Qualitative Methods

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In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviewing entails asking questions, listening to and recording the answers, and then posing additional questions to clarify or expand on a particular issue. Questions are open-ended and respondents are encouraged to express their own perceptions in their own words. In-depth interviewing aims at understanding the beneficiaries' view of a program, their terminology and judgments.

There are three basic approaches to in-depth interviewing that differ mainly in the extent to which the interview questions are determined and standardized beforehand: the informal conversational interview; semi-structured interview; and the standardized open-ended interview. Each approach serves a different purpose and has different preparation and instrumentation requirements.

The INFORMAL CONVERSATIONAL INTERVIEW relies primarily on the spontaneous generation of questions in the natural flow of an interaction. This type of interview is appropriate when the evaluator wants to maintain maximum flexibility to be able to pursue questioning in whatever direction appears to be appropriate, depending on the information that emerges from observing a particular setting, or from talking to one or more individuals in that setting. Under these circumstances, it is not possible to have a predetermined set of questions. The strength of this approach is that the interviewer is flexible and highly responsive to individual differences, situational changes and emerging new information. The weakness is that it may generate less systematic data that is difficult and time consuming to classify and analyze.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS involve the preparation of an interview guide that lists a pre-determined set of questions or issues that are to be explored during an interview. This guide serves as a checklist during the interview and ensures that basically the same information is obtained from a number of people. Yet, there is a great deal of flexibility. The order and the actual working of the questions is not

determined in advance. Moreover, within the list of topic or subject areas, the interviewer is free to pursue certain questions in greater depth. The advantage of the interview guide approach is that it makes interviewing of a number of different persons more systematic and comprehensive by delimiting the issues to be taken up in the interview. Logical gaps in the data collected can be anticipated and closed, while the interviews remain fairly conversational and situational. The weakness of this approach is that it does not permit the interviewer to pursue topics or issues of interest that were not anticipated when the interview guide was elaborated. Also, interviewer flexibility in wording and sequencing questions may result in substantially different responses from different persons, thus reducing comparability.

The STANDARDIZED OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEW consists of a set of open-ended questions carefully worded and arranged in advance. The interviewer ask the same questions to each respondent with essentially the same words and in the same sequence. This type of interview may be particularly appropriate when there are several interviewers and the evaluator wants to minimize the variation in the questions they pose. It is also useful when it is desirable to have the same information from each interviewee at several points in time or when there are time constraints for data collection and analysis. Standardized open-ended interviews allow the evaluator to collect detailed data systematically and facilitate comparability among all respondents. The weakness of this approach is that it does not permit the interviewer to pursue topics or issues that were not anticipated when the interview instrument was elaborated. Also, standardized open-ended interviews limits the use of alternative lines of questioning with different people depending on their particular experiences. This reduces the extent to which individual differences and circumstances can be fully incorporated in the evaluation.

Interviews with individual respondents

A common type of individual respondent interview is the KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW. A key informant is an individual, who as a result of their knowledge, previous experience or social status in a community has access to information valuable for the evaluator such as insights about the functioning of society, their problems and needs. Key informants are a source of information which can assist in understanding the context of a program or project, or clarifying particular issues or problems.

However, since the selection of key informants is not random, the issue of bias always arise. Another difficulty of this method lies in separating the informants' potential partiality to form a balanced view of the situation.

Group interviews

Interviews with a group of individuals can take many different forms depending on the purpose they serve, the structure of the questions, the role of the interviewer and the circumstances under which the group is convened. Some of the group interview types relevant to evaluation are: focus groups, community interviews and spontaneous group interviews.

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS are interviews with small groups of relatively homogeneous people with similar background and experience. Participants are asked to reflect on the questions asked by the interviewers, provide their own comments, listen to what the rest of the group have to say and react to their observations. The main purpose is to elicit ideas, insights and experiences in a social context where people stimulate each other and consider their own views along with the views of others. Typically, these interviews are conducted several times with different groups so that the evaluator can identify trends in the perceptions and opinions expressed. The interviewer acts as facilitator introducing the subject, guiding the discussion, cross-checking each other comments and encouraging all members to express their opinions. One of the main advantages of this techniques is that participant interaction helps weed out false or extreme views, thus providing a quality control mechanism. This, however, requires a skillful facilitator to ensure an even participation from all members.

COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS are conducted as public meetings in which the whole community is consulted. Typically, these interviews involve a set of factually-based fairly close-ended questions. Once the interviewers pose the question, the group will interact to get a consensus around an answer. Interviewing the community as a whole can provide valuable information on how well a project is working. The major weakness of this methods is that participation may be limited to a few high status

members of the community or that community leaders may use the forum to seek consensus on their own views and preferences.

Observational Methods

Firsthand observation of a program is another important source of qualitative data for evaluation. The main purpose of observational evaluation is to obtain a thorough description of the program including program activities, participants and the meaning they attach to the program. It involves careful identification and accurate description of relevant human interactions and processes.

There are several advantages to observational fieldwork for evaluation purposes:

- it provides a better understanding of the context in which program activities occur;
- it allows to be aware of important things program participants may ignore or omit willingly or unwillingly in an interview;
- it permits the evaluator to present a more comprehensive view of the program by combining his own as well as others perceptions;
- it helps understand and interpret the program by providing personal knowledge and direct experience.

Observational evaluation is a hard work that requires a skilled, trained and competent evaluator to ensure good quality data. There are a number of variations in observational methods. The most fundamental difference among them refers to the role of the evaluation observer either as a full program participant, a detached spectator or somewhere in between.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION is at one end of the participation spectrum and consists of the evaluation observer becoming a member of the community or population being studied. The researcher participates in activities of the community, observes how people behave and interact with each other and outside organizations. The evaluator tries to become accepted as a neighbor or participant rather than as an outsider. The purpose of such participation is not only to see what is happening but to feel what it is like to be part of the group. The extent to which this is possible depends on the characteristics of program participants, the type of questions being studied and the socio-political context of the setting. The strength of this approach is that the

researcher is able to experience and presumably better understand any project impacts. The main weakness is that it is likely to alter the behavior that is being observed. In addition, ethical issues may arise if the participant observer misrepresents himself/herself in order to be accepted by the community being studied.

DIRECT OBSERVATION tends to be at the other end of the participation spectrum. It involves the systematic noting and recording of activities, behaviors and physical objects in the evaluation setting as an unobtrusive observer. It can often be a rapid an economical way of obtaining basic socio-economic information on households or communities. The main advantage of this method is that if participants are not aware that they are being observed, then they are less likely to change their behavior and compromise the validity of the evaluation.

It is important to remember that there is a great deal of variation between the two extremes and that the extent of participation can change over time. For example, the evaluator may begin the observation as an outsider and gradually become a participant as the study evolves.

Document Review

Evaluators may supplement observational fieldwork and interviewing with gathering and analyzing documentary material generated by a program such as laws, regulations, contracts, correspondence, memoranda and routine records on services and clients. These kind of documents are a useful source of information on program activities and processes, and they can generate ideas for questions that can be pursued through observation and interviewing. In addition, program documents can provide valuable information that may not be accessible by other means. For example, they can provide information about things that the evaluator cannot observe because they took place before the evaluation began, they were part of private interchanges in which the evaluator did not participate or they reflect plans that have not been realized in actual program performance.

A major advantage of this method is the documents were generated contemporaneously with the events they refer to. Hence, they are less likely to be subject to memory decay or memory distortion compared with data obtain from an

interview. However, an important disadvantage is that they may be subject to selective-deposit or selective-survival bias.