Rigorous Qualitative Methods

National Child Welfare Evaluation Summit
May 27, 2009

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Questions Guiding the Presentation

- What should be the standard for rigor when using qualitative methods in child welfare evaluation?
- In what instances is qualitative design preferable and arguably more appropriate for building evidence?
- What are some of the challenges and solutions when attempting to design and conduct a rigorous qualitative design?
- What are the strengths and limitations of qualitative approaches?
- What value is added by using a mixed methods approach?
Presentation Overview

- Definitions
- When qualitative methods are appropriate
- Strengths of qualitative and mixed methods
- Challenges
- Examples of qualitative child welfare studies
- Examples from our work: The unique contribution of qualitative data
- Building rigor in qualitative evaluations
- Resources for further information
- Discussion
What is meant by “qualitative?”

- Per Padgett, a “family of methods” that generally have these common features:
  - Insider rather than outsider perspectives
  - Person-centered rather than variable-centered
  - Holistic rather than particularistic
  - Contextual rather than decontextual
  - Depth rather than breadth

Padgett (2008, p. 2)
Primary Approaches (Padgett, 2008)

- **Ethnographic**
  - Emic—view of the insider
  - Cultures must be understood in their own terms
  - View all parts of the interrelated whole
  - Participant observation—does not preclude measures
    - (RQ: What is daily life like for children living on the streets?)

- **Grounded Theory**
  - Constant comparative analysis to examine contrasts among participants, situations and settings
  - Cycle between data collection and analysis
    - (RQ: How do women with HIV balance sex work with other life demands—Padgett, 2008)

- **Case Study**
  - Multiple perspectives and data sources
  - Aggregate across cases while maintaining the distinctive nature of each case
    - (RQ: How are the life stories of women in shelters similar or different?)
Primary Approaches  (Padgett, 2008)

- **Narrative Approaches**
  - Linguistic structures and meaning
  - Discourse analysis (e.g. conversations between parents and children)
    - RQ-What stories are imbedded in the narratives of children placed in care and their birth families?

- **Phenomenological**
  - Lived experience of a phenomena
    - Broad open ended questions, small sample, in-depth, multiple interviews
    - Assess common themes
    - Leave readers feeling “They have walked a mile in the shoes of participants” (e.g. cancer survivors; adoptive parents)
    - RQ-What is the lived experience of being HIV positive?

- **Action Research and Community Based Participation**
  - Rapid needs assessment, planning, evaluation, maximum community involvement
    - RQ-What are the needs of families at risk of child removal and what can be done to address those needs?
A Pragmatic Approach

- Some differences between qualitative traditions are irreconcilable.
- Yet a number of methods can be used across qualitative approaches:
  - Data collection with interviews, observations, or documents
  - Systematic coding
  - Identification of patterns, themes, relationships between variables, commonalities and differences in subgroups
  - Comparing generalizations identified in the data with formal theories or constructs

Braun & Clark (2006); Miles & Huberman (1994); Padgett (2008)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fields that use Qualitative Methods</th>
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<td>Social Work</td>
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When are qualitative methods appropriate?

When:

- Little is known about the topic of interest
- Seeking in-depth, rich descriptions
- Subjective, first-person accounts of a phenomenon are needed ("insider perspective" of what experience means to someone who’s lived it)
- Studying a sensitive topic
- Considering the natural context of a topic is important
- To get inside the “black box” (e.g. intervention fidelity, process of program implementation, consumer perceptions)

Anastas (2004); Cresswell (1994); Padgett (2008)
Strengths of Qualitative Approaches

- Shows complexity
- Considers natural context
- Holistic in scope
- Provides rich descriptions understandable to non-experts
- Uncovers unexpected findings
- Methods are agile and can be adapted based on emerging findings
- Can combine multiple sources of information:
  - Interview transcripts, observation, videotape, documents (e.g. case files, text of legislation, meeting minutes)
Quantitative and Qualitative Research

- **Quantitative research involves empirical observations of the world reported as numeric quantities. Numbers are transposed into words for research conclusions.**

- **Qualitative researchers make empirical observations of the world and report these observations as narratives. Narratives in qualitative research are sometimes transposed into numbers for further analysis of trends and patterns.**

Marchel & Owens (2007)
Validity and reliability in quantitative research are reframed by qualitative researchers as the credibility and trustworthiness of research claims.

