

Staff Development Session

Conducting Research with Focus Groups

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Research Influences from Social Sciences

Positivists

Functionalists

Structuralist

Political

Economists

Quantitative

Methods

Interactionist

Phenomenologists

Ethnomethodologist

Symbolic

Interactionist

Qualitative

Methods

Positivist Approach

- Scientific...”objective”
- Quantitative Methods: Experimental or statistical manipulation of variables
- Attempt to establish Laws and Rules through empiricist study
- Attempt to explain and predict social events

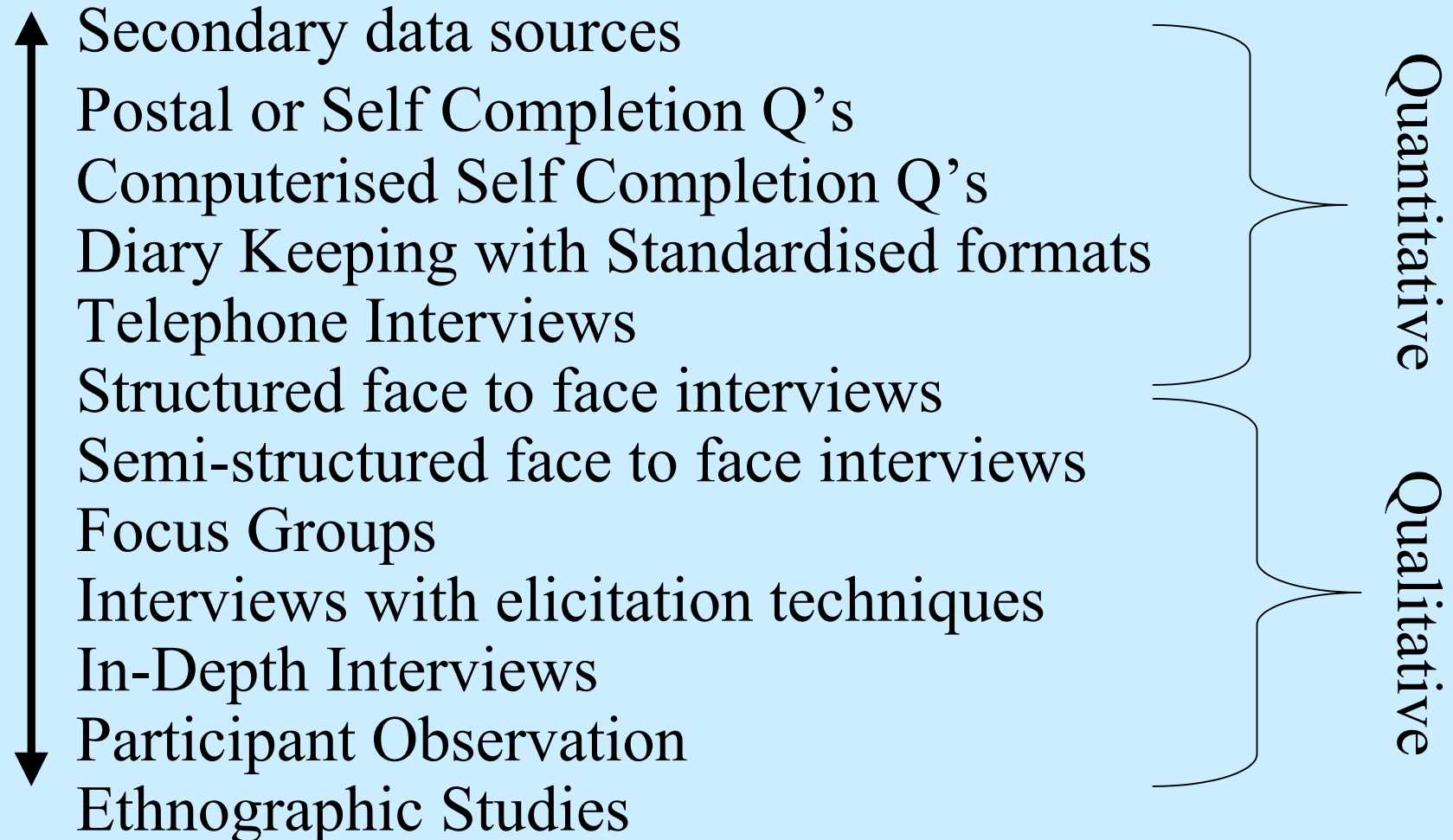
Compt, Durkheim, Parsons...

