



Qualitative Approaches to Program Evaluation

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What's Inside?

1. What's here?

This brief provides an introduction to using qualitative research in program evaluations, including what it is, when to use it, and how to combine it with quantitative research for a more robust evaluation.

2. Who should read this brief?

This brief targets evaluators but is also informative for individuals who design or assess program evaluations or evaluation plans.

Introduction

Qualitative research focuses on understanding individuals' beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behaviors, and interactions and is often used to answer open-ended research questions focused on how or why something occurs. It seeks an in-depth understanding of real-world phenomena from the perspective of the people experiencing it, by asking "how," "why," and "to what extent" instead of "how many" or "how much" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Tenny et al., 2021).

Qualitative Research Definition

Qualitative research gathers participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviors through open-ended research questions.

In evaluations, qualitative research can provide participant-informed insights into the implementation, outcomes, and impacts of programs. Using qualitative approaches, evaluators can incorporate the unique perspectives of people served by a program into an evaluation, ensuring that their lived experiences inform program findings and recommendations.

Understanding Qualitative Research

Rigorous qualitative methods have the potential to be:

- ▶ **Holistic.** They may support the full understanding of an issue by incorporating multiple perspectives and considering how context or environment may influence outcomes.
- ▶ **Inclusive.** They may support the inclusion and active participation of people served by a program and uplift the voices of people who may not often be represented in research.
- ▶ **Comprehensive.** They may make use of unique data sources, such as program documents, observations, or video and audio recordings.

However, evaluators should consider potential obstacles before using qualitative approaches, including:

- ▶ **Resource intensity.** They may require considerable resources, including staff and participant time, which may limit sample size.
- ▶ **Limited generalizability.** Findings may not be applied to a broader population. However, methods and results may be transferable and applied to similar settings.
- ▶ **Lack of anonymity in data collection.** Although confidentiality may be maintained in reporting results, participants may be more comfortable completing anonymous surveys than participating in one-on-one interviews or focus groups, especially when asked about sensitive topics.

When Is Qualitative Best?

Consider using qualitative methods when:

- ▶ The goal of the research is to understand individuals, groups, or organizations, including their values, beliefs, behaviors, perspectives, relationships, and interactions as conveyed in their own voices (Teherani et al., 2015).
- ▶ The evaluators have built trust and rapport with participants.
- ▶ Program outcomes cannot be easily quantified.
- ▶ Study participants are few in number or from hard-to-reach populations, making a representative sample difficult to achieve (Rao & Woolcock, 2003).
- ▶ Quantitative data need to be contextualized or validated.

Consider alternatives to qualitative methods when:

- ▶ The analyses needed to answer the research questions require a large participant sample.
- ▶ The responses to the research questions deal with numbers or variables that are measurable and clearly defined (e.g., duration, frequency).
- ▶ The goal of the research is generalizability across groups and populations (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

Consider using qualitative approaches at different points in a program’s life cycle (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.; Office of Data, Analysis, Research, and Evaluation, 2016):

- ▶ **Prior to implementation of a program**, qualitative approaches can assess the social and historical context of the program, gauge the perceptions and buy-in of the target population, and help develop hypotheses about program outcomes.
- ▶ **Throughout program implementation**, qualitative approaches can illuminate participants’ perspectives and provide real-time insights for improvement.
- ▶ **In the final stages of program work and after program completion**, qualitative approaches can explore participants’ experiences and program effects in detail and inform actionable recommendations.

Answering Questions Using Qualitative Approaches

Certain research questions and thematic areas lend themselves more to qualitative research than others. Qualitative research is particularly valuable in answering questions related to meaning, context, process, and relationships. It is also valuable in developing hypotheses and exploring equity issues in questions related to:

- ▶ Exploring why something occurs when little information is available
- ▶ Understanding context and environment
- ▶ Understanding perceptions and subjective meaning
- ▶ Understanding behaviors
- ▶ Evaluating how interventions work in practice (Wolff et al., 2018)

Equity Considerations

In an environment where systemic or institutional barriers to equity and biases are eliminated, everyone—regardless of income, identify, or skin color—can have what they need to live healthy, happy lives (Gutuskey, 2022). Centering equity means recognizing, understanding, and incorporating the needs, perspectives, and voices of community members affected by inequitable systems and structures in the design and completion of an evaluation. Such an equity approach helps counter the evaluation team’s implicit biases. Including community members in the evaluation process also helps evaluators understand context and root causes and prioritize findings that are relevant and reflect community perspectives.

