**QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION - PRESENTATION MATERIAL**

Qualitative methods are often used in evaluations because they tell the program’s story by capturing and communicating the participants´ stories. (Patton, 2003)

**Introduction**

An evaluation may be entirely conducted using a qualitative approach, but it will depend on the context and needs of the evaluation. Sometimes initial qualitative exploratory work is followed by a quantitative approach, particularly when an evaluator is developing survey questions. Developing logic models is a qualitative process that relies on interpreting documents, interviewing stakeholders, and putting together a visual representation of a program.

Sometimes qualitative findings are collected and/or presented along with quantitative data, such as those gathered from a survey with both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Finally, qualitative research sometimes occurs *after* quantitative research has been completed, such as when an organization is determining how to follow up on survey results that indicate a program needs changes.

There are strong practical reasons to view qualitative evaluation methods as complementary to quantitative methods. Indeed, as Reichardt and Rallis (1994) and others have argued, using two methods can be better than one. In her discussion of the “paradigm wars,” for example, Datta (1994) concludes:

[T]he differences [between the qualitative and quantitative paradigms] are less sharp in practice than in theoretical statements. The best examples of both paradigms seem actually to be mixed models…Perhaps this is not surprising…Most evaluations are conducted under many constraints. These include relatively short time frames, relatively little money, often intractable measurement challenges…In most circumstances, evaluators have to do the best they can and need more, not fewer, approaches on which they can draw. (p. 67)

**What is qualitative research?**

Qualitative research is a type of scientific research. Additionally, it seeks to understand a given research problem or topic from the perspectives of the local population it involves.

The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue. It provides information about the “human” side of an issue – that is, the often contradictory behaviors, beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships of individuals.

Qualitative methods are also effective in identifying intangible factors, such as social norms, socioeconomic status, gender roles, ethnicity, and religion, whose role in the research issue may not be readily apparent. When used along with quantitative methods, qualitative research can help us to interpret and better understand the complex reality of a given situation and the implications of quantitative data.

Although findings from qualitative data can often be extended to people with characteristics similar to those in the study population, gaining a rich and complex understanding of a specific social context or phenomenon typically takes precedence over eliciting data that can be generalized to other geographical areas or populations. In this sense, qualitative research differs slightly from scientific research in general.

Table 1. Principal differences between quantitative and qualitative research

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|  | Quantitative | Qualitative |
| General framework | Seek to confirm hypotheses about phenomenaInstruments use more rigid style of eliciting and categorizing responses to questionsUse highly structured methodssuch as questionnaires, surveys, and structured observation | Seek to explore phenomenaInstruments use more flexible,iterative style of eliciting andcategorizing responses to questionsUse semi-structured methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation |
| Analytical objectives | To quantify variationTo predict causal relationshipsTo describe characteristics of apopulation | To describe variationTo describe and explain relationshipsTo describe individual experiencesTo describe group norms |
| Question format | Closed-ended | Open-ended |
| Data format | Numerical (obtained by assigning numerical values to responses) | Textual (obtained from audiotapes,videotapes, and field notes) |
| Flexibility in study design | Study design is stable frombeginning to endParticipant responses do notinfluence or determine how and which questions researchers ask nextStudy design is subject tostatistical assumptions andconditions | Some aspects of the study areflexible (for example, the addition, exclusion, or wording of particular interview questions)Participant responses affect how and which questions researchers ask nextStudy design is iterative, that is, data collection and researchquestions are adjusted according to what is learned |

**Types of qualitative research instruments**

There are primarily three instruments for qualitative research:

* Participant observation
* In-depth interviews
* Focus groups

The use of these instruments should be decided depending on the methodology and purposes of the qualitative research. We do suggest some readings at the end of the document in case someone is interested in deepen on this topic.

**Participant observation**

As qualitative researchers, we presume that there will be multiple perspectives within any given community. We are interested in knowing what those diverse perspectives are as well as in understanding the interplay among them.

Qualitative researchers accomplish this through observation alone or by both observing and participating, to varying degrees, in the study community’s daily activities. Participant observation

always takes place in community settings, in locations believed to have some relevance to the

research questions. The method is distinctive because the researcher approaches participants in

their own environment rather than having the participants come to the researcher. Generally

speaking, the researcher engaged in participant observation tries to learn what life is like for an

“insider” while remaining, inevitably, an “outsider.”