- Credibility of a qualitative narrative is enhanced by the use of methods to check the “reliability” of data analysis procedures: peer debriefing and independent coding and triangulation.
  - Simultaneous analysis of observations or interviews
  - Collect data from multiple sources—observations, interviews and multiple research contexts.
Threats to Trustworthiness of Qualitative Studies

- Reactivity—Impact of researcher’s presence on participant’s beliefs and behaviors

- Researcher bias—Observations and interpretations are clouded by preconceptions and personal opinions of the researcher
  - (Asking questions to support their belief)

- Respondent bias—Faulty recall; respondent misleads

Padgett (2008)
Trustworthiness of research findings
(Marchel & Owens, 2007)

- Can be enhanced through extended lengths of time in the field
- Explicit descriptions of the researcher’s theoretical lens and guiding assumptions
- To address concern about replicability of findings, a qualitative researcher can replicate the methods used for data collection and analysis and can also view data through the theoretical lens of the original researcher and therefore ascertain whether similar conclusions
Strengths specific to program evaluation

- Quantitative can determine what works and qualitative methods can help uncover why (hidden processes in programs)
  - Why does the program work (not work)?
  - How is the program achieving its goals?
  - Why does it work for some clients and not others?

- Quantitative measures may not capture sensitive or fluctuating phenomena
  - Definitions may have been too narrow

- Service users can be involved in problem definition
  - Do they have needs unanticipated by program developers?

- Qualitative methods often less intrusive

Anastas (2004); Padgett (2008)
Strengths of mixing qualitative & quantitative methods

Quantitative results can:
- Ensure that key operational definitions of variables used in data collection and analysis are consistent across cases (for example, by integrating standardized measures with semi-structured interviews)
- Increase likelihood of generalizing results beyond sample
- Assist with identifying subgroups and patterns for further exploration in qualitative data

Qualitative results can:
- Assist with understanding puzzling quantitative findings
- Uncover problems in quantitative designs (e.g. an open-ended survey question may indicate that respondents misinterpreted scaled survey questions)
- Illuminate how quantitative findings appear in natural settings
Challenges with Qualitative Methods

- Time-consuming, labor intensive & expensive
- Findings not “generalizable”
- Universal standards not agreed upon
- Reports are longer
- Reports more difficult to synthesize across studies (e.g. in systematic reviews or meta-analyses)
2 Examples: Child Welfare Studies using Qualitative Methods

- The Urban Institute conducted focus groups with youth in foster care and gathered their perspectives on adoption and permanency (Chambers, Zielewski & Malm, 2008)

- To see inside the “black box” of a home-visiting intervention that did not achieve program goals: Data included interviews with 21 families & 9 home visitors, videos of home visits, focus groups with 60 other mothers, and children’s assessments (Hebbeler, 2002)
Mixed Methods in Data Collection and Analysis

- **Data Collection**
  - **Sequential design**
    - Analyze scores from survey first then interview a subsample
  - **Concurrent design**
    - Indepth interviews paired with Likert type survey questions

- **Data Analysis**
  - **Concurrent design**
    - Qualitative data are quantified and variables tested

- **Longitudinal concurrent design in which quantitative and qualitative mutually inform**
  1) Focus groups to inform development of survey
  2) Conduct survey
  3) Results are used to inform development of intervention
  4) Pilot test intervention
  5) Use ethnographic observation of the intervention
Interviewing Considerations (Padgett, 2008)

- Telephone and computer-mediated interviews
  - Computer mediated interviews
    - Data in typed form
    - Spontaneous outpouring of thoughts and feelings throughout day and night
    - Interviewees may feel more safe
    - Increase rapport/interviewees feel more in control
    - Leave out respondents without access to computer
  - Considerations in matching interviewers to respondents—race, gender, age, other characteristics
Examples from our work: The unique contribution of qualitative data in mixed methods
Selected Research Projects

- Minnesota-Texas Adoption Research Project-Longitudinal study of outcomes of openness in adoption for birthmothers, adoptive parents and adopted children
- Transracial and Inracial Adoptions-The Adolescent Years
- Healthy Marriage Initiative for Adoptive Families
- Success Factors Study
- Barriers to Adoption Study
- Disrupted, Dissolved and Intact Special Needs Adoptions
- Adoption Competency Training Evaluation
Example #1: AdoptUsKids Barriers Study (Slide 1 of 2)