Interactionist Approach

- Scientific method inadequate for human beings
- People attach ‘meaning’ and ‘motives’ to social Action and Interaction
- Subjective motives and meanings must be investigated and understood
- Qualitative Methods: discussions, observations, verbal data etc

Degree of 'Closeness' to Researched Subjects

Distance



Closeness

General Features of Qualitative Approach

- Holistic Approach - seeks to understand motivations + attitudes + reasons for behaviour.
- Relies on Words, Narratives, Observations
- Seeks perspectives of program participants and consumers, stakeholders
- Can address dynamics of evolving projects (action research)
- Sensitive to Contexts/Sites/Timing
- Opportunistic - Receptive to 'unpredicted' data outcomes
- Flexible and Adaptable approaches
- Can be 'political' - empowering - Action Research

The Main Qualitative Approaches

- Focus Groups
- In-depth Interviews
- Observation
- Ethnography and Participant Observation

General Strengths of Qualitative Approach

- Exploration and Discovery
- Context and Depth
- Interpretation
- Sharing and Comparing
- Multiple Applications:
 - Problem Identification
 - Planning
 - Implementation
 - Evaluation

Focus Groups and In-Depth Interviews

- Allow participants to express views ‘freely’ around presented ‘items’
- Highlight the social processes as understood by the people involved
- Think oneself into the perspective of others
- Introspective and Empathetic process
- Attempt to gain an ‘explanatory understanding’

‘VERSTEHEN’ (Weber, 1947)

Focus-Group Advantages

Less costly + quicker than depth interviewing

Produce large amount of concentrated data

Flexible and Adaptable - Allows new questions to be raised and new findings to be revealed

Focus-Group Advantages (cont..)

Able to probe for more meaningful reactions or ideas beyond answers that are either superficial or incomplete BUT also can allow interviewer influence to be minimal

Interaction between participants is observable and allows comparison and contrast; exploration and awareness

Allow less rational motivations to be freely expressed

Focus Group Description

- Around 6-8 subjects involved in group discussion
- Issues/Areas are listed on a 'Topic Guide'
- Items are introduced by a 'Moderator'
- Relaxed 'flow' of ideas - interactive conversation and discussion is encouraged
- Stimuli or Projective Techniques may be used

Focus Group Description (Cont..)

- Groups usually homogeneous (with exceptions)
- Groups may be stratified
- Conversation is taped for later transcription
- Field notes may also be included in analysis
- Concept analysis conducted

Spontaneous + Synergistic + Serendipitous

Recruitment

- Identify characteristics for group membership
- Intercept surveys / telephone / networks / quota sample / gatekeepers / advertising / sampling frames / Pre-organised gatherings
- Consider screening questionnaire
- Consider Incentives
- Consider location and timing
- Consider recruiting agency

Uses of Focus Groups

- Explore sub-cultural meanings, motivations, and actions
- Orientate researcher to new area
- Generation of hypotheses for quantitative study
- Deeper exploration of existing quantitative findings
- Product, Project or advertisement evaluation

Uses of Focus Groups (cont..)

- Party Political
 - Identify issues of public concern
 - Orientate Presentation of Policy
- Community/Consumer/Employee/Participant Consultation
 - Involve in evaluation + development of product / service
 - Equity and Ownership
 - ‘Seen’ to be involving
- Explore what people think, how they think and why they think that way (Kitzinger, 1995)

Consider Using FGs when...

- There is a gap between people
 - Different 'ways' of thinking - professionals and target audience
- ..you need immediate and vivid feedback on responses to ideas
- ..investigating complex Behaviour and Motivations
- ..you need to understand diversity - variety of experience
- ..you need a friendly respectful research method
 - interaction + sense of being listened to + sense of 'connection'

Avoid Using FGs when...

- ..participants are not comfortable with each other
- ..discussing 'lack of experience'
- ..the project requires statistical data
- ..the topic is not appropriate
 - match researcher and participant interest
- ..they imply commitments you cannot keep
 - raising expectations that something will be done

Interaction in Focus Groups..

