Using Qualitative Research Strategies for Public Health Law Evaluation

A Methods Monograph

PHLR

Making the Case for Laws that Improve Health

PUBLIC HEALTH LAW RESEARCH

March 1, 2012

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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A Methods Monograph
for the
Public Health Law Research Program (PHLR)
Temple University Beasley School of Law

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PHLR is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Summary

Qualitative research helps form our understanding of relationships between law, legal practices and public health. Because of its inductive nature, qualitative research generates insight into previously unstudied (or understudied) mechanisms of legal effect. Its various methods and strategies help uncover ways in which laws have effects that lie outside existing theories and models, and for which standardized quantitative measures do not exist.

Different data collection tools can be used alone or in combination. Semi-structured one-on-one interviews involve open-ended questions that generate detailed narrative data on an individual's unique knowledge and experience. Focus groups create opportunities for participants to build on others' insights, contradict them, or refine them, generating insight that would not emerge through individual interviews. Direct observations can help understand how an action is carried out, and can reveal the cultural norms that guide behaviors. The collection and analysis of written texts can help us understand how issues are framed and articulated, and can capture forms of reasoning that help us understand human practices.

Qualitative tools can be deployed within broader research approaches or strategies. Ethnographic studies are ideal for understanding the behavioral or cultural norms that guide the practices of groups or organizations. Case studies illustrate a process, and are suited to answering questions of how a law was crafted, passed, or implemented. A "grounded theory approach" produces a theory of a process, behavior or interaction, and consists of guidelines for generating theory inductively from the data. An action research approach involves researchers and practitioners (or members of a community of interest) working hand-in-hand in all stages of a research project, from conceptualizing the problem to identifying a needed change, to developing ways forward to improve practice. Qualitative research can form part of a mixed methods study that

integrates quantitative data to offer a richer set of answers than provided by quantitative or qualitative research on its own.

Regardless of research strategy, studies must be designed with appropriate sampling strategies, and researchers must ensure validity and reliability. Purposeful sampling strategies are common in qualitative research, and their choice depends on the research question, types of data collection methods deployed, availability of participants, and resources of the researcher. There are several strategies that researchers can employ to make sure that findings are valid, including use of "negative case analysis" or "communicative validity" processes where researchers subject their claims to other researchers with relevant content and theoretical expertise. It is important to guarantee the reliability of qualitative research by utilizing consistent and systematic procedures for gathering and analyzing data. Finally, good quality research involves a robust cyclical engagement between descriptive data and higher levels of abstract understanding, which is facilitated by a process of coding (assigning concepts to segments of data).

Introduction

The field of public health law research (PHLR) occupies a rich space where interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives meet rigorous empirical methods to examine law as an independent variable and population health as the ultimate outcome of concern (Burris et al., 2010). Systematic qualitative research strategies can help form our understanding of relationships between, and mechanisms influencing law, legal practices and public health. Qualitative research can shed light on the nuanced ways in which law works; how human decision-makers, organizations, and whole environments may act or behave differently as a direct or indirect response to legal constraints; and how these changes, in turn, can re-shape the physical and social landscape of health risk and wellbeing for populations

Because of its inductive nature, qualitative research can generate insight into previously unstudied (or understudied) mechanisms of legal effect. It can explore new theoretical ideas, identifying previously uncharted terrain that may not be found through deductive hypothesis testing. Qualitative research often dominates the initial phase of research on a new PHLR topic, building a foundation of understanding for later quantitative studies. Qualitative methods help uncover ways in which laws have effects that lie outside existing theories and models, and for which standardized quantitative measures do not exist. It can also inform the study of law's implementation, peering into the gap between "law on the books" and law in action. Those charged with the administration or enforcement of law can be vital sources of empirical data, as can populations and sub-groups that are targeted by law. Understanding how law is applied and in some cases contested in various real life situations is an integral piece of the puzzle which seeks to explore law's effects on public health, including unintended consequences. Understanding the factors that drive and shape lawmaking is also an important area of PHLR, and the texts capturing legislative debates, including testimonies and committee reports, provide the empirical material for qualitative analysis.

The purpose of this monograph is to situate qualitative research on the wider stage of PHLR and describe ways in which it can be rigorously and effectively used in PHLR. It outlines examples of broad research strategies and data collection methods they employ, both alone and in combination. The utility and appropriateness of each method will be discussed in relation to examples of PHLR questions or studies. The monograph closes with a discussion of core criteria for guiding high quality empirical research.