- Example of a quantitative finding from the AdoptUsKids Barriers Study (N=200):
  - Among families who discontinued their attempts to adopt children from foster care (n = 102), 53 families (52%) stopped the process after they had been approved but before a child had been placed with them.
  - The two barriers to adoption most frequently cited by these 53 families were Adoption Process Logistics (94%) & Agency Communication/Responsiveness (87%).
This family quote illustrates their experience of Agency Communication/Responsiveness barriers:

*We would get calls that would never go further than the initial call. ‘We have this child, are you interested…’ and my answer was always, ‘yes.’ It just never seemed to happen. I guess 5 or 6 times they called like that and I said, ‘What’s the next step?’ ‘Well, I’ll call you back with the details, blah, blah, blah.’ But the call back never came.*
Example #2: AdoptUsKids Success Factors Study (Slide 1 of 2)

- Families (N = 161) in the Success Factors study completed 2-3 hour telephone interviews and several standardized measures.

- For example, satisfaction with parenting was measured using a 10-item scale developed by Reilly and Platz (2003).

- A quantitative finding: Parents in the study reported being very satisfied (4.6 on a 5-point scale) with the adoption of the child and very satisfied with parenting in general (3.5 on a 4-point scale).
Qualitative data illuminated quantitative findings on parent satisfaction, for example in this family’s quote:

_They come with all these diagnoses and it’s kind of overwhelming at first… And when you get deep in the root of them in who they are, it’s not so ‘special needs’ anymore. It’s just – they’re your kid. And that’s who they are._
Examples from study of coping in youth living in domestic violence shelters

- Study used life story methods to gain a comprehensive, contextualized picture of the experiences of young adolescents (N = 14, ages 12-14) residing in domestic violence emergency shelters
- 27 interviews were conducted with 14 youth/mother dyads
- Informed by ecological & resilience frameworks, and family systems & social cognitive theory
Examples of qualitative data

- Data included interview transcripts, field notes about the interview in the shelter, and a life story time line each youth created during the interview to facilitate recall of important events.

- Left: A 13 year-old girl’s time line page for fifth grade. She expressed that the challenge of her mother’s incarceration made her stronger.
Example #3: Coping in youth living in domestic violence shelters (Slide 1 of 2)

- Selected quantitative findings:
  - 100% (N = 14) of the youth had moved frequently throughout their lifetimes and had attended an average of 7.8 different schools
  - 28.6% (n = 4) had a parent addicted to crack-cocaine
  - 21.4% (n = 3) reported negative experiences with law enforcement
Example #3: Coping in youth living in domestic violence shelters (Slide 1 of 2)

- The context and first-person experience described in the qualitative data from a 13-year-old girl:
  
  *The cops came finally. “Put the gun down! Put the gun down!” First they threatened to kill my dog. “Get that dog out of my face. I’m going to shoot him!” That dog is my life. I loved that dog so bad. They were going to shoot it, they had the red dot and my mom was like “No, you are not. That’s my daughter’s dog, leave it alone.” And all that, so I had to haul my dog.*

  *And then my mom went and took my dog outside, “Make the kids leave, make the kids leave.” …*

  *This is like several times he’s been escorted away from our house. The cops are always taking him. I’m like okay, whatever. But then he kept saying he didn’t want us anymore, and we were like great, whatever. So he’d get us kicked out and we kept losing our friends and animals and me and my brother were just sick. Dang, harsh life.*
Example #4: Coping in youth living in domestic violence shelters

- A quantitative finding:
  - Prior to their current stay in an emergency shelter, mothers reported that their number of previous shelter stays ranged from zero to 17 (mean = 2.4 stays, SD = 4.6).
  - The interview of the “outlier” case with 17 previous stays was examined to understand factors that may have contributed to the much higher number of shelter stays for this mother.
Example #4: Coping in youth living in domestic violence shelters

- A mother’s perceptions of the current shelter:

What I like about being in the shelter, probably the weirdest answer you’ll ever hear, is I like the fact that they stay on me to become self-sufficient for myself and my children. I can honestly say that their program here is totally different to where it has me motivated. Every time they see me, “Do you have your housing thing? You got a job?” That’s kind of what us as women in domestic violence need. Yeah, it’s good to be a support system and give us a safe place, but I’d rather you prepare me to go out there and be self-sufficient than to let me stay here and sit on my tail and not do anything and better myself. And then all I’m going to do is just leave and go right back because my time is up and I don’t have nowhere to go so I just go back. But here it’s, okay, you are going to get from A, B, C to where you need to be so when you get out there, I don’t have to get you again. [laughs]
Enhancing Rigor