Qualitative approaches are well suited to centering equity in evaluations. Research questions that pose “how” or “why,” for example, provide an opportunity to obtain in-depth information on important contextual factors such as historical and structural inequities relevant to the program and its target population. Qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, and Photovoice provide opportunities for participants to share unique lived experiences and perspectives that quantitative data alone cannot reveal. See *Centering Equity in Program Evaluation* OPRE Report No. 2022-211 (Gutuskey, 2022) for a comparison of conventional and equitable evaluation characteristics.

Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches in Evaluation

Though sometimes presented as opposites, qualitative and quantitative approaches are complementary, and many evaluations benefit from a mixed-methods approach. Qualitative approaches can, for example, help explain quantitative data results. While quantitative methods enable evaluators to generalize to entire populations using data from a much smaller sample, losing nuance and important context about the individuals or groups being studied is a risk (Rao & Woolcock, 2003). This concern may be exacerbated for research with communities harmed by systemic and structural inequities. With a mixed-methods approach, however, qualitative research can supplement and contextualize quantitative data results and ensure participants' experiences and perspectives are captured accurately in data and findings.

Different Answers to Different Questions

Quantitative research answers the question of “what.”

Qualitative research provides context and is best suited to answer questions of “why,” “how,” “how much,” and “to what extent.”

Combining qualitative approaches with quantitative methods in program evaluation enhances the rigor and robustness of research. A mixed-methods evaluation may better illuminate the holistic effects of a program and support comparisons across subgroups without sacrificing the nuance and perspectives acquired through methods such as interviews and focus groups. Evaluators should consider a mixed-methods approach to improve program design and delivery through increased opportunities for participants to be directly involved in the research.

Designing Qualitative Research

In designing a qualitative evaluation, consider which methodology, questions, and methods work best together. Although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, methodology and methods are not the same concept. Methodology refers to the broad, theoretical, political, and philosophical background of the research and implications for particular methods (Petty et al., 2012). Methods are the ways evaluators collect and analyze the data.

Methodological Approaches

Evaluators should select an approach that aligns with the study's research questions and target population. Methodological approaches include:

- ▶ **Grounded theory.** This approach involves the construction of a new theory through systematic data collection and analysis. Theory is typically generated from the field through observations. This approach can be used to answer process questions about experiences over time or changes that consist of discrete stages. For example, “What theory of change explains the impact of your program on parent-child interaction?”

Types of Qualitative Data

- Documents
- Interview or discussion transcripts or audio files
- Videos
- Observation logs
- Photographs and drawings

- ▶ **Case study.** This approach involves an in-depth exploration of an individual, group, organization, event, or phenomenon within a setting or context. For example, “How do three local implementing agencies in the northern region of the State recruit, engage, and retain families? What are the similarities and differences among these grantees?”
- ▶ **Ethnography.** This observational approach examines the culture of a group of people over a long time period. The evaluator collects rich descriptive data while immersed in the daily life of a group or a social or cultural setting. The evaluator intensely examines, describes, and interprets practices, behaviors, values, and relationships among group members. For example, “How do families experience the program intervention in your community?”
- ▶ **Phenomenology.** This approach examines the shared everyday life experiences of individuals within a group, describing the nature of a particular phenomenon and how people experience it. For example, “How do home visitors in your program experience working with families dealing with trauma?”

Research Questions

Research questions set the foundation for and guide the evaluation (Corporation for National & Community Service, n.d.). In writing research questions, consider the goals of the research since different types of evaluation require different questions (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.).

Write research questions with enough detail to convey their purpose and goal without additional explanation. Research questions should be:

- ▶ **Narrowly defined.** The questions add focus to the research. They should focus on a single phenomenon or concept.
- ▶ **Exploratory.** The questions are open-ended and often begin with “what” or “how” and avoid directional words such as “affect” or “impact.”
- ▶ **Answerable.** The investigator can observe or assess the answers.
- ▶ **Specific.** The questions should specify the target population, align with the research design, and guide data collection and analysis.
- ▶ **Nonjudgmental.** The questions demonstrate an openness to a range of participants’ perspectives and do not imply greater value in one response or finding over another.
- ▶ **Culturally relevant.** The questions are tailored to the perspectives and lived experiences of the target population and reflect awareness of relevant social, historical, and economic contexts.