Table 2. Strengths and weaknesses of participant observation

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| **Weaknesses** | **Strengths** |
| * Time-consuming
* Documentation relies on memory, personal discipline, and diligence of researcher
* Requires conscious effort at objectivity because method is inherently subjective
 | * Allows for insight into contexts, relationships, behavior
* Can provide information previously unknown to researchers that is crucial for project design, data collection, and interpretation of other data
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**What are my responsibilities as a participant observer?**

Researchers conducting participant observation need to be prepared and willing to adapt to a variety of uncontrolled situations and settings. How much you actively participate in activities versus observe them depends on the objectives and design of the specific project, on the circumstances in which you find yourself, and on your ability to blend in with the study population.

Your specific responsibilities include:

* Observing people as they engage in activities that would probably occur in much the same way if you were not present.
* Engaging to some extent in the activities taking place, either in order to better understand the local perspective or so as not to call attention to yourself.
* Interacting with people socially outside of a controlled research environment, such as at a bar, public meeting place, bus depot, religious gathering, or market – if casual conversation gives way to more substantive discussion of the research topic, you would need to disclose your identity, affiliation, and purpose
* Identifying and developing relationships with key informants, stakeholders, and gatekeepers.

**Is participant observation done individually or as a team?**

Participant observation may be done individually, in pairs, and in teams – whichever arrangement is most appropriate for covering the locations and topics at issue.

Factors often considered in determining the appropriate arrangement include the age, gender, physical appearance, ethnicity, personality, and linguistic abilities of different data collectors. The objective should be to gather data in the least obtrusive and most efficient manner possible, in light of the specific population and context.

Table 3. What to observe during participant observation

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| **Category** | **Includes** | **Researchers should note** |
| Appearance | Clothing, age, gender,physical appearance | Anything that might indicate membership in groups or in sub-populations of interest to the study, such as profession, social status, socioeconomic class, religion, or ethnicity |
| Verbal behavior andInteractions | Who speaks to whom andfor how long; who initiatesinteraction; languages ordialects spoken; tone ofvoice | Gender, age, ethnicity, and profession of speakers;dynamics of interaction |
| Physical behavior andGestures | What people do, who doeswhat, who interacts withwhom, who is notinteracting | How people use their bodies and voices to communicate different emotions; what individuals’ behaviors indicate about their feelings toward one another, their social rank, or their profession |
| Personal space | How close people stand toone another | What individuals’ preferences concerning personalspace suggest about their relationships |
| Human traffic | People who enter, leave, andspend time at theobservation site | Where people enter and exit; how long they stay;who they are (ethnicity, age, gender); whether they are alone or accompanied; number of people |
| People who stand out | Identification of people whoreceive a lot of attentionfrom others | The characteristics of these individuals; whatdifferentiates them from others; whether peopleconsult them or they approach other people;whether they seem to be strangers or well knownby others present |

Another important aspect of participant observation is identifying key informants – local individuals who can directly provide important information about the community and thus help the researcher more quickly understand the study population and cultural environment.

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| **Tips for taking field notes****Begin each notebook entry** with the date, time, place, and type of data collection event.**Leave space** on the page for expanding your notes, or plan to expand them on a separate page. **Take notes strategically.** It is usually practical to make only brief notes during data collection. Direct quotes can be especially hard to write down accurately. Rather than try to document every detail or quote, write down key words and phrases that will trigger your memory when you expand notes.**Use shorthand.** Because you will expand and type your notes soon after you write them, it does not matter if you are the only person who can understand your shorthand system.Use abbreviations and acronyms to quickly note what is happening and being said.**Cover a range of observations.** In addition to documenting events and informal conversations, note people’s body language, moods, or attitudes; the general environment; interactions among participants; ambiance; and other information that could be relevant. |

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| **Field notes example***Community: La Planada**Municipality: Coyotepec**Date: 03/04/2011**Activity: Contact with Lorena´s family through the social work of UTPMP.**Main contact UTPMP: Community Coordinator Ana Valeria**We arrived to UTPMP´s place in the Community. It is built in the exact same way than the emergency house except that it´s twice the size. In this day three persons showed up: Mrs. Lorena Rivas, Msr. Guadalupe Rojas and Mr. Jose Martinez. There were also two “doctors” that are giving medical consultation in the community, using a building that was donated for the community use. They talked about a conflict between the project of these doctors and the Oportunidades program nurse to use that space.* |

**In-depth Interviews**

In-depth interviews are one of the most common qualitative methods. One reason for their popularity is that they are very effective in giving a human face to research problems. In addition, conducting and participating in interviews can be a rewarding experience for participants and interviewers alike. For participants – whether members of the study population or someone related to the population in a professional capacity – in-depth interviews offer the opportunity to express themselves in a way ordinary life rarely affords them.

