Qualitative Research Designs
Political Analysis
October 18, 2005

Some qualitative tools
- Field Research
- Interviews
- Focus Groups

Schedule
- Today
  - Sign up to distribute surveys
  - Review Qualitative Research Designs
- Thursday
  - DATA ARE DUE!
  - Review for exam (attendance optional)
    - If you do not come, arrange to pick up surveys another way.
- Tuesday
  - MIDTERM!

Review difference between qualitative and quantitative
Field Research
The study of people acting in the natural courses of their daily lives.

Field Research
- Carried out in natural settings
- History—the study of the urban poor
- Robert Park urged his students to:
  “go and sit in the lounges of the luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of the flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and on the slum shake-downs; sit in Orchestra Hall and in the Star and Garter Burlesk. In short, gentlemen, go get the seat of your pants dirty in real research”

Participant Observation
- A type of field research where the investigator attempts to attain some kind of membership or close attachment to the group that he or she wishes to study
- Fenno’s study of Congress
- Sudhir Venkatesh’s studies of Chicago crack gangs

Complete Participant
- The observer is wholly concealed; the research objectives are unknown to the observed, and the researcher attempts to become a member of the group under observation
- Nickel and Dimed (2001)
The problem of field research

- “going native”
- The Hawthorne effect

Interviews

- What is an interview?
  - A conversation with a purpose: to gather information

Interview Structures

- Structured:
  - Must stick rigidly to a prepared script
  - Used for collecting standard information
  - Have a good idea about what to explore
  - Interviewer led
  - Quick to complete
  - Large samples more feasible
  - Validity depends on quality of the script
  - Reliability depends on skill of interviewer

When to use interviews?

- To focus on informant’s understanding
- To explore in depth informant’s meanings
- To target samples hard to identify
- To explore the dynamics of social interactions
- To reconstruct past events
- To explore a topic not well understood
Interview Structures

- Structured (cont.):
  - Easy to analyze
  - Assumes everyone interviewed understands clearly what they are asked
  - Assumes the wording of each question has the same meaning to all informants

- Semi-structured:
  - Main questions are scripted and fixed
  - May improvise follow-up questions
  - Interviewer guide usually has a mix of open- and closed-ended questions
  - Interviewer is expected to probe beyond the answers to prepared questions
  - Partly interviewer-led, partly informant-led

- Unstructured:
  - List of broad topics or themes to explore
  - Often used early in a project
  - Largely informant-led
  - Validity depends on skill of the interviewer
  - Typically small samples
  - Difficult to keep anonymity of informants

- Unstructured (cont.):
  - Assumes that researcher does not know all the questions that need to be asked
  - Assumes that not all subjects will necessarily find equal meaning in like-worded questions
Types of Questions

- **Essential questions:**
  - Central focus of the study

- **Extra questions:**
  - Similar to essential questions but with different wording
  - Used to assess reliability of responses

- **Throw-away questions:**
  - Usually used towards the beginning
  - May be demographic questions or designed to develop rapport with informant
  - Are incidental for gathering information essential to the study
  - May be essential for drawing out a complete story

- **Probing questions:**
  - Illicit more information about a response to another question
    - Can you tell me more about that?
    - Can you explain?
    - What are you thinking?
    - Why do you feel that way?

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Pretest Interview Script

- Have it examined by others familiar with the subject
- Practice interviews to assess how effectively the script works and if needed information will be collected
Tips for Interviewers

- Never begin an interview cold
  - Spend several minutes making small talk
- Remember your purpose
- Present a natural front
  - Questions should naturally flow from the conversation
- Dress appropriately for the subject and setting

Tips for Interviewers

- Interview in a comfortable place
- Don’t be satisfied with monosyllabic answers
- Be respectful
- Practice, practice, and practice some more
- Be cordial and appreciative
  - Send a thank you note afterwards

Elite Interviewing

- Negotiating access:
  - Write a letter of introduction setting out study purpose, methodology, how results will be used
  - Start at the top of the organization and work down the hierarchy
  - Utilize personal contacts

Elite Interviewing

- Obtain background knowledge:
  - Biographical data of interviewee
  - Interviewee’s position on the subject or role
  - Organization’s structure
  - Knowledge of basic jargon (technical language)
  - Understanding of different positions on the policy issue
**Taking Notes**

- Often useful to have two interviewers
  - One asks questions, other takes notes
- Immediately after interview jot down any relevant thoughts
- Using a tape recorder:
  - Get permission from the subject
  - Do not be secretive
  - Practice using the equipment
  - Check the batteries
  - Test the optimum setting and placement before the interview

**Focus Groups**

- When to use focus groups?
  - To learn how people feel about something
  - To understand different perspectives
  - To identify factors that influence behavior
  - To test pilot ideas, materials, or plans
  - To gain information for designing a large-scale study
  - To pretest questionnaires
  - To better understand quantitative findings

- When not to use focus groups?
  - To gain consensus
  - To educate people
  - When asking sensitive information
  - The environment is emotionally charged
  - Can’t ensure confidentiality of sensitive information
  - Other techniques can produce same information less expensively

**Focus Group Script**

- Qualities of good questions:
  - Sound conversational
  - Use words participants would use
  - Easy to answer
  - Usually short
  - Usually open-ended
  - Include clear, well-thought out direction
### Composition of the Group
- Members share something in common
- Ideal size: 6 to 8 individuals
- Should generally not know one another
- Should not have focus group experience
- Must have adequate experience with the topic/issue
- Goal is *NOT* a representative sample

### Conducting a Focus Group
- Environment should be relaxed, informal
  - Serve light refreshment before
- Beginning the focus group:
  - The welcome
  - Overview of the topic
  - Ground rules
  - First questions

### Analyzing a Focus Group
- Analysis is based on identifying patterns
- Pay attention to frequency but don’t necessarily count things up
- Do not make inferences to a population
- Be aware of a personal bias on the topic
- Not everything is worthy of analysis

### Advantages of a Focus Group
- Takes advantage of interactions
- Flexible
- High face validity
- Quick results
Disadvantages of a Focus Group

- Researcher has less control than in interviews
- Data are difficult to analyze
- Groups are difficult to assemble
- Moderators require special skills