Planning Qualitative Data Collection

Many different methods and tools are designed to elicit a participant’s perspective on a program, experience, or scenario. The evaluation team should consider the differences among various data collection methods, sampling, and recruitment strategies to find participants with the most relevant and diverse perspectives for their research.

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative research may use a combination of data collection methods to examine issues in depth, triangulate data from various sources, or complement quantitative data. Table 1 describes the advantages and disadvantages of common qualitative data collection methods. For example, interviews might elicit meaningful responses, but they are time-consuming. Focus groups present a more rapid and less costly data collection, but gathering sensitive information in group settings might be difficult.

Table 1. Common Qualitative Data Collection Methods

Data Collection Method	Description	Advantages	Disadvantages
 <p>Interviews</p>	Structured or unstructured (conversational) one-on-one or group discussions with participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explores experiences, views, or opinions Can elicit meaningful responses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conducting interviews and analyzing data are time-consuming and resource-intensive tasks
 <p>Focus groups</p>	Structured or unstructured small-group discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generates additional questions or ideas Faster and less expensive than interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May be difficult to gather sensitive information Data analysis may be more complex than for interviews
 <p>Observations</p>	Video recordings, participant observations, or long-term ethnographic studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Views interactions in real time and in context Observer may interact with participants if desired 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> People may alter behavior because of observation May provide a limited view Time-consuming Possible technology challenges
 <p>Photovoice</p>	Respondents take pictures to answer a question or questions the evaluator poses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can be engaging and empowering for participants Provides opportunity to discuss difficult topics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires more than one meeting with participants and respondent follow-up to collect photographs Increased participant burden
 <p>Document review</p>	Documents or data from agencies, programs, or service providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uses data that were already collected and may be available to download Can use checklists or other forms to summarize data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited to data found in documents

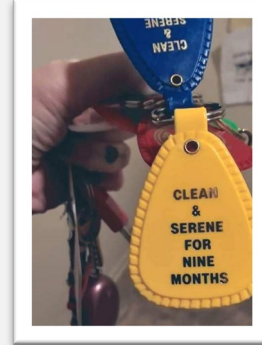
Example: Photovoice—Giving Voice to Lived Experience

Photovoice is a relatively new method of incorporating community representation into qualitative research. Using the Photovoice method, evaluators provide cameras to community members and participants to take photographs that represent their perspectives, experiences, or issues they see in their community (Hergenrath et al., 2009). Evaluators, policymakers, and community members then reflect on the photographs and engage in dialogue about what they mean in relation to the program or problem.

Photovoice underscores that “people are experts in their own lives” (Wang et al., 2004) and that a visual medium has the power to convey meaning and influence the world around us. Using Photovoice may also reduce language, literacy, or ability barriers common to interviews and focus groups (Hergenrath et al., 2009).

A common framework for conducting Photovoice is the **SHOWeD** method (Wang et al., 2004). This method asks participants to consider: What do you **See** in the photo? What is really **Happening**? How does this relate to **Our** lives? **Why** does this problem or strength exist? What can we **Do** about it?

Photovoice Example



Nine months clean. I never thought I would be able to make it so far in recovery. I used to be existing. Now I am living.

—Maternal Opioid Misuse (MOM) Model Patient (Tucker et al., 2023)

Piloting Protocols With the Target Population

Qualitative research often involves developing tools for specific situations. Pilot test instruments and protocols to ensure they are understandable. Tests should address the following:

- ▶ Are questions clearly worded and readily interpreted as intended?
- ▶ Are questions culturally sensitive and relevant to the participants?
- ▶ How long does it take to conduct an interview or focus group?
- ▶ What procedural or methodological challenges may arise?

Sampling and Recruitment Strategies

A qualitative evaluation sampling plan should include the sampling technique, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the number of participants. Use the plan to identify answers to the following questions:

- ▶ Who is included in the sample?
- ▶ What is the composition of the sample (e.g., application of inclusion and exclusion criteria)? Where and how will the sample be recruited?
- ▶ How and when will data be gathered?

- ▶ Why are the data important to the evaluation?

