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## Executive Summary

**To:** Jessica Sotelo, Executive Director, Partners for Prosperity  
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**RE:** Qualitative Research Methods

The purpose of this summary is to examine a variety of different qualitative research methods and to determine how effective each of these methods of inquiry is in (a) obtaining accurate information about the nature of social problems experienced by groups of people within communities, and (b) generating buy-in to development activities by members of the community.

### REVIEW OF QUALITATIVE METHODS

Qualitative data is information gathered through fieldwork that can not easily be presented in numerical form. In other words, qualitative data includes everything that can not be counted in some fashion. It includes attitudes, experiences, and beliefs of the people studied and of the researcher. Field research consists of direct observations of events in progress, interviews with informants, and time sensitive studies. Researchers engaged in fieldwork have developed a variety of methods to conduct each of these elements. Some of these methods are better suited than others based on the type of inquiry.

#### Observation

“Field observation differs from some other models of observation in that it is not only a data-collecting activity. Frequently, perhaps typically, it is a theory-generating activity as well ... You will attempt to make sense out of an ongoing process that cannot be predicted in advance—making initial observations, developing tentative general conclusions that suggest particular types of further observations, making those observations and thereby, revising your conclusions and so forth” (Babbie, 1986, p. 239).

Various disciplines of the social sciences have adapted similar, but somewhat different, methods of conducting field research. A method of field research commonly used by sociologists and anthropologists is *participant observation*. Researchers utilizing participant observation act in one of two related roles: the complete participant or the participant-as-observer. The **complete participant** is so emerged in the experience they are studying that “the true identity and purpose . . . are not known to those whom he observes. He interacts with them as naturally as possible in whatever areas of their living interest him and are acceptable to him in situations in which he can play or learn to play requisite day-to-day roles successfully” (Gold, 1969, p. 33). Although the complete observer is able to observe the situations he/she is studying in the most natural of all settings, there are some ethical concerns with doing this type of field research. There is a level of deception by the researcher. People are not given a choice as to their inclusion in the study. Some may confide in the researcher in a way that they would not if they knew that research was being conducted.



“No researcher deceives his or her subjects solely for the purpose of deception. Rather it is done in the belief that the data will be more valid and reliable, that the subjects will be more natural and honest if they do not know that the researcher is doing a research project. If the people being studied know they might modify their behavior in a variety of ways. On the other side of the coin, complete participants may affect what they are studying. To play the role of participant, you must participate. Yet, your participation may importantly affect the social process you are studying. Ultimately, anything that the participant observer does or does not do will have some effect on that which is being observed; it is simply inevitable” (Babbie, p. 243).

A form of participant observation that is less fraught with ethical concerns is the **participant-as-observer**. “In this role, you would participate fully with the group under study, but you would make it clear that you were also undertaking research” (Babbie, p. 243). The danger with this technique is that people may shift their attention from the social process that is of interest and instead focus on the research project and the activities of the researcher. “The process being observed may no longer be typical. Or, conversely, you yourself may come to identify too much with the interests and viewpoints of the participants. You may “go native” and lose much of your scientific detachment” (Babbie, p. 243).

A third type of observation is that of the **complete observer**. The complete observer is at the other extreme of the observation scale from that of complete participant. In this role the researcher “observes a social process without becoming a part of it in any way” (Babbie, p. 243). In this instance, subjects may not realize they are being studied but the researcher is less likely to develop a full appreciation of what is being studied. The researcher does not interfere with the phenomenon of interest and he/she can only use his/her own perspective to understand the situation.