**What is an in-depth interview?**

The in-depth interview is a technique designed to elicit a vivid picture of the participant’s perspective on the research topic. During in-depth interviews, the person being interviewed is considered the expert and the interviewer is considered the student. The researcher’s interviewing techniques are motivated by the desire to learn everything the participant can share about the research topic.

Researchers engage with participants by posing questions in a neutral manner, listening attentively to participants’ responses, and asking follow-up questions and probes based on those responses.

They do not lead participants according to any preconceived notions, nor do they encourage participants to provide particular answers by expressing approval or disapproval of what they say.

In-depth interviews are usually conducted face-to-face and involve one interviewer and one participant.

When safety is an issue for the interviewer, the presence of two interviewers is appropriate. In these situations, however, care must be taken not to intimidate the participant. Phone conversations and interviews with more than one participant also qualify as in-depth interviews.

**Logistics of Interviewing**

**What are my responsibilities as an interviewer?**

The interviewer is responsible for fulfilling the following roles, tasks, and obligations before, during, and after the interview:

*Prepare for the interview*

* Recruit participants according to the recruitment strategy outlined in the work plan (if interviewers are involved in recruitment).
* Set up recording equipment and the physical space where interviews will take place.
* Become knowledgeable about the research topic, including anticipating and being prepared to answer any questions participants may have about it.
* Be reliable. To get participants to take the interview seriously, you need to demonstrate your own commitment. Arrive on time, equipped with the recording equipment, interview guide, and notebooks. Be both mentally and psychologically prepared to conduct the interview. Keep all promises you make to participants.

*Interview participants thoroughly*

* Obtain informed consent from each participant before the interview.
* Address all questions or topics listed in the interview guide. Ask follow-up questions (some of which may be scripted in the interview guide) in order to elicit participants’ complete knowledge and experience related to the research topic.
* Probe participants for elaboration of their responses, with the aim of learning all they can share about the research topic.

*Document the interview*

* Record the interview using an audio (and sometimes video) recorder.
* Take backup notes.
* Observe and document participants’ behaviors and contextual aspects of the interview as part of your field notes.
* Expand your notes as soon as possible after each interview, preferably within 24 hours, while your memory is still fresh.

Key skills for in-depth interviewing

**Skill 1 - Rapport-building**

Rapport-building is the the ability to quickly create interviewer/ participant dynamics that are positive, relaxed, and mutually respectful.

Participants will talk freely, openly, and honestly about the research topic only if they:

* Feel comfortable in the interviewer’s presence
* Trust the interviewer
* Feel secure about confidentiality
* Believe the interviewer is interested in their story
* Do not feel judged

***Tips for rapport-building***

Learn culturally-specific styles and techniques for building rapport. Suggestions include:

* Be friendly
* Smile
* Use a pleasant tone of voice
* Use relaxed body language
* Incorporate humor
* Be humble
* Do not patronize
* Do not scold, coerce, or cajole participants
* Be patient

**Skill 2 - Emphasizing the participant’s perspective**

Emphasizing the participant’s perspective involves treating the participant as the expert, while keeping the participant from interviewing you. This means that you will need to balance deference to the participant with control over the interview, while remaining an engaged listener and demonstrating a neutral attitude.

This latter detail is indispensible. It is critical that the interviewer’s perspective on the research issue should be invisible. This avoids the risk that participants will modify their responses to please the interviewer instead of describing their own perspectives.

***Tips for emphasizing the participant’s perspective***

Remember that the purpose of the interview is to elicit the participant’s perspective.

* Consider yourself a student.
* If a participant asks for factual information during the interview, write down the questions and respond after the interview is over.
* If a participant asks what you think, deflect the question. Let the participant know that you consider his or her point of view more important.
* Don’t overcompensate for perceived status differences by giving the participant too much control over the interview.
* Pay attention to what participants say and follow up with relevant questions and probes.
* Be aware that what you say, how you say it, and your body language can convey your own biases and emotional reactions.
* Use them instead to convey neutrality and acceptance.