- Prolonged Engagement
- Triangulation
  - Theory
  - Methods
  - Observer
  - Data sources (interviews, observations, archival materials)
  - Interdisciplinary
- Peer Debriefing
- Analytical triangulation
  - Multiple coders/calculate reliability
- Auditability—can you defend?
- Negative case analysis—active search for disconfirming evidence
Strategies We’ve used to Address Threats (Slide 1 of 2)

- Data collection:
  - Extensive, standardized training and monitoring of interviewers:
    - Didactic, written manual, role plays, observation of first interview, audiotapes of first interview checked, ongoing feedback
    - Interview and survey schedules pilot-tested
    - Introductory scripts
    - Suggested probes in interview schedules
    - Interviewer completes field notes after every interview
    - Standardized measures augment qualitative
Strategies We’ve used to Address Threats (Slide 2 of 2)

- **Data Analysis:**
  - Team approach (peer debriefing)
  - Verbatim transcription, incl. affect (e.g. crying)
  - Coder training standardized & follows model of interviewer training (didactic, manualized, practice)
  - Every case coded independently by two individuals, followed by consensus meeting
  - Auditor checks consensus process, monitors team reliability (e.g. code interpretation and assignment)
  - Rotating coding pairs
  - Negative case analysis
Codebooks for Data Analysis
(Example #1)
From the AdoptUsKids Barriers Study Codebook:

Q11.6. Did you have the opportunity to review your home study and make suggestions for changes prior to the approval of the home study? If no, would you have liked to?

1 = Yes and no changes were recommended
2 = Yes and changes were made
3 = Yes but changes were ignored
4 = No, and would not have liked to. Specify why not:____
5 = No, and would have liked to. Specify why:____
96 = Other. List on codesheet:____
97 = Does not apply—participant did not complete home study
98 = Participant says “I don’t know”
99 = Missing/not asked/not answered
Codebooks for Data Analysis
(Example #2)

From the AdoptUsKids Barriers Study Codebook:

Q23.1 Have you attempted to adopt a child(ren) from another county, region/district, or state?

*Code all that apply.*

0 = No
1 = Attempted to adopt from a different county. Specify:____
2 = Attempted to adopt from another region/district. Specify:____
3 = Attempted to adopt from another state. Specify:____
96 = Other. List on codesheet:____
97 = Does not apply
98 = Participant says “I don’t know”
99 = Missing/not asked/ not answered
Software for Qualitative Methods
(Slide 1 of 3)

- Numerous packages available, with wide range of functions
  - Atlas.ti, NVivo, QDA Miner, MAX qda2, Qualrus, Transana, HyperRESEARCH (and many more!)

- Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Networking Project (http://caqdas.soc.surrey.ac.uk/)
  - Independent source for information on software uses in qualitative research/evaluation (not affiliated with any software developer)
  - Provides information to help users assess which functions would be most useful for their particular needs
  - Compares what different packages offer
Examples of how software can help with analysis and project management:

- Code and retrieve functionality
- Easy recoding (e.g. you decide as analysis proceeds that two codes you thought were conceptually distinct are not – can combine/reassign codes across cases quickly)
- Link content across cases – assists with identification of patterns, development of theme categories
- Can assign codes to text, photos, music, video

Lewis & Silver (2006)
Examples of how software can help with analysis and project management (con’t):

- Can assist with managing/comparing subsets of data
- Can search for relationships between codes (co-occurrence, proximity)
- Can easily print subsets of data (e.g. could print a “quote library” of all chunks of text that were assigned a certain code)
- Some software can provide a graphic map of the coding schema used

Lewis & Silver (2006)
Anastas: Hallmarks of quality in qualitative evaluation

- Clear research question
- Effective use of theory and prior research
- Relationship between “researcher” and the “researched” is specified
- Ethical standards upheld
- Methods documented
- Findings communicated effectively

Anastas (2004)
Selected resources on qualitative methods (Handout)

- Introductory texts
- Web resources provide information on:
  - Annual conferences
  - Training workshops
  - Discussion forums
  - Electronic journals
  - Data analysis software
  - Numerous other online resources
References (Slide 1 of 2)


