

# Creative & Credible

## QUALITATIVE EVALUATION

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Qualitative data include information gathered about participants' experiences, perspectives and opinions. They can help to understand the meaning of arts activities and processes to participants. They can reveal important subjective information as well as illuminating the process of project delivery, showing unintended consequences of projects that cannot be identified through measurement using pre defined categories. Examples of qualitative data collection tools are interviews, focus groups and case studies. This document discusses techniques developed by qualitative researchers that can be used in project evaluation.

Qualitative data are often poorly understood in evaluation. There sometimes a sense that quantitative data are more authoritative and less reliable than qualitative evidence. However, qualitative methods, when used rigorously, can be both powerful and trustworthy, providing answers to questions that quantitative data are not designed to address, such as the meaning of an arts process to participants. For further information about the role of qualitative research and evaluation in arts and health see Daykin & Stickley (2015).

### **Interviews and Focus Groups**

While most routine evaluation relies on monitoring and feedback using simple questionnaires, interviews and focus groups are also sometimes used in project evaluation. Interviews can be structured or unstructured, with perhaps the most common approach being that of the semi structured interview, which includes a mixture of structured and open ended questions to provide qualitative data on participants' experiences and views about a project. Focus groups can increase the numbers of people taking part and can benefit from group discussion which may increase the flow of ideas and generate a broader range of views than one to one interviews will elicit. Whatever the method, the quality of the information it provides will depend very much on the approach to sampling that is used. Data gathered from interviews and focus groups cannot be reported using tables and graphs, instead they are analysed using thematic analysis.

There are a number of issues to consider before undertaking interviews or focus groups for the purposes of evaluation.

- How structured or unstructured will the topic guide be?

This depends on the type of information that is sought as well as the sensitivity of the topic.

- How many participants should be included? How will they be sampled from the wider population of project participants?
- How will consent from participants be obtained?
- Where will the interviews or focus groups take place? Are these best undertaken in a naturalistic setting, for example, where the arts activity takes place?
- Who will undertake the interviews or focus groups? Are they known to participants already? What effect might this have on the data?
- What level of training and support might evaluators need in order to undertake interviews and/or focus groups?
- What strategies and resources are in place to respond if a participant finds aspects of the discussion upsetting?
- What strategies are in place to respond to disclosures of risk or other safeguarding issues that may need further action?
- Will the data be audio recorded and transcribed? What additional permission and consent issues are raised by this?
- Who will have access to the data? How will it be stored and managed in order to comply with data protection and ethics requirements?
- How will the data be analysed and who will analyse it? What level of training and support might evaluators need in order to analyse the data?
- How will the privacy and anonymity of participants be maintained in reports?

### *Structured and unstructured interviews*

Face to face interviews can be a useful way of gathering feedback from project participants and those who have been involved in project delivery including artists, clinical and care staff and managers. Interviews formats can adopt varying degrees of structuring. Interviews that are highly structured are useful for gathering information from relatively large numbers of participants. They are also useful when standardisation is needed, for example when multiple interviewers are involved in data collection. An interview process that involves simply reading standardised, scripted questions and writing down responses will not generate much rich information.

Nevertheless, this may be sufficient for some evaluation purposes.

#### *Depth and semi-structured interviews.*

A common type of interview used in qualitative research is the depth interview. This is relatively open ended and involves the sharing and development of ideas rather than following a simple question and answer format. Depth interviews are useful if information is sought from a small number of participants about a specific topic or experience. They are usually used when the research is exploring a sensitive topic about which little is known, or where there is a wish to explore participants' experiences in depth. Depth interviews require high level research skills including advanced techniques of data analysis. Exploring sensitive topics in interviews normally requires ethics approval. For these reasons, they are unlikely to be used in routine evaluation. Nevertheless, they are included here because many of the techniques and issues raised by depth interviewing apply to other kinds of qualitative interviewing.

If depth interviews are needed then it is recommended that project teams work with experienced researchers to advise on research design and to undertake the data collection and analysis.

For project evaluation, an approach that is half way between structured and depth interviewing is often used. Semi structured interviews include a mixture of structured responses and open ended questions on identified topics. The inclusion of limited qualitative data can make the process more enjoyable and meaningful for participants while providing richer data that can be analysed using relatively simple techniques of thematic analysis. They can capture structured information from a relatively large number of people, making them a cost effective option for evaluation.

*Telephone interviews* can minimise impression made by the interviewer, perhaps encouraging more open responses. They can offer a cost effective way of seeking information from a relatively large group of people. Telephone interviews can be very effective in gaining feedback from project staff and busy professionals who may find it difficult to schedule a face to face interview. However, they do raise additional challenges, since the interviewer does not control the setting in which the interview takes place and so cannot use the environment to put the interviewee at ease or ensure confidentiality. Telephone interviews may raise additional challenges with some groups of respondents, for example, people with hearing difficulties or those whose first language is not English.

#### *Focus Groups*

Focus groups are often viewed as a cost effective way of gathering feedback from a group of people. Focus groups have the advantage of benefiting from group interaction, which can stimulate a broader range of responses than one to one interviews. While group dynamics can have a positive effect on the discussion but they can also create difficulties, for example, strong characters or vocal individuals can sometimes dominate

the discussion. Hence focus groups require skilful facilitation and it is common for two facilitators to be involved, one to manage the group process and the other to observe and record the discussion.