**Skill 3 - Adapting to different personalities and emotional states**

Adapting to different personalities and emotional states requires that the researcher is able to quickly adjust his or her style to suit each individual participant. Every participant has a unique character and demeanor. By adopting an appropriate demeanor for each individual, the interviewer can help the participant be comfortable enough to speak freely about the research topic.

***Tips for adapting to different personalities and emotional states***

* Different interviewing styles may be needed for different participants – for example, be able to retain control of a conversation with a dominant personality and to animate a shy participant.
* Know how to tone down heightened emotions, such as when a participant starts crying or becomes belligerent.
* Adapt to each individual may require softening the way you broach sensitive issues,
* Adjust your tone of voice to be more sober or upbeat, or exhibiting increased warmth or social distance.

**Asking unbiased questions**

It is crucial to remain neutral while we are performing an interview. Remember we are interested in the participant´s opinions, the participant´s answers as an expert on the topic of the research. We must avoid influencing or leading participant´s answers by asking in a proper unbiased way.

Table 4. Unbiased versus leading questions

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| **Leading question** | **Unbiased question** |
| “Most smart people in this community always use condoms, don’t they?”“Was one reason that you wanted to use the female condom because you were trying to prevent sexually transmitted infections?”“Do you think people in the school communitydon’t talk about sex and condoms because theymight be stigmatized and seen as promiscuous?” | “I’ve heard some people in this community say that most smart people use a condom, and others say that they know smart people who don’t use condoms. What do you think?”“Why did you want to use the female condom?”Potential follow-up question:“What were you trying to protect yourself from?” “What do you think stops people in the schoolcommunity from talking about sex and condoms?” |

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| **Example of Testimonial***“The first time that we were selected to get a house they didn´t want to build it. Well, actually they didn´t, until later that we fixed the situation with the owner of the land … but my daughters had the illusion of having that house, when they knew that it was not going to be built they were actually crying. Dulce cryed for her wooden house …”* (Mrs. Mónica, April 12th, 2011).  |

**Focus Groups**

**What is a focus group?**

A focus group is a qualitative data collection method in which one or two researchers and several participants meet as a group to discuss a given research topic. These sessions are usually audio recorded, and sometimes video recorded. One researcher (the moderator) leads the discussion by asking participants to respond to open-ended questions – that is, questions that require an in-depth response rather than a single phrase or simple “yes” or “no” answer.

A second researcher (the note-taker) takes detailed notes on the discussion. A principal advantage of focus groups is that they yield a large amount of information over a relatively short period of time. They are also effective for accessing a broad range of views on a specific topic, as opposed to achieving group consensus. Focus groups are not the best method for acquiring information on highly personal or socially sensitive topics; one-on-one interviews are better-suited for such topics.

Table 5. Strengths of focus groups versus in-depth interviews

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|  | **Appropriate for** | **Strength of method** |
| **Focus groups** | Identifying group normsEliciting opinions about groupNormsDiscovering variety within apopulation | Elicits information on a range ofnorms and opinions in a short timeGroup dynamic stimulatesconversation, reactions |
| **Interviews** | Eliciting individual experiences,opinions, feelingsAddressing sensitive topics | Elicits in-depth responses, withnuances and contradictionsGets at interpretive perspective, i.e., the connections and relationships a person sees between particular events, phenomena, and beliefs |

**How do I document the focus group?**

Documenting the focus group consists of making tape recordings and writing notes. The notetaker is responsible for taking detailed notes of the discussion and often for operating the recording equipment. The moderator takes brief notes. Both facilitators should take the opportunity to expand their notes during the debriefing session after the focus group, and/or generate a set of debriefing notes.

**How are focus group data used?**

Typed transcripts are the most utilized form of focus group data. During the data analysis phase of the research, after data collection, transcripts are coded according to participants’ responses to each question and/or to the most salient themes emerging across the set of focus groups.

The moderator’s and note-taker’s expanded focus group notes (from the discussion and the debriefing session) are used:

* By moderators during the focus group discussions, to remind themselves of questions they need to go back to, where they need more complete information, etc.
* During debriefing sessions with other field staff and investigators
* During transcription of focus group recordings, to clarify and add contextual details to what participants have said.

