer has general idea of topics to be covered in interview
• Structure allows participant to define the content of discussion

*Requires skilled interviewer
Interview types

Semi-Structured Interviews
- Based on a set of questions derived from theory, previous research, and experience
- Interview guides have specific questions/topics to cover
- Provides minimally directive framework
  - Both researcher and participant define questions and generate new ideas

Structured Interviews
- All participants respond to same set of open-ended questions
- Little room for building on conversation to identify new ideas
- Often integrated into quantitative surveys
- Tend to be short and more direct
Focus Groups
Focus Groups

- Facilitated group discussion or interview with 7-10 people on a topic

- Often used to:
  - Get information on how groups of people think or feel about a particular topic
  - Gain greater insight into why certain opinions are held
  - Help improve the planning and design of new programs
  - Provide a means of evaluating existing programs
  - Produce insights for developing strategies for outreach
Focus Groups

• Topics:
  – Useful for topics that lend themselves to relatively amicable group discussion – want participants to respond to each others’ comments and opinions
  – Not an appropriate method for very sensitive topics

• Participants:
  – Homogenous groups are best
  – Take into consideration socio-economic and demographic differences (job status, education, race/ethnicity, etc)
Focus Groups

Limitations/Considerations:

- Participants are often not a representative sample population, so findings cannot be generalized.
- Focus on information from the group, not individual.
  - Unit of analysis is the group, not individuals.
- Challenges of facilitating group conversation.
  - Group dynamics play a big role in the type and quality of information.
  - Skilled moderator/facilitator is critical.
- Can be labor intensive to set up.
Participatory Photography & Videography

• Allows participants to capture and reflect on their strengths and concerns through taking photographs or videos, discussing them, and presenting their words and pictures to the community.

• Participants are guided with a question to explore through photography or videos.
  – E.g. “In five years, where do you see yourself?”

• Has often been employed with marginalized groups as a tool of empowerment and activism.

• Beginning to be used more frequently in evaluation.
Strengths

• Empowers youth

• Opportunities to explore new roles

• Develop new skills

• Increase ownership of an issue

• Build new relationships with peers
Challenges

- Lack of resources
- Time commitment
- Training of the equipment
- Human subjects training
The essential steps- simplified

1. Determine what you want to know. What are your evaluation questions?

2. Determine best method to answer those questions? (more than one method can be used)
   - Interview
   - Focus group
   - Observation
   - Document review
   - Photovoice

3. Develop protocol/data collection instrument
Good Evaluation Questions

• Are specific and meaningful
• Come from discussions with staff/clients/users/stakeholders who have direct experience with the program or issue
• Are grounded in literature review of previous studies

Make sure that the data you collect has utility and is connected to your overall purpose!
Top **tips** for developing interview questions

- Ask truly **open-ended** questions
- **Avoid dichotomous** questions that suggest a “yes” or “no” response.
- Ask **singular** questions that contain only one idea. One question at a time.
- Ask **short and clear** questions
- Use words, phrases and special terms that the interviewee would use and/or understand
- Exercise caution when asking “why” questions
Avoid Dichotomous Questions

• Dichotomous questions solicit “yes” or “no” responses
• They can make interviews feel quiz-like rather than conversational

Dichotomous:
• Did you like ABC Program?

Open-ended:
• Thinking back on your experiences, what are some things you have really liked about ABC Program?
Avoid Double-Barreled Questions

• Ask only one question at a time
• Singular questions ensure interviewee knows exactly what is being asked

Not singular:
• How well do you know and like the staff in ABC program?

Singular:
• Based on your experiences, what do you like about the staff in ABC Program?
Use Words Interviewees Would Use

- Avoid acronyms, jargon and technical lingo
- Have questions reviewed by people similar to your target audience
- Ask people to describe things and then use that description in the interview
- Be mindful of literacy level

**Question with technical terms and jargon:**
- What role do you think physicians should play in helping you with diabetes management?

**Clear, simple question:**
- What are some things your doctor can do to help you take care of your diabetes?
Use Caution When Asking “Why” Questions

• “Why” questions presume cause-effect relationship
• Imply a rational answer
• May feel confrontational
• “Why” questions can often be re-phrased to avoid these issues

“Why” question:
• Why did you join the ABC program?

Specific question:
• What was it about the ABC program that made you join?
Developing Interview Guides

- Start off easy
- Avoid tough or sensitive questions at start
- Consider question sequencing and flow
- Usually move from general to specific
- Time considerations
- Pilot test the guide with your target population
Case Study

Town A is in their fourth year of implementing an evidenced-based youth development initiative called ABC. The program combines classroom lessons and group discussion with service learning activities aimed at fostering the development of healthy behaviors, life skills, and a sense of purpose among youth participants. This program targets high risk behaviors, school failure and adolescent pregnancy, all of which have been identified as areas of concern for this community.

The short term goals of the youth development initiative are to increase attachment to school and school achievement, increase connectedness between community and youth, increase positive relationships between youth and adults, increase skills to abstain from sex, and increase knowledge about contraception and the importance of avoiding pregnancy. The long term goals of the program are to reduce pregnancy and STI/HIV rates among Town A’s youth.
Case Study Activity

In your group, review the case study and follow the steps:

• Develop an evaluation question best answered qualitatively
  – What do you want to know about your program and/or your participants?

• Choose the best qualitative method to answer your question*
  – Interview
  – Focus group
  – Photovoice/Videography

• Discuss benefits and challenges of your chosen method
Case Study Activity Discussion
Tips and Tricks
Data Management

• **Tip:** Record/enter data in form that makes it amendable to analysis
  – **Trick:** Use interview or focus group guide as a template and enter data within the protocols themselves
  – **Trick:** During focus groups, create diagram of table with identifying initials or number for each person, add that identifier next to each person’s comments when taking notes.
Data Analysis

• **Tip:** Choose your approach with the end in mind.
  
  – What level of detail and rigor do the people who will use the information need?
  – What resources do you have? (time, money, skills)

• **Tip:** Record themes, theories, notes of interest throughout the data collection process
  
  – **Trick:** Schedule extra ½ hour after end of focus group for facilitator, note taker and any other assistants to document preliminary themes and areas of interest and great quotes noted in focus group.
Qualitative Reports

- **Tip:** In general, less is more! Think about your audience, assess appropriate length

- **Tip:** Use quotes and photos to illustrate themes
  - **Trick:** Compelling quotes and photos can be used for visibility/marketing, proposals to new funders...

- **Tip:** Be creative!
  - **Trick:** Powerpoints/posters/youtube videos, etc. - these can all be used to convey qualitative findings and can have multiple uses (think sustainability!)
Ethical Considerations

• Maintaining objectivity is important
  – Staff/stakeholders and others deeply invested in program outcomes and/or the issue may not be appropriate to collect/analyze the data.

• Be transparent with participants about the purpose of the study and the use of the findings
  – Respect participant’s wishes about their own data.

• Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval may be required
  – Dissemination of findings, beyond internal program improvement, often require IRB approval.
Questions/Comments?
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