

## Class 4. Qualitative research methods for planning

### Objectives

At the end of this class the students will know

- ◆ what do "qualitative research methods" mean, and how do they differ from "quantitative research methods"
- ◆ how qualitative methods are used for planning
- ◆ what are the main techniques for collecting qualitative information including advantages and disadvantages

**Qualitative research** is a type of formative research that seeks to understand the *meanings* of human behavior and the social-cultural context of social interaction. Qualitative research provides insight into the attitudes, beliefs, motives, and behaviors of a target population. By its very nature the research deals with emotional and contextual aspects of human responses rather than with objective, measurable behavior and attitudes. It is conducted to answer the question why (but not how many or how often). Qualitative research is used for discovery (not for proof). Usually it involves a small number of respondents, using non-probability methods. Qualitative research is more interpretative than descriptive.

Qualitative research is used in planning for the following purposes:

- ◆ to identify needs of a target population
- ◆ to explain/understand quantitative data
- ◆ to generate ideas
- ◆ to aid in development of a quantitative instrument
- ◆ to develop communication strategies
- ◆ to develop interventions/programs (especially strategies to achieve behavior change)
- ◆ to identify problems that may arise from various strategies
- ◆ to learn "language" and cultural concepts of a target population

Now let's discuss the main techniques used for collecting qualitative data. They include:

1. Observations (participant observations, continuous monitoring, spot checks, etc)
2. Interviews (informal, unstructured, semi-structured, structured (surveys); key informant interviews, focus groups interviews; etc)
3. Systematic data collection methods (free listing, pile sorts, etc)

### 1. Observations

Observations include gathering in-depth, detailed information in a setting through observing and recording. Observations are what you do when you want to see *actual* behavior and practices. Depending on the strategy used for observations, they can be

*overt* - obvious and reactive (people know you are watching them)

*covert*- unobtrusive and non-reactive (observe without their knowledge)

*direct* (for example, participant observation)

*indirect* (for example, medical records study)

Direct observations can have different level of "structure":

*Unstructured direct observations* – are an example of participant observation used in ethnographic fieldwork-anthropology. This technique gives an insider perspective and is dependant upon obtaining a rapport with target group/responder.

Continuous monitoring (common in psychology) is an example of a *more structured type of direct observation*. This method of observation involves watching a subject or group, and recording behavior as faithfully as possible.

*The most structured type of direct observations* are spot checks which are often used in program evaluation. Spot checks are used to observe at a randomly selected time and place what is and what is not being done.

Observations are used in planning

- ◆ to record the frequency of behaviors for the topic of interest (most reliable method)
- ◆ to identify previous unknown behaviors that may affect health outcomes
- ◆ to identify conditions that restrict or support a certain behavior
- ◆ to gain more in- depth knowledge about cultural practices

*Advantages of observations*

- ◆ relatively reliable (as opposed to reported behavior) – actual but not reported/ recalled behavior and practices are seen

*Limitations of observations*

- ◆ time and labor intensive (i.e., expensive) – can be simplified through the use of structured forms
- ◆ difficult to set up logistically
- ◆ observed behavior may change due to observation
- ◆ observer bias (due to observer expectations and interpretation) – to avoid it, it is necessary to develop the art of describing
- ◆ ethical considerations (participant observation)

## 2. In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviews involve asking open-ended questions, listening and recording answers, following up with additional relevant questions -probing beneath the surface, soliciting details and providing a holistic understanding of the interviewee's point of view.