Qualitative sampling strategies are designed to generate a deep understanding of a topic rather than broad findings, so sample groups are often composed of participants with similar or shared experiences (Palinkas et al., 2015). However, it is important to include participants in the sample who represent diverse perspectives. To develop a sampling strategy:

- ▶ Determine the sample size in the context of the evaluation design and data collection methods. The number of participants or cases should facilitate representation of multiple perspectives and oversampling to ensure an adequate range of information is collected.
- ▶ Select a sampling technique (e.g., purposive, quota, snowball). See table 2 for a description of common qualitative sampling techniques.
 - Most qualitative research uses a form of purposive sampling and matches the specific strategy to the evaluation context and requirements.
 - Bias can skew the evaluation. Consider the potential sources of bias, including the evaluators’ own biases, and ways to mitigate the risk of selection bias in the sample. Discuss biases in the final report or presentation of findings.

The sampling plan for a qualitative evaluation will be different from a quantitative study, which is designed to achieve the highest statistical probability and support generalization. In contrast, qualitative research generally focuses on collecting more in-depth information from a smaller number of cases. There is no formula for determining the sample size for qualitative research or how many participants need to be involved before additional participants no longer contribute new information. See the discussion on assessing saturation below.

Table 2. Common Qualitative Evaluation Sampling Techniques

Sampling Technique	Description	Potential Selection Bias
Purposive	Participants are identified and recruited based on criteria relevant to the study goals, research questions, and evaluator knowledge. Sample size depends on available resources and time, study objectives, or number of participants needed to yield theoretical saturation (i.e., when new data no longer bring additional insights).	Recruitment that reinforces the evaluator’s beliefs, attitudes, or knowledge
Quota	Participants are identified and recruited according to characteristics: general (e.g., demographics), related to the study (e.g., use of services), or related to insights into the research topic (e.g., prior home visiting experience). Sample sizes or relative proportions are specified before sampling begins.	Ease of recruitment access or desire to include or emphasize specific groups
Snowball or chain referral	New/additional participants are identified and recruited by current participants. This method may be used to recruit hard-to-find or hard-to-recruit populations not identified through other sampling strategies.	Sampling that overrepresents specific characteristics and similar perspectives
Convenience	Participants are identified and recruited based on easy identification, contact, proximity, and willingness to participate.	Ease of access or approachability of participants who share characteristics or patterns of behaviors or activities

A combination of small sample size and focused sampling techniques may unintentionally introduce bias. Make sampling decisions in the context of the evaluation design and establish processes to achieve the following:

- ▶ **Track enrollment.** Tracking enrollment in the study and reflecting on sampling and recruitment strategies can help the team identify bias in recruitment and assess sample diversity. Assess sample characteristics to ensure all relevant perspectives are represented (e.g., different caregivers, age, ethnicity, religion, health status).
- ▶ **Adjust the sampling plan.** During the data collection process, tracking the information gathered can reveal flaws or unintended bias in the sampling plan. Evaluators should adjust sampling plans to combat this bias, thus increasing the rigor of the evaluation. Documentation of team discussions and sampling decisions are important for research transparency, institutional review board amendments, justifications to funders for design changes, and communication efforts.
- ▶ **Assess saturation.** Saturation refers to the point in data collection when new data no longer bring additional insights. Reaching saturation is the gold standard of purposive sampling and lends credibility and validity to the data. Given that achieving saturation depends on the sample, research questions, study design, and evaluation plans should include criteria on what constitutes saturation. Strategies for identifying saturation include creating a saturation table by theme and respondent; documenting when the same themes, explanations, or interpretations recur; or conducting a few final interviews or a focus group (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Small, 2009).

Equity Considerations

In designing a qualitative evaluation, consider how to incorporate equity characteristics into every aspect of research design (Gutuskey, 2022). For example, recruit an evaluation team that includes diverse and culturally competent members, such as individuals from the target population with relevant experience and knowledge. Throughout the evaluation, engage in continuous reflection on the team's positionality, identities, and power dynamics, building this reflection into the project timeline. Develop a plan to address team biases or assumptions when recognized to ensure they are not incorporated into the evaluation. Research the context the evaluation is being conducted in to better understand and navigate historical and structural inequities related to the target population.

Consider the role community members may play in the evaluation beyond data collection. Recognize the value of their lived experiences and provide community members with the power to identify and define features of the research, such as the scope of the evaluation, research questions, and relevant terminology or variables.