Focus groups usually involve between 8 and 12 participants. They can be sampled in order to represent a spread of experiences, or to bring people together with similar backgrounds in order to explore a more specific topic. Focus group data are more difficult to analyse than interview data: it is difficult to work out from audio recordings and transcripts who is speaking unless the interviewer knows the group well.

#### *Overcoming Bias*

An important consideration for any kind of qualitative data collection is that of bias. The interviewer or facilitator must be skilled at guiding the discussion without leading it to fit their own agenda. In internal project evaluations where the interviewer is likely to be known to the participants, perhaps as an artist or project manager, responses may be affected by participants' feelings of protectiveness towards artists and projects. Evaluators need to ensure that they reduce these effects, being especially sensitive to the instances when participants may feel inhibited or find it difficult to discuss challenges and problems that they have experienced within the project.

#### **Managing Qualitative Evaluation**

A key consideration in qualitative data collection is where to undertake the interviews or focus groups. For the purposes of project evaluation, it might be preferable to undertake these in naturalistic settings, such as community halls or health care facilities where project activity takes place. The advantage of this is that participants are familiar with the setting and associate it with the activity being discussed. However, interviews that include sensitive topics should not be undertaken in settings where participants might be distracted by activity going on, or where there is no guarantee that the interview will not be interrupted.

While depth interviews require a high level of skill and research awareness on the part of the interviewer, all qualitative interviewing requires skills that are not used in everyday conversation or in other types of interview. As well as asking initial questions, interviewers need to be skilled at following up with prompts, ensuring that the interviewee is relaxed and that the process is not intrusive or upsetting. Interviewers also need to have in place a range of strategies for responding appropriately to a range of disclosures that may need action, and opportunities to debrief in case they themselves find the process challenging.

#### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

Data analysis normally takes place on completion of the project once all of the data have been gathered. However, if the project is of a lengthy duration or a lot of data are gathered over the course of the project, it may be helpful to analyse data at intervals throughout the project so as to minimise the amount



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of work required post-project and also to ensure that any information gathered is still fresh in the evaluator's mind.

#### *Qualitative Analysis Versus 'Anecdotal' Reporting?*

In arts and health, the notion of 'anecdotal' evidence is often used when trying to capture and describe the impacts of projects on participants. It is sometimes thought that this kind of evidence, which often takes the form of personal testimonials or single case studies, will be effective in winning the hearts and minds of policy makers and commissioners. 'Anecdotal' evidence is contrasted with 'hard' evidence from evaluation activity.

There are real dangers of relying 'anecdotal' evaluation. Not only is this unlikely to be taken seriously by people external to the project, it contains so many inherent biases that it is unlikely to be useful for project development in the longer term. In contrast, balanced reporting of qualitative data that are methodically collected from a carefully chosen sample of participants can produce rich, detailed evidence and stories that can inform advocacy and provide meaningful information to support project improvement. While some techniques and theories of qualitative research may be too complex for most project evaluation settings, the key principles from qualitative research can be usefully applied. Perhaps the most important one is to treat the information that you collect methodically, fairly and comprehensively and avoid selecting out the examples that seem to tell the most exciting story or the story that funders, commissioners and other external audiences are assumed to want to hear.

#### *Using thematic analysis in evaluation*

Most qualitative evaluation involves some form of content analysis. This can be a simple textual analysis, i.e. identifying the instances where particular words are used by participants in feedback forms. More often, a form of thematic analysis is used. Thematic analysis covers a number of techniques and approaches. For evaluation purposes, it can be considered a useful method that can be used on different types of qualitative data including those from interviews, focus groups and case studies. It involves a step by step process that seeks to stay close to participants' words, coding responses into and successively grouping them so that overarching themes can be identified. It is useful for identifying patterns in qualitative data including similarities and differences, trends and unusual responses or cases. It can be undertaken relatively quickly and is easy to learn and allows evaluators to summarise a large volume of data.

A useful guide to thematic analysis has been produced by Braun and Clarke (2006). Their six step guide is adapted slightly below for the purpose of evaluation. Familiarise yourself with the data by reading and rereading it. In most arts and health evaluations, qualitative data will not be in the form of interview and focus group transcripts. This phase therefore involves becoming familiar with notes taken by evaluators or practitioners as well as responses to open ended questions provided by participants.

1. Generating initial codes. This entails working systematically to identify and name interesting items, especially if these are repeated. They could be words used by participants to describe their responses to a project. An inductive approach will stay close to participants' language, while a more deductive approach may search for codes using a predetermined conceptual framework. Deductive approaches may seem more manageable in evaluation but they carry the drawback that the analysis might miss participants' unanticipated responses.
2. Searching for themes. This involves grouping your codes into overarching themes. These might be different types of response, such as reported feelings, moods, creative challenges and other reflections.
3. Reviewing themes in order to gain a sense of what the different themes are, how they fit together, and the overall story they tell about the data.
4. Defining and naming themes. This is an attempt to capture the essential character of each theme and show how it fits within the overall picture.
5. Producing the report. The aim here is to tell the rich story of your data in a way that convinces the reader of the rigour of the analysis. This allows you to highlight out vibrant cases while showing how these fit within the overall body of information.

#### **References**

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