Qualitative Research in Context

Qualitative research is centrally concerned with the study of *meaning*, including people's understandings of and beliefs about aspects of their experiences. The focus of qualitative studies can range from a few people to small social networks to large groups that are defined by a shared characteristic, experience, or institutional membership. Based on the definition of "empirical" as "relying on direct experience and observation" (Janesick, 2004, p.18), the task of qualitative research is to provide an authentic account of how people think about the world and act within it. Human thought and action is shaped by social, cultural, organizational, political or geographic conditions or contexts. Such contexts can be seen, or rendered visible, through various representations including: written text (such as laws, policies, or procedures), oral texts (including personal narratives or stories), researcher field notes, and video or audio recordings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.3).

Qualitative research is vital to empirical legal studies of "law in the real world" (Genn et al., 2006, p.iii), including the realities of enforcement and compliance behaviors (McBarnet, Voiculescu, & Campbell, 2007). Sociolegal or "law and society" scholars care about the effects or consequences that law in action may have on populations and social institutions (McBarnet et al., 2007; see Unger, 1983; Fitzpatrick & Hunt, 1987 on the field of "critical legal studies"). In bridging law and social science, law and society scholarship treats law not as neutral or purely technical, but rather as

"meaning-making". As such, qualitative inquiry has long been integral to the study of law (Jabbari, 1998).

Many theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches are being advanced and refined as the field of PHLR advances. Taken together, these frameworks and approaches provide a comprehensive toolkit for answering questions of *whether* and *how* law influences population health. Beyond revealing the patterns, nature and distribution of laws, qualitative tools can produce evidence to support causal inference, enhancing what we know about the theoretical mechanisms of law. Robust causal inference is obviously vital to evaluations of law's effectiveness, and qualitative tools can help assess both the intended *and* unintended effects of a law, including such effects on particular groups, by exploring the causal mechanisms and identifying potentially important but previously undetected effects.

Data Collection Methods and Sources

Qualitative research typically involves analyses of written texts and the collection of data from, and in conjunction with human subjects. At the outset, one must determine the nature of one's data sources and their accessibility. Documents capturing processes of lawmaking or law's implementation may be searchable on the internet or made available by public agencies. Access to human subjects can in some cases be challenging, particularly in studies of a law's effects on vulnerable or protected groups, such as people affected by mental illnesses, or prisoners. Of course, access is only the first consideration. Depending on the characteristics of interview respondents (are they members of an elite professional group, or do they have language or literacy challenges?), the content of interviews, as well as the manner in which interviews are performed, affect the ethics and difficulty of the research.

Interviews

The purpose of an interview is to elicit peoples' knowledge and perspectives that might otherwise remain unknown, simply because they weren't asked before. Such individuals might include those involved in lawmaking, or in the implementation of the law, or those who experience law's enforcement. Interviews are a useful vehicle for tapping into people's experiences, assuming such individuals are comfortable sharing information with researchers and through two-way verbal communication.

Researchers must decide how much structure to impose on interviews, and whether interviews should be with one individual at a time (one-to-one) or with groups. Semi-structured interviewing is most useful to PHLR because it is both systematic and flexible, allowing for the generation of rich qualitative data. A researcher directs an interview by following an interview guide containing general questions to which interviewees can respond with as much detail as is relevant. The researcher strives for depth in responses, using general, open-ended questions that make sure to avoid 'yes' or 'no' answers. As the interviewee replies, the researcher actively listens for insights. This may prompt the interviewer to ask new questions in order to gain a deeper understanding of the initial response (see Miller & Crabtree, 2004).

The semi-structured approach therefore aims to strike a balance between guiding the interview conservation to cover pre-planned topics while asking unplanned questions that cover new, previously unexplored ground. As such, it is an approach which is appropriate when a topic is partially understood and some key research questions are known in advance. Yet, "the best probing is that which is responsive, in the moment, to what the interviewee is saying" and having an interview guide allows for comparison of answers to key questions across interviews, therefore ensuring that data gathering is systematic (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). This semi-structured approach stands in contrast to highly structured interviewing, or survey research, where respondents must

choose from a list of answer options provided in a set of pre-ordered questions (Willis, 2007), and the data generated are numerical and subject to quantitative analyses.