- Highlights attitudes, priorities, language and framework of understanding
- Encourages generation and exploration of respondents own questions + develop own analysis of common experiences + active comparison of feelings and experiences
- Help identify group norms and cultural values
- Provides insight into group social processes in articulation of knowledge (eg. see what's censored)
- Can encourage open conversation about embarrassing subjects + permit expression of criticism (Kitzinger 1995)

Projective Techniques Examples

- Third Person Test
- Word Association test
- Sentence Completion test
- Thematic Apperception test
- Story Completion
- Rorschach Ink Blot test
- Psychodrama
- Cartoons
- Triads
- Repertory Grids

Other Techniques

- Secret Pooling
- Triangular Interviews
- SWOT analysis
- Collage
- Friendship pairs

Focus Group Moderators

- **Ensures relaxed setting**
- **Introduces items on Topic Guide -
Changes direction and pace of
conversation**
- **Kind, sociable but firm - controls
influence of dominant members**
- **Awareness of self and social context**
- **Conscious of Physical Appearance and
group perceptions**

Focus Group Moderators (cont..)

- **Permissive**
- **Encourage Involvement (particularly for passive members)**
- **Skilled at Effective probing**
- **Applies suitable degree of structure / control (Morgan 1996)**
- **Flexibility, Sensitivity and judgement**

Practical Tips (early stages)

- Ensure comfortable, relaxed, culturally congruent setting
- Familiarise with the area and participants but be aware assumptions and interpretations may be challenged
- Obtain biographical information on registration forms prior to group sitting (avoids status influences)
- Allocate numbers to respondents

Practical Tips (early stages cont.)

- Fully explain nature of FG + who you are
- Set stage with ‘easy’ early questions which can be ‘thrown away’
- Use an Assistant Moderator to:
 - draw diagram of seating arrangements - memory jog to link participants to utterances
 - Record non-verbal data - gesture, enthusiasm, voice tone, sarcasm, no’ of respondent
 - Take careful field notes of proceedings

Practical Tips (action stage)

- Focus on key questions from topic guide
- Avoid asking 'why' questions
- Used 'If' / 'Then' questions
- Observe process of saturation - may ditch for late groups
- Listen for inconsistent, vague or cryptic comments - probe for meaning
- Ask serendipitous questions at the end
- Provide summary to group at the end to verify authenticity + debrief members
- Thanks + remind of confidentiality

Practical Tips (post-action stage)

- Conduct moderator and assistant 'debriefing session'
- Clearly label all field notes, tapes and materials on completion of each group
- Conduct analysis on completion of first group - review strategy in light of findings
- Remember - findings from early groups may be incorporated in later ones
- Transcribe tapes - check transcripts - update with reference to field notes and debriefing session - keep two copies

General Problems of qualitative approach

- Lack of representativeness?
- Lack of Generality?
- Lack of scientific rigour
- ‘Case Study’ weaknesses often apply
- Specification of wider causal factors not possible

Additional Problems with Focus Groups

- Manageability: masses of data - less control over data collected
- Sampling
 - Recruitment costs + time
 - ‘Theoretical Sampling’
 - Stratification - covering the permutations
- Data Analysis
 - Largely verbal data only - reliable analysis difficult (recording and transcription issues)
 - Confidentiality Issues (pseudonyms)
 - Little information about individuals

Additional Problems with Focus Groups

- Possibly limited expression of original ideas (Fern, '82) and 'Group Think' - (May use Devil's Advocates)
- Possible elicitation of more extreme responses (Sussman et al, '91)
- Do not observe 'natural' behaviours as they occur
- Cultural Incongruity (Yelland et al 1994)
- The aftermath of anxiety?

Problems with Group Dynamics

- Rationalization
 - Evasion V Cooperation
- Inhibitions and 'over-politeness'
 - Dominating Individuals
 - Formation of 'Cliques'
- Difficulty of subjects' articulation
 - Hostility
- Degree of prior acquaintance
 - Mobilisation

Ethnographic Criticisms

- Unnatural setting
- Artificial scenario:
 - focus on unusual areas
 - discussions with strangers
- Decontextualises social reality

Ethical Issues

- Informed Consent
- Confidentiality
- Over-Disclosure
- Stress

- Setting Boundaries

Key References

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