For recruitment and data collection, consider and integrate community needs and experiences (Gutuskey, 2022). Collaborate with community leaders to recruit participants, provide appropriate compensation for participation, and adapt informed consent procedures for various needs and abilities, including options for verbal or written consent. When collecting data, adapt tools such as interview guides for each participant group, and schedule interviews at times and in settings that are accessible to participants with various needs and resources. Consider participants' cognitive and physical abilities, technological, transportation, and child care needs. Above all, ensure the safety, confidentiality, and anonymity of all participants through the research process by establishing community-informed protocols and procedures.

Connect with community members throughout the data analysis and dissemination processes. Build strategies, such as member checking, into the research design and timeline to ensure participants have the opportunity to reflect on preliminary findings and confirm that their contributions to the research are interpreted correctly. Plan to design deliverables tailored to the specific needs and interests of community members. See sections “Analyzing Qualitative Data” and “Reporting Qualitative Findings” for more information on equity considerations in these stages of qualitative research.

Working With Community Members

Many benefits accrue when working with community members in qualitative evaluation. For example, this approach can improve the accuracy of the evaluation, increase the agency and social capital of community members, and strengthen the connection between evaluators and communities (Hyra, 2022). Evaluators and community members may have different perspectives on program success. For example, evaluators may believe that a means-tested food distribution program for individuals with low incomes is successful based on the number of people it serves each year or its cost-efficacy. The individuals who stand to benefit from the program, however, may find it is difficult and burdensome to complete the application, or they may be concerned with the quality of food received.

Approaches to Coding

Evaluators can code data in a variety of ways. The appropriate coding approach may depend on the level of detail required, the amount of data to analyze, and the technology available for a project. Approaches include:

- Sticky notes
- Colored highlighters
- Excel spreadsheets
- Software packages such as Atlas.ti, NVivo, and Dedoose

These differing perspectives from the implementation side versus the community side of a program demonstrate the importance of incorporating community members in the research design process. It is particularly important for evaluators and community members to share their perspectives on what program success means to ensure the data collection tools and findings are relevant and beneficial to all interested groups, including community members, program administrators, and funders.

For further discussion and best practices for working with community members, see *Engaging Community Representation in Program Evaluation* (Hyra, 2022).

Analyzing Qualitative Data

Qualitative data analysis is an iterative set of processes with multiple reviews. As a result, bias can easily occur during data analysis. Use the following strategies to help minimize bias: data reduction, data triangulation, and alternative explanations or contextual factors.

Data Reduction

Data reduction techniques enable evaluators to rigorously and meaningfully categorize data, thereby strengthening the validity of evaluation findings. Data reduction involves (1) selecting, focusing, simplifying, and abstracting raw data; (2) transforming and analyzing the condensed dataset to identify significant patterns and answer evaluation questions; and (3) drawing conclusions from the data and building a logical chain of evidence (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2022). For example, coding is an

important data reduction method. To minimize bias and strengthen the credibility of findings, evaluators should create systematic coding procedures, such as the following:

- ▶ Document each step to ensure the process can be replicated.
- ▶ Develop and use codebooks that include code descriptions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and example text.
- ▶ Establish interrater reliability (i.e., several coders code the same data).
- ▶ Use a code-recode process (e.g., recode the same data at least two weeks after the initial coding).

Developing, Testing, and Using a Codebook

Developing a codebook is a necessary strategy to maintain consistency and ensure credibility in qualitative data analysis.

To draft a codebook, evaluators should consider their research objectives and questions: What are the main concepts the research aims to explore? Conduct an initial scan of the data to identify themes and subthemes. Supplement this activity with a review of relevant literature to ensure the themes and concepts reflect or engage with existing data. These themes and subthemes will represent an initial codebook for data analysis (Roberts et al., 2019).

To test a codebook, apply the codes to a subset of data. After a round of coding, the team should meet to review the codebook and add, delete, or combine codes, as necessary. Testing a codebook is an iterative process and should be done multiple times until saturation is achieved and no additional changes to the codebook are needed. After testing is complete, the codebook may be applied to a larger dataset (Roberts et al., 2019).

In testing and applying the codebook, consider both **interrater and code-recode reliability**. Interrater reliability is the consistency by which several coders code the same data. Code-recode reliability is the consistency by which a coder recodes the same data. By verifying interrater and code-recode reliability, evaluators can ensure the data are fully represented in the codebook and analysis.