When law is a topic of exploration, care must always be taken not to bias responses through questions that assume law is important. Sociolegal research has shown that law often influences behavior and attitudes at a deep or unconscious level, defining options and setting bounds of possibility. It may be at work defining norms that are not recognized as coming from law, or people may have folk beliefs about what the law is that are not factual. So when an interview is designed to explore how the law influences behavior, it may be useful to allow law to emerge in a semi-structured interview rather than prompting people to define their legal knowledge or explain how law influences them. An example of this more patient but revealing process in Engel and Munger's work on how disability rights law has changed the lives of people with disabilities. In their "autobiographical" approach, they asked interviewees to tell their life stories, waiting patiently for the law to emerge, or not, in the narratives of their subjects (Engel & Munger, 1996).

A semi-structured approach was used by Dodson and colleagues (2009) to better understand the various conditions influencing the development and passage of childhood obesity laws and regulations. The researchers argued that knowledge was lacking on the complex dynamics of the policy-making process, and that those involved directly in this process would be best placed to help deepen and extend existing knowledge. To this end, the team conducted semi-structured interviews with legislators and staffers from various states with different political climates. The researchers used interview guides that contained questions on basic demographic information (for example, respondents' educational backgrounds) as well as open-ended questions designed to probe respondents on their perceptions and experiences of the legislative process. The interviews elicited information that served to validate existing knowledge about lawmaking dynamics in general, while illuminating factors specific to the area of childhood obesity prevention. For example, the research

affirmed that concerns with the costs of legislation can serve as a barrier to enacting law, while having wide stakeholder support is an enabling condition. At the same time, interviewees illuminated factors specific to the childhood obesity debate, namely the influence of lobbyists representing companies in the production of obesogenic foods, as well as the problem of misinformation among constituents, such as the assumption that school districts would lose money with the passage of legislation.

The Dodson study used one-on-one interviews with people involved in lawmaking. Interviews are also useful for tapping into the knowledge and experiences of people targeted by law. For instance, a study carried out by Cooper and colleagues (2005) set out to examine whether and how a police drug crackdown shaped the health-risk behaviors of injection drug users in New York City. Drug users themselves are obviously the most direct source of information on this topic because they can express how policing tactics influence their thought and actions, and in particular, whether such tactics serve to alter their daily health risk habits and routines. Although previous research revealed that police crackdowns can undermine healthy behaviors (by, for example, discouraging users from obtaining or using sterile syringes), the research team wanted to generate a more in-depth understanding of users' thoughts and habits in relation to crackdowns. As part of this, they wanted to see whether specific police tactics had differential impacts on the health risk behaviors of individuals with different demographic and social characteristics (race/ethnicity, gender, age, socio-economic status, enrollment in a syringe exchange program). To this end, the lead researcher recruited a diverse sample of individuals who lived in and around a police precinct that was the site of a police crackdown.

In addition to a brief survey (highly structured interview) the researcher undertook an open-ended/semi-structured interview which addressed core issues such as community/police relations, contributions of police to public safety, the ways in which the socio-demographic characteristics of

users influenced police interactions, and drug use behaviors. These individual interviews provided an opportunity for respondents to describe their thoughts and actions – as they were shaped by police crackdown tactics – through stories of daily struggles and rituals. This research did reveal both commonalities and differences in the experiences of practices of drug users across different sub-groups of the sample. For instance, poorer users - particularly those without homes or access to private spaces – were more likely than users with more resources to resort to high risk drug use practices, such as injecting hastily (to avoid being caught) without proper regard for safe injecting practices (for example, failing to clean their injection site, not heating up the drug adequately). In this research, semi-structured interviews were essential to drawing out the details and nuances of these struggles and rituals as shaped by users' individual life circumstances. In this research, interviews were carried out on an individual or one-on-one basis, but in some cases a semi-structured approach with groups – commonly referred to as focus groups – can be used as well.

Focus Groups

A focus group is a type of group interview designed to facilitate a social process where interaction and sharing of views among people produces valuable information. Sometimes this information emerges through a new awareness of shared understandings which no single individual group member could provide alone if interviewed separately. In simple terms, "participants relate their experiences and reactions among presumed peers with whom they likely share some common frame of reference"(Kidd & Parshall, 2000, p. 294). One common frame of reference could be an occupational position. For example, Eman and colleagues (2011) conducted focus groups with family doctors in Canada– as well as administering a short questionnaire - in order to better understand the nature of doctors' concerns about disclosing patient health information in the interests of public health. Previous research had identified privacy issues as a critical barrier, but the

researchers wanted to learn more about the legal and extra-legal factors shaping doctors' perception and application of privacy principles, in specific relation to the 2009 pandemic H1N1 influenza outbreak.

