

PS 0700

# Supplement on Collection of Qualitative Data

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Political Science Research Methods

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# In-Depth Interviews

- “An interaction between an interviewer and a respondent in which the interviewer has a general plan of inquiry but not a specific set of questions that must be asked with particular words and in a particular order” (Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, p. 300).
- The metaphor of the interviewer as a “miner” (in traditional survey research) or as a “traveler” (in-depth approach), exploring many domains of the person’s experiences and perceptions
- Interviewers adopt the role of the “socially acceptable incompetent” (Lofland and Lofland *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*, 1995)

- Used in political science research to:
  - Uncover views of elites who initiated policy or participated in important political events or decisions
  - Learn about the implementation of the policy from staff in the field
  - Learn about sensitive topics that would not be revealed in a group setting, nor able to be observed by the researcher
  - Learn about hard-to-reach subpopulations before initiating expensive sample surveys
  - Explore reactions to policy among recipients at various stages of process

- Important operational issues
  - Sample individuals in self-conscious fashion, either purposefully or randomly
  - Use thematic guide or protocol to provide some structure
  - “Pre-test” guide or the protocol as in traditional surveys
  - Transcribe interviews from tape or video recordings (i.e. don’t trust your memory!)
  - Be aware of variations in talkativeness and ability of subjects to express themselves (i.e. need for probes, silence, positive body language)
  - Some pointers for question construction:
    - Open-ended, unbiased questions that call for elaboration by respondent
      - “What did you find most helpful about the training you received?”
      - “What made it difficult for you to attend another civic education workshop”?
    - Give people hints to stimulate thinking but don’t lead them in particular ways
      - “Some people suggest that the workshops should be structured differently, like being longer or shorter, or with different kinds of games and activities, or that the facilitators should be trained differently”
- Analyze data by looking for patterns, themes, noting enthusiastic/emphatic responses, intensity of emotions, consistency across individuals

# Focus Groups

- “A group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research” (Powell and Single1996)
- Not simply group interviews, but emphasis on the interaction within the group based on topics supplied by the researcher
- The interaction within the group is designed to:
  - Highlight participants’ views of the subject
  - Allow individuals to ask questions and react to others’ views
  - Express emotional reactions to issues and policies that would be inhibited in one-on-one interaction
  - Re-evaluate and reconsider their own experiences and understandings of that experience

- Used in political science research:
  - To explore citizen reactions to media presentations, political rhetoric, candidates, party themes
  - To explore puzzles or anomalies in the quantitative data
  - To understand why an issue or problem is salient among a particular population
  - When individual interviews are too expensive to conduct
  - To examine social context of policy effects more so than is possible in one-on-one interviews
  - To uncover unanticipated effects (i.e. those not considered by researchers) of policies in unstructured social setting
  - To anticipate problems in policies or policy implementation before the program starts

- Important operational issues
  - Approximately 8-10 participants per session (maximum recommended: 15)
  - Selection of participants crucial, related to:
    - Heterogeneity of population of interest
    - Likely inhibitions of cross-gender, class groupings in discussing particular topics
    - Need for some social similarities within the group but not so much that differences of opinion and experience are not revealed
  - Organization difficult and must be monitored (i.e. cannot allow the organizers simply to recruit those most readily available)
  - Moderator or facilitator is key to whole experience
    - Must control proceedings
    - Must not show favoritism
    - Must challenge participants and get them to think creatively
    - Must avoid giving own opinions
  - Potential problems:
    - Domination of group by one or two individuals
    - Give researcher what s/he wants to hear to get approval of the “leader”
    - Give socially accepted responses within that sub-population
    - Data are difficult to analyze

# Two Important Extensions

- “Deliberative Polls”
  - Group interaction with policy makers, elected officials, then discussions within the group to see how information and deliberation changes public opinion
- “Participatory Action Research”
  - Focus groups/discussions for emancipation and social change
  - Participants empowered through the research process and through being consulted regarding their future and the future of their community
  - Popular in international development work to bring marginalized members of communities in touch with local officials and policy elites to participate in planning community change



# Observation and Participant Observation

- Observe social processes in natural setting, or learn about social processes by directly participating in them
- Continuum of researcher involvement, from unobtrusive observer (classrooms, video/audio recordings) to detached observer to active joiner of group, sub-culture, church, etc.
- Differing philosophical underpinnings
  - Reality is “out there” (not in the laboratory) for researcher to observe
  - Reality is not “out there” but “constructed” by cultures and groups, and researcher must discover how individuals, groups, cultures make sense of the world

- Used in political science research:
  - To observe politicians and their behavior (e.g. *Home Style* by Richard Fenno), or behavior of citizen groups, lobbies, bureaucracies, decision makers
  - To observe a policy or event “in action” (i.e. classrooms, civic education workshops, etc)
  - To observe sub-cultures toward which a policy is directed, discover potential problems with policy or openings in implementation that may not have been apparent (e.g. teen receptivity toward HIV prevention)

- Important operational issues
  - Develop observation “to-do” list (i.e. don’t go in to setting without knowing what to look for, at least at first)
  - Field notes crucial (i.e. don’t rely on memory)
  - Relatively long observation periods necessary
  - Dangers of losing objectivity through immersion in sub-culture
  - Ethical issues in informing groups of purpose of the study