## **Interviewing**

A less intrusive method of field research than participant observation is **guided interviewing**. As with participant observation there are various techniques to conduct interviews in the field. **Un-Structured** interviews are used when the researcher wants to learn about the lived experience of the informant. The interviewer has minimal control over the informant’s responses. Unstructured interviews ask the informant to participate in free recall of the topic of interest. In other words, the informant discloses as much as he/she can remember (or wants to disclose) with little prompting or probing from interviewer. During the unstructured interview the researcher only asks enough questions to keep the informant talking. The informant decides what information to give and what information to hold back. The information obtained is based solely on the free recall of the informant. Un-structured, free recall interviews may or may not produce useful information to the researcher. The researcher only gets information that the informant can remember and wants to share. Unstructured interviews conducted at different times and in different circumstances are likely to produce different information. Therefore, there is a question of reliability with this interviewing method. Also, since the informant chooses what information to share, there is a question of validity as well. Some evidence suggests that informants in un-structured interviewing can (and have) intentionally deceived researchers about the culture in which



they live. People often say what they think you want to hear rather than what is true. In any interviewing method, the researcher is a primary participant. As a result, interviewer bias is always a concern.

**Semi-Structured** interviews are useful when the interviewer gets only one shot at interviewing. A semi-structured interview retains much of the feel of unstructured interviews but uses an interviewing guide or list of questions that must or should be covered. From the responses to initial questions, the interviewer probes for more information. Semi-Structured interviews attempt to balance the reliability of the structured interview and the validity of the unstructured interview.

During **Structured** interviews informants are asked to respond to a specific, clearly identified set of questions. This method involves the use of an interview schedule or a set of instructions to interviewers who administer questionnaires verbally. This form has the highest level of reliability but sacrifices the ability of the interviewer to learn about the lived experiences of the informant directly. That is, the interviewer already knows what information he/she is looking for. He/she may not recognize important information given to the interviewer because that information does not fit within the previously defined questions.

The **Cognitive Interview** (Fisher & Geiselman, 1984; 1986) is a type of structured interviewing. This method utilizes a two stage recall format. First, informants participate in free recall. The interviewer may say something like “tell me about \_\_\_\_\_.” The informant is allowed the opportunity to offer any thing they remember or choose to say about the topic. The researcher would then probe for details on what the informant said. Interviewing in this manner can directly increase the amount of information recalled without increasing the relative numbers of errors.

**Ethnographic Interviewing** is another form of guided interviewing used mostly by anthropologists doing field research. The method was developed by James P. Spradley and is used as a tool in developing a cultural description called ethnography. Ethnographers conduct a series of guided interviews probing for information with the same informant. The purpose behind the interviews is to help break down the language barriers between the informant and the interviewer and to add to the knowledge of the culture gathered by the research using other field techniques. Ethnographic interviews begin as unstructured interviews and then build into semi-structured and structured format. Most often, ethnographers also use observation techniques to create the ethnography. The level of participation varies from one ethnographer to the next, however ethnographic interviews are only one tool in understanding the culture and are not used alone. Ethnographic interviews are most often used to supplement observations made by the researcher.

This method of interviewing was employed by Partners for Prosperity (P4P) during the planning stage. The interviews began as unstructured interviews. Interviewers then used a form of cognitive interviewing, called mind mapping, to probe for details from the informant about specific things that had been said. For the planning stage, the interviews were coupled with observations made by the researcher to create the social science description (Spradley, 1979) of people living in poverty. Future analysis of the interviews along with additional ethnographic interviewing may lead to an ethnographic description of the region (Spradley, 1979).



Another form of guided interviewing is *Appreciative Inquiry*. Appreciative Inquiry differs from other research methods in that those using this form of interviewing are not seeking to understand situations from the point of view of the informant, but instead the goal is to create change in the behavior or attitudes of the informant. This method of interviewing is used in organizations that want to improve production and moral. Some communities have adapted this method of interviewing as well.

Appreciative Inquiry takes an asset based approach to research and development. Researchers ask questions about the strengths (positive things) rather than needs (what is missing) in the organization. The interviews are thought to push people to become cognitive (aware) of the assets in the community, the individual, and the system. It is based on the philosophy of W. I. Thomas stated in 1919. That is, if individuals perceive a situation in a certain way, such perceptions are real to them in all of their consequences. In other words, we become what we believe we already are and we can change our environment to be as we believe it already is. So, then, if people are asked about poverty then they will focus on poverty and will become poor. However, if people focus on prosperity they will recognize their own potential and begin to prosper.