Data Triangulation

Evaluators should verify results by triangulating across data sources and methods (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Krefting, 1991). Triangulation involves comparing data from various sources to cross-check the information and its interpretation to increase confidence in the findings. Generating similar results from two or more methods strengthens the credibility and validity of findings. Analyzing data from multiple sources or data reflective of a mixed-methods approach can also provide a holistic, balanced picture of the phenomenon examined.

Alternative Explanations and Contextual Factors

When preparing findings, consider all possible explanations or contexts that may contribute to the conclusions (Krefting, 1991). For example, if a study reveals many families withdrew from a program within a short period, all possible explanations should be explored to help understand why. Accounting for all plausible explanations can strengthen the interpretation of findings. Incorporating relevant

contextual information (e.g., participant characteristics, study location) also promotes a comprehensive understanding of themes emerging from the data. Remain open to a variety of diverse and new perspectives that may be relevant for the evaluation. Collaborate with participants and community members to help develop these alternative explanations, ensuring they are culturally relevant and reflect the nuances of their lived experiences.

Negative Case Analysis

When preparing findings, consider negative case analysis, or the active search for data that contradict or do not fit the evaluator’s interpretation. For example, you may find that participants receiving child care assistance report feeling less depressed after receiving assistance. If a negative case analysis determines zero contradictory cases, the credibility of the findings is bolstered. If negative cases are found, you may need to adjust your analysis to account for these contradictory cases. As a result of this process, evaluators can better understand the correlations among phenomena, refine their findings, and enhance the credibility and rigor of the evaluation (Williams & Kimmons, 2022).

Peer Review

Allowing peers to examine key findings and recommendations—referred to as peer debriefing—can help minimize bias. Evaluators should discuss the research process and results with peers experienced in qualitative methods who are not involved in the project. Debriefing can include an examination of transcripts, documents, recorded interviews, or field notes. Peers can identify potential issues in the research and analysis, such as vague descriptions, irrelevant methods, underemphasized or overemphasized points, errors in the data, or evaluator bias. Peers can also strengthen credibility by reviewing data categories and identifying disconfirming evidence (e.g., cases that do not fit patterns or refute conclusions). Evaluators should provide evidence of this process and explain how they modified the report using peer feedback.

Member Checking

Member checking, also known as participant feedback or validation, is the process of sharing data and themes with study participants to confirm they have been interpreted correctly (Koelsch, 2013). This technique increases the credibility of credibility of qualitative findings by ensuring an accurate representation of participant voices and beliefs (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Evaluators can incorporate member checking throughout the data analysis process to verify interim findings and adjust analyses as necessary (Krefting, 1991). Consider asking participants the following questions:

- ▶ Is the description of the phenomenon complete and realistic?
- ▶ Are your stories portrayed accurately?
- ▶ Are the themes accurate? If not, what should be modified?
- ▶ Are the interpretations fair and representative? Do you have any objections to the interpretations?
- ▶ Would you like to share anything else?

Reporting Qualitative Findings

Accurate, targeted reporting is essential to valid and reliable qualitative findings. Reports of qualitative data analysis findings should be grounded in the data (e.g., examples, quotes, excerpts, descriptions of the evaluator's engagement in data collection). Evaluators should also provide a description of the sample and important contextual information that may help the target audience assess the generalizability of findings across other groups or settings. Evaluators should consider the following strategies to strengthen the trustworthiness of findings:



Consider using a checklist. Depending on the audience for the evaluation report, evaluators may consider using a standardized framework for reporting the results of their research. For example, the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (known as SRQR) break qualitative research reports into 21 sections and provide detailed explanations of each section's components. See O'Brien et al. (2014) for more details.

Equity Considerations



In reporting qualitative findings, consider all audiences, not just the funder. Community members who have assisted with or participated in the research may be interested in the findings. Communicate with community members to learn what type of information and findings they are most interested in and how they would prefer to have that information shared with them. Avoid making decisions on behalf of community members. Rather, recognize that each community member has distinct interests and needs that should be reflected in the reporting process. Key factors to consider include level of detail and complexity of the data. For example, funders may be interested in a full-length evaluation report with detailed tables of findings and technical appendices describing methods and analytical techniques. However, a shorter summary with rich quotes, practitioner-oriented tips and findings, engaging visuals, and a more succinct description of methods may be more appropriate for sharing outcomes with the community.