With groups of people sharing the same occupation position, the focus group method was able to draw from a common pool of knowledge, eliciting the experiences of people facing similar challenges as medical practitioners such as protecting patient-physician relationships, and maintaining confidentiality, while facing larger public health obligations. Focus groups can also serve as an efficient means of gathering information from people who might otherwise be difficult to access on a one-one-one basis. In the case of this study, research participants were recruited from a sample of doctors who were going to attend a family medicine conference, and thus the focus groups were held in private meeting rooms at the conference venue.

Focus groups have other advantages by virtue of bringing together people that have circumstances, characteristics or experiences in common. Focus groups create opportunities for participants to build on others' insights, contradict them, or refine them (Kitzinger, 1994). Participants may have to explain or justify what they mean by a given statement when prompted by their peers; this may then cause them to explicate or refine their statements; doing so may cause others to do the same. This iterative engagement does not serve to falsify previous statements, but rather helps add nuance and precision to the researcher's understandings of a group's norms or shared experiences, especially in cases where the researcher is working with a group for the first time (Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 2004).

Focus groups also help give a voice to participants who otherwise may have little opportunity to offer their knowledge, helping them to have greater control over the research conversation than they would otherwise have in an interview situation (Morgan, 2004). That being said, it is important for researchers, as focus group facilitators, to steer the focus group and ensure

that it addresses the key issues of the study. Otherwise, the objectives of the study might get lost. Similar to individual semi-structured interviews, focus group facilitators follow a general question guide while giving participants the opportunity to provide detailed answers and to draw from relevant personal stories. In a group dynamic though, different strands or insights may emerge in quick order, and it is up to the researcher to keep track of these insights and to follow up with them as is relevant to the study's questions of interest. As in the case of individual stories in interviews, law in focus group discussions may hide in the background, shaping how members understand a notion like privacy without becoming explicit in the discussion.

Some suggest that focus groups could potentially inhibit participants from speaking fully about their experience, because doing so can involve acts of highly personal self-disclosure in front of others. However, this group setting can create a safe environment for people who share a common life experience or set of risk factors and who might otherwise be less likely to discuss "taboo" subjects in a one-on-one interview (Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 2004). Focus groups, for example, have long been an important tool in HIV research (Joseph et al., 1984). As part of a larger study on the effects of using criminal law as a tool to reduce HIV transmission, a recent Canadian study used focus groups with people with HIV in order to elicit information on how they perceived and responded to the legal obligation to disclosure their HIV status prior to engaging in sexual activity that posed "significant risk" (Mykhalovskiy, 2011, p. 669). The researcher wanted to better understand how people with HIV interpreted and applied the specific provisions of the law, and in particular the law's rather ambiguous legal conception of "significant risk" (which didn't necessarily align with public health-based understandings of risk). Focus groups in this case brought together people with a common characteristic (HIV positive status) who - through active participation, listening to others, refining and explicating views – generated a multi-faceted understanding of a shared phenomenon.

While focus groups are useful for discussing sensitive topics, it is nonetheless important to consider factors which might serve to silence certain participants in a group setting. In studies of occupational groups, like law enforcement personnel, for example, it is important to ensure there are no power dynamics that allow certain participants to dominate. Holding focus groups with officers that share the same rank (and/or gender) can avoid this, especially if the topic centers on the informal decision-making norms that guide officers' arrest decisions in sensitive areas of concern to PHLR (for example, management of people with mental illness, or arrests of drug users).

Researchers may choose to use focus groups in conjunction with interviews. Doing so can combine the depth achieved in interviews with the breadth achieved in focus groups. Focus groups can be used to validate previous findings from interviews while expanding the sample of people involved in a study. Alternatively, focus groups can generate ideas that can be explored in more depth through one-to-one interviews.

Field Observations

Sometimes direct observations of people's behavior and informal conversations *in situ* are the most appropriate method to address a special topic in PHLR. When people are asked – in the case of interviews and focus groups – to "talk" about what they do, there's a good chance that their narratives mask aspects of what they do. It is human nature to want to be perceived as a good person making sensible choices. People may not always be consciously aware of what they do; they may not reveal some of the minutia of their daily lives that for them is not worth mentioning, but for a researcher may be profoundly insightful. Direct observations provide the opportunity for researchers to judge for themselves what is significant.

