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Qualitative Research

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Characteristics

- Subjective: Captures views, motivations, and experiences of participants
- Provides meaning to data with words
- Can be used to explain survey results
- Can be used to develop surveys or materials or interventions for patients
- Can be used to develop new hypotheses
Qualitative research is dismissed by many as “soft research”

Totally opposite of quantitative research in terms of trying to get equally distributed groups

Want to get experts on certain topics

Want to get views of like people to see if can identify themes

Totally opposite in terms of trying to control for extraneous variables
Types of Designs

- Focus groups
- Interviews
- Documentation: e.g., charts, letters, diaries
- Observation
- Case study
Focus Groups

- Bring together groups of people of a certain type to identify their views, wants, needs, etc.
- Have its roots in advertising
- Groups are usually segregated by age, gender, race, or perhaps other attributes
Recruiting Focus Group Subjects (1)

- Go to where they (potential subjects) hang out
- Use an advertising agency to recruit potential subjects
- Have potential subjects fill out a focus group screener, including questions of
  - Demographic questions
  - A few questions of interest to our topic
Recruiting Focus Group Subjects (2)

- Look over the screener and decide who we want to invite to the group
- Call potential subjects and invite them
- Invite a few extras just in case
  - If too many, we can pay them and send them home
- Give them a general idea about what you are going to talk about
- But not a lot
- As we are going for spontaneous “from the heart” responses
Focus Group Procedures

- Each subject may be paid for $75 or higher for coming
- Best to arrange all of our groups on 1 day to avoid a historical effect
- 6-10 participants per group
- Each group may last for about 1½ hours

- Respondents are asked to come early to eat and drink
  - Get our participants socializing and talking to each other
Focus Group Facility

- A room with a large table
- Generally the room has a 2-way mirror
- Observers (can be the researchers) may watch from behind the glass
- If the researchers do not have funding for renting a facility with a 2-way mirror, the researchers can use a large room and have observers present in the room
- Notes (data) are taken by the observers
- Sessions will usually be taped and transcribed later (data)
Focus Group Leader or Moderator

- Is best to have a disinterested moderator to avoid bias
- Is best to have a moderator similar to group: e.g., a Hispanic woman for group of Hispanic women
- The moderator should be trained and able to get people talking
Focus Group Moderator Guide

• Is an outline for the moderator to follow
• Must use the same guide for every group so all groups are approached in the same manner

• Starts out explaining the “rules of the game”
  ○ Today we are going to talk about .....
• Have open ended questions
• Has prompts
Sample Questions

- Tell me about your end-of-life preferences

- Prompt
  - Can you say a bit more about that
  - Why do you feel that way?
Interview Techniques

- Use open ended questions
- Use careful listening
- Do not lead respondents
Terminating The Group

- Generally have a debriefing time
- Let participants ask any questions they may have
- Often, participants may want to meet the observers, if the observers are behind the glass
- Thank participants and pay them CASH in an envelope
Focus Group Data Analysis (1)

- Can be a nightmare
  - Many focus group studies not published for this reason
- Take the transcripts from each group
- Have two disinterested persons read the transcripts and identify themes, if any
- Then, have the disinterested persons (aforementioned) come together along with the researchers to identify or verify the developed themes
Focus Group Data Analysis (2)

- Very sophisticated programs now that you can read in the transcripts
- Identify different “nodes”
- You can ask the program to tell you how many times a certain word was mentioned
- All these are attempts to “quantify” the data
Focus Group Data Analysis (3)

- Give participants specific scenarios and ask the group if they can come to an agreement
  - For example: If you had 6 months to live, would you rather live a few days longer and stay in the ICU or go home a live a few days shorter?

- This way, the researchers can say how each group responded to each of the predetermined scenarios without fancy data analysis programs
Another trick

- Put all important concepts on cards
  - e.g., end-of-life preferences
- During the group, have the observers add to the stack of cards any new concepts that the group may mention
- At the end of the group, have the participants do a “card sort” exercise
  - Place 4 hats in the front of the room
  - The moderator yells each concept out and asks the group to quickly put the concept in the very important, important, neutral, or not important hat
- This way, we will have very important and important concepts “quantified” for each group
Last Thoughts on Focus Groups

- Is best to do a few groups for each segmented category
  - Could have a weird group or a heckler or a dominant person that intimidates the group

- Large studies do groups in different regions of the country
Interviews

- Used interviews if the topic is too sensitive to discuss in a group
- Used to gain unique insights of individuals
- Used if respondents are so dissimilar or live too far away to assemble a group

- Similar ideas for interviewing as in focus groups
A study tested the differences between a new smoking intervention and a traditional smoking cessation program.

All smokers that were assigned to the new intervention group were interviewed after the study to see:
- What they liked and disliked about the intervention.
• Example: Go through patient charts and read nurses notes
  ○ To identify common themes

• Example: Go through nursing diaries
  ○ To identify what it was like to be a nurse in the 1800’s
• The same idea as in the focus group analysis
• Have two independent reviewers read the document and identify themes
• Then, the independent reviewers meet together with the research team
• Goal: Reach a consensus on the themes
Observation

- Come from anthropology
  - Example: We observe family members in the waiting room of an intensive care unit
- We take notes on the types of concerns family members are expressing
- We identify common themes from our notes
Case Study

- Comes from medicine
- Study individual cases to identify a common theme

Example: When AIDS first presented itself, it was not a known disease and was initially classified as cancer
Mixed Methods (1)

- Bring together both qualitative and quantitative data
- Use both to explain a phenomenon
- Example: The researchers may use the quantitative data from the RCT and the qualitative data from the interviews
**Mixed Methods (2)**

- **Example:**
  - Give the focus group participants in the end-of-life group a survey to take home and complete
  - Then, the researchers can compare the focus group data and survey data to see if they match
  - Allows the researchers to get data from respondents who were quiet during group or data that people did not feel comfortable about talking about in group
Triangulation

- Bring together multiple sources of data to explain a phenomenon
Summary

- Can be biased in its nature
- Often, may not be generalizable to the population
- Best if a qualitative study can be used in conjunction with a quantitative one