Because Appreciative Inquiry is goal directed it fails to give a complete picture of the situation as it exists. There are some real problems with scientific reliability and validity for those who employ this method. There are also a number of ethical concerns. Researchers, in their method of questioning, direct the patterns of the informants' thought. Some have argued that the researcher, in this manner, defines the reality of the informant. On the other hand, it can be argued that all methods of inquiry direct thoughts of the individual, this method would assist in working toward the goal of change. There may be a place for appreciative inquiry when P4P undertakes the project of asset mapping.

### **Time Sensitive Studies**

The final element of qualitative studies is related to time and change. Communities are dynamic elements. Things, situations, and people change over time. This is especially true of places where community development is being practiced. Several methods of assessing the change that occurs over time have also been developed by researchers. Some of these are not unique to qualitative research.

*Cross Sectional Studies* are designed to look at a single issue or topic at a specified point in time and to analyze and compare different sections of the population. Exploratory and descriptive studies are often cross-sectional. For example, the U.S. census looks at the entire population as of April 1st every ten years. This information can then be used to compare one group to another at that time. It can also be used to analyze change in groups over a ten year interval. Cross sectional studies may be utilized by community development organizations as well. For example, information gathered through interviews, observation, or methods across the population of interest could be compared and contrasted among sub-groups. There are many uses for cross sectional studies.



*Longitudinal Studies*, on the other hand, are designed to permit observations over an extended period of time. Again, longitudinal studies can be utilized by either quantitative or qualitative researchers. Three types of longitudinal studies are trend studies, cohort studies, and panel studies. *Trend studies* (sometimes called period analysis) are designed to specifically look at change within a population of people over time. In other words, the same community is evaluated at various points in time. Differences in the population at time “A” and time “B” are of interest to the researcher. *Cohort Studies*, instead, examine specific sub-populations as they change over time. “A cohort consists of a group of individuals who experienced the same significant event during a specified brief period of time, usually a year, and may be identified as a group at successive later dates on the basis of common demographic experience” (Shryock, Siegel, et al., 1976, p. 550). Examples of cohorts are birth cohorts (people born the same year), marriage cohorts (people married the same year or years), migration cohorts (people who moved into an area the same year), and a labor force cohort (persons who entered or left the labor force the same year). Cohorts are observed in successive years following the defining event. This kind of analysis allows us to see change that is experienced over time by a specific group of people. “*Period Analysis*, on the other hand, involves . . . description and analysis for the many cohorts observed during a specified time interval” (Shryock, Siegel, et al., 1976, p. 550). Finally, in a *Panel Study* “information is collected from the same people at various time intervals” (Shryock, Siegel, et al., 1976, p. 551). This differs from the trend study in that trend studies draw from the same population but panel studies look at the same people over time. Panel studies require a long term commitment from the participants whereas a trend study will only require a one time participation of the informants.

## SUMMARY

In summary, the use of qualitative inquiry in development efforts can help researchers understand the situation from the point of view of the community members and can help create buy-in. Qualitative research methods rely on three factors: observation, interviewing, and time series studies. All three factors are needed to gain an understanding of situations in communities. Further, the questions that the developers want to answer with research will direct what methods are best to use. Characteristics of the population and of the researcher may limit the methods that are available. The use of qualitative analysis can be quite intrusive. As a result, ethical issues of application must be considered when choosing qualitative methods. In all cases, protection of the informants needs to be a top consideration. P4P could benefit from a comprehensive qualitative research project that would result in an ethnographic description of the community. Application of all or some of the methods described here could be utilized to expand the understanding of the people living in Eastern Idaho.



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