Depending on the level of "structure" the interviews can be

- a) *informal* (no structure or control, conversations should be remembered, used for uncovering new topics)
- b) *unstructured* (more formal, yet no control or structure, allows people to express themselves in their own words)

- c) *semi-structured interviews* (based on the guide including written list of topics and/or questions to be answered in a particular order, asking non direct questions)
- d) *structured interviews* (quantitative approach, surveys)

In-depth interviews are used in planning

- ◆ to obtain in-depth information on complex subject matters with knowledgeable informants
- ◆ to explore knowledge, attitude, and practices of a target population, especially when dealing with sensitive topics
- ◆ to investigate complex behavior and motivations

*Advantages:*

- ◆ quality richness of information is very high
- ◆ interactive; can explore areas of interest in more depth through second interviews
- ◆ can explore sensitive topics
- ◆ better than focus groups (we will discuss them a little bit later) with geographically dispersed populations

*Disadvantages:*

- ◆ need highly skilled interviewers
- ◆ take time
- ◆ results aren't generalizable
- ◆ interviewer has limited control over the environment where interview takes place
- ◆ can generate a lot of extraneous information
- ◆ the data obtained are not always accurate (strongly influenced by interviewee's views and thoughts)

*Other issues to consider:*

- ◆ interviewer behavior is crucial to the success of conducting interviews and analyzing the information; training of interviewers is extremely important when using this technique
- ◆ data can be cumbersome and a plan to manage the data should be in place before the interviews begin

*Key-informant interview* is a type of in-depth interview - it involves interviewing people (usually 6-8 persons) specialized in the field. Usually key-informant interviews provide valuable information of interest.

Another type of in-depth interview is a *focus group interview* - a *group interview* process used to elicit detailed information about the experience, attitudes, beliefs, opinions. It is led by a skilled moderator with a small group of people (usually 6-8 persons) on a specific topic. The discussion is being recorded by a recorder/tape-recorder. Focus groups are conducted to get an insider perspective via group discussion, and to gather rich information that is stimulated by a group process. Semi-structured interview guides are usually used for focus group interviewing. Usually, debriefing takes place after focus groups, where a moderator, recorder and observers (if they were present) discuss the participant characteristics, their enthusiasm, consistency between participant comments and reported behaviors, their body language, and overall mood of the discussion. They also pay attention to changes in the

questioning route that took place during the focus group session, some new themes/subtopics that arose during the discussion, and decide on new avenues of questioning to be used in future focus groups. The transcripts of the session including the debriefing notes are used in the analysis of the focus groups, and the preparation of the focus group summary/report.

Focus groups are used in planning

- ◆ to identify and define problems
- ◆ to generate ideas about the project design
- ◆ to evaluate materials for use in a project
- ◆ to help in baseline surveys (question design, pre-testing, corroborate findings)
- ◆ to learn about the degree of consensus on a specific topic

*Advantages:*

- ◆ low cost (potentially)
- ◆ group interactions can stimulate rich responses and illuminate conflicting opinions

*Disadvantages:*

- ◆ cannot ensure confidentiality (ethical concerns)
- ◆ logistics of assembling a group is more complicated
- ◆ skilled moderator is needed
- ◆ number of questions that can be asked are limited

*Other issues to be considered:*

- ◆ the primary intention of a focus group is to collect information, not resolve the conflicts, build consensus, increase communication, change attitudes, make decisions
- ◆ focus groups should not be used when statistical data is required

When we have an understanding of how to collect the information necessary for a situational analysis, we can move to the next step of the generic health planning model - priority, goals, objectives setting, and strategy appraisal.

**Questions:**

**1. Qualitative research is conducted to answer the question how many or how often.**

True    False

Answer: False. See page 1.

**2. Please choose the least structured type of observations (among listed below)**

- a) Participant observation
- b) Spot checks
- c) Continuous monitoring

Answer: a) See page 1-2

**3. Observer bias is the bias due to expectations and interpretation of an observer.**

True    False

Answer: True. See page 2

**4. In-depth interview includes asking open-ended questions, listening and recording answers, following up with additional relevant questions.**

True    False

Answer: True. See page 2.

**5. How many people are usually involved in focus group?**

- a) 1-3 persons
- b) 3-6 persons
- c) 6-8 persons
- d) 10-20 persons

Answer: (c) See page 3.