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| **Fostering a relaxed, positive****atmosphere** | **Establishing mutual respect among****researchers and group members** |
| Be friendlySmileMake eye contact with participants (if culturallyappropriate)Speak in a pleasant tone of voiceUse relaxed body languageIncorporate humor where appropriateBe patient and do not rush participants to respond | Set ground rules at the beginning of the focus groupHave a humble attitudeDo not be patronizing, for example, byunnecessarily repeating everything participants say or “talking down” to themDo not scold or berate participants for the content of their responses or for personal characteristicsDo not allow any participants to berate others in the groupDo not coerce or cajole participants into responding to a question or responding in a certain way |

**Preparing the report**

Because they capture the thoughts and experiences of individual people, every set of

qualitative data collected (from every participant observation event, interview, and focus

group) is distinct. In addition, individual researchers inevitably have differences in style

that affect how data are managed in the field, and different locations have unique logistical

constraints.

Thus, systematically comparing and analyzing qualitative data in raw form is challenging.

Organizing data in a rigorous, standardized way is essential to their security and to the validity of

the study results, however. Consistency is important for every study but is especially crucial for

large, team-based projects involving extensive amounts of data located in multiple sites.

**Converting Raw Data to Computer Files**

In-depth interviews and focus groups are tape-recorded whenever possible. Preparing these recorded data for analysis requires transcribing all tapes and typing the transcriptions into computer files. Before transcription, the tabs on the tapes should be punched to prevent them from being recorded over. Next, backup copies of the tapes should be made. The backup copies should be securely stored in a separate location from the original tapes.

**What happens to the handwritten field notes?**

Participant observers, focus group facilitators, and interviewers take handwritten notes to document a wide range of information, including:

* casual and structured observations
* verbatim quotes
* paraphrases of participant responses
* interview and focus group backup documentation
* the researcher’s questions
* questions, conclusions, and observations discussed during the staff debriefing sessions

These notes are written on standardized forms, the interview or focus group question guide, or

field notebooks, according to the situation.

For focus groups and interviews, after transcribing all relevant recordings, the transcriptionist

types up the interviewer’s or focus group moderator’s corresponding handwritten field notes.

These typed field notes could either be appended to the transcript within the same file or kept in

a separate file (the principal investigator or data manager would make this decision). Whatever

the case, the typed field notes provide contextual information that could enhance the researchers’

understanding of the transcript and therefore need to be easily identifiable as part of the same

data collection event. Expanded notes from each participant observation event should be typed as

separate computer files.

**Writing the Report**

* Determine what is essential and make that the focus of the evaluation report and other communication strategies (e.g., oral reports).
* Focus on what will be most useful and meaningful. Even a comprehensive report will have to omit a great deal of information collected by the qualitative evaluator. Evaluators who try to include everything risk losing their readers in the sheer volume of the presentation. To enhance a report’s impact, the evaluation should address each major evaluation question clearly, that is, succinctly present the descriptive findings, analysis, and interpretation of each focused issue.
* An evaluation report should be readable, understandable, and relatively free of academic jargon.

Review the evaluation findings to distinguish functions like the following:

* Confirm and highlight major evaluation findings supported by the qualitative data.
* Disabuse people of misconceptions about the program.
* Illuminate important things not previously known or understood that should be known or understood

One of the great appeals of qualitative evaluation is the ability to render experiences in convincing detail. Narrative from even a single case, rendered to convey a person’s own words and feelings, is a very powerful way to draw attention to an issue or a point of view.

**Conclusion**

Most of us respond favorably to stories, to narratives that chronicle the experiences of individuals. In the context of program evaluations, it is often much easier to communicate key findings by using case examples. For many clients, tables do not convey a lot of intuitive meaning. Graphs are better; but narratives, in some cases, are best.

In program evaluations, qualitative input often carry a lot of weight, we can relate to the experiences of individuals more readily than we can understand the aggregated/summarized experiences of many.

Qualitative research results could help us make significant adaptations, changes or enhance the overall Evaluation process. We have to decide in which stage of the Evaluation process we could better use a Qualitative research: Design, Implementation, Results, maybe during the whole process or in between phases.

For program evaluators, there is both an opportunity and a caution in this:

* The opportunity: to be able to use cases and qualitative evidence to render evaluation findings more tangible, and, ultimately, more useful.
* The caution: to conduct qualitative evaluation with an experienced team that has the knowledge on using the methodology, applying the instruments, collecting the data and presenting results.

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**Sharepoint Readings**

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