Consider best practices when reporting qualitative findings with an equity approach (Gutuskey, 2022). Use qualitative data visualization to engage readers across audiences in meaningful ways. Collaborate with community members to interpret and present findings in a culturally competent manner. Consider the accessibility needs of each audience when sharing findings, and adapt products for a variety of language and technological needs.

Rigor in Qualitative Research

Evaluators should take active steps to ensure their data and findings are trustworthy and thorough. Best practices for rigor should be incorporated at every stage of the research process, from design to reporting. The four primary components of rigor in qualitative research follow (Williams & Kimmons, 2022; Queens University of Charlotte, n.d.):

- ▶ **Credibility:** the expectation that findings are believable to readers and accurate to participants. Best practices include research reflexivity, member checking, persistent observation, and prolonged engagement with community members and participants.

- ▶ **Transferability:** the expectation that findings can be applied or adapted to readers’ own experiences. Best practices include consistency in data collection methods, using words such as “may” or “suggests” to avoid inappropriate generalizations, and providing detail of the time and context of the research.
- ▶ **Dependability:** the expectation that research methods and reasoning are clear and consistent. Best practices include defining a clear purpose for the research, sharing a thorough description of the research methodology, and including community members in research design and analysis.
- ▶ **Confirmability:** the expectation that findings are supported by other data, evaluators, and participants. Best practices include the completion of a thorough literature review and data triangulation.

Clear Purpose

Research questions should reflect a clear purpose. To develop a research question, consider existing literature and reflect on the goals of the evaluation. It may be a helpful exercise when planning research to develop a broad, overarching question that captures these goals (Agee, 2009). Broad or vague questions result in an unfocused study, blurring the purpose and diminishing the rigor of the research. Evaluators must refine broad questions into more focused, specific research questions that better inform data collection and analysis. Narrowly focused research questions ensure the study design aligns with the overall purpose of the research, and the research scope remains relevant to the target population.

Use of a Conceptual Framework and Appropriate Study Methods

A conceptual framework is an evaluator’s understanding of how concepts, assumptions, beliefs, and theories are interrelated (Maxwell, 2012; Applied Doctoral Center, n.d.). A framework can be in narrative or graphic form, such as a logic model. Developing a conceptual framework helps the evaluator design an evaluation that reflects logic and an understanding of existing data, which bolsters the credibility and dependability of the research.

A conceptual framework can be informed by the evaluator’s persistent observation, with the evaluator acquiring an in-depth understanding of the selected phenomenon or program and its participants (Williams & Kimmons, 2022). This approach ensures the framework centers the most significant and relevant details of the program being studied and ensures the selection and creation of appropriate study methods and tools.

Evaluator Reflexivity

The evaluator’s experiences, emotions, and patterns of interpretation shape all aspects of the research process (Malterud, 2001). Qualitative and quantitative research should be reflexive and dynamic because the practitioner is part of the research, not separate from it (Malterud, 2001; Aamodt, 1982). Reflexivity requires evaluators to consider how their world view may influence their work. They must continuously monitor how their backgrounds, biases, assumptions, perceptions, and interests affect the research process. For example, evaluators can keep reflexive journals to document their experiences and

reflections at each stage of the evaluation (Palaganas et al., 2017). Journaling facilitates examination of the human factors that may influence interpretation. Reflexive journals should include:

- ▶ Daily schedule and logistics of the evaluation
- ▶ Methodology log
- ▶ Description and interpretation of evaluator behavior and experiences
- ▶ Thoughts, feelings, ideas, and hypotheses generated by interacting with participants
- ▶ Questions, problems, and frustrations concerning the research process

Journaling encourages evaluators to be aware of biases and assumptions to ensure they can factor them into their analytical approach to improve the credibility of the findings.

Conclusions

Qualitative research provides an opportunity to recognize and incorporate significant context, lived experiences, and unique perspectives into every stage of program work. In using qualitative approaches, evaluators have ample opportunity to build equity into their research, reducing the risk that a program will exacerbate systemic and institutional inequities. Using qualitative or mixed-methods approaches in evaluation helps address questions or identify program gaps that quantitative methods alone cannot. Using qualitative approaches can also help enhance the rigor and robustness of evaluations and support findings relevant to and informed by the people most affected by a program.

Acknowledgments

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Atukpawu-Tipton, G., Higman, S., & Morrison, C. (2020). *Qualitative evaluation* (OPRE Report No. 2020-136). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation.

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