Levels of participation in an observation setting can vary, and may change over time (Bailey, 2007). Unobtrusive observations may be most appropriate, in a relatively public setting, such as a

fast food restaurants or a school cafeteria, if one is interested in observing how healthy foods are explained on menus or displayed on buffet tables, or whether people ask questions about calories or nutritional content. It may, though, be preferable to join a group, or to become an honorary member of it. Doing so helps build trust between the researcher and the group, which is important when the behavior of interest is largely hidden from public view, and one needs to be physically close to the actors under study to observe what they are doing. Becoming a semi-participant, or even a full participant has been used in research on the police, where the focus is on the "practical reasoning" of front-line workers in bureaucratic organizations (Brewer, 2004). Without placing oneself in the group, and building rapport, the researcher may have the figurative door closed to them by organizational gatekeepers, or have the observed behaviors "stage-managed" when the outsider is present.

Observations can be used for different purposes. Researchers may be interested, for example, in understanding how something is done, such as the implementation of an intervention. Observations were used by Frattaroli and Teret (2006) as part of a case study on the implementation of the Maryland Gun Violence Act of 1996, which authorizes judges to issue protective orders requiring batterers to surrender their firearms. In order to see whether and if judges were making use of this authority the researchers observed protective order hearings in a court that specialized in domestic violence cases. The researchers took detailed notes of these hearings, and subsequently categorized the judicial activity they observed. These observations revealed that some judges were stricter than others in making sure that that the surrender of firearms – as one "relief" option for protective orders – was reviewed with the petitioner. These direct observations of judicial behavior therefore helped the researchers to gauge the degree to which the law was being implemented in practice.

Observations can be used as a tool for understanding the meanings, rules and norms that guide the behaviors and everyday routines of groups. Such observations can be useful to PHLR when one is concerned with understanding the norms guiding health risk behaviors, or the norms guiding the practices of those implementing or enforcing the law. This use of observations is central to ethnographic research (see below), which seeks to gather data on culture and cultural practices. What people say or how they talk while they are being observed is just as important as what they do, because their everyday talk can reveal a deeper logic or sensibility that explains the actions being observed. Depending on the study, what people wear, how they talk, and their body language could all reveal power relationships, or interpersonal dynamics, that illuminate how a culture operates. The ethnographer documents this social world in as much rich detail as possible. All of these observations then form the data for the analysis of the meaning-making practices of a group.

Written Textual Analysis

In addition to peoples' words and actions, written texts provide another valuable source of qualitative data. For instance, a researcher may be interested in gathering and analyzing texts that can help us understand how and why a particular lawmaking effort was successful or how it was implemented. As part of understanding lawmaking, it may be important to examine the nature and extent of arguments used either in support of, or against the passage of a particular piece of legislation. Written texts produced as part of legislative debates can provide detailed information on this argumentation, and because they were produced at the time of the legislative process, can be considered accurate, and not subject to the failures of human memory. Written texts, such as standard operating procedures, or guidance documents, can also help us understand implementation practices.

As an example of textual analysis, Apollonio and Bero (2009) set out to examine which arguments were used in the passage of workplace smoking legislation. They also wanted to 'weigh' this evidence, seeing how much certain arguments were used more than others. The researchers were particularly interested in discovering whether arguments that deployed research evidence, or scientific discourse, were ultimately associated with the passage of workplace smoking legislation that had strong protections for public health. To this end they performed a "content analysis" of materials including written testimony (oral testimony was used as well), the text of proposed and passed bills and amendments, audiotapes of committee hearings, meeting minutes and public commentary. Content analysis is a common form of textual analysis that involved, in this case, coding text segments according to argument types and counting the number of times certain arguments were used. Content analysis therefore produced both qualitative data (descriptions of different argument types, categorized by reading and analyzing the narratives) and quantitative data (the number of times different arguments were used). The researchers discovered different categories of argument in the texts, such as those centered on science and health effects and those stressing ideological positions. After analyzing and weighing up different forms of argumentation, the authors concluded that "an emphasis on scientific discourse, relative to other arguments made in legislative testimony, might help produce political outcomes that favor public health" (Apollonio & Bero, 2009, p. 1).

Texts can serve as an important data source for the PHLR toolbox because they can capture arguments and discourse that is so much a part of legislative and adjudicative processes. They can help us understand the thoughts and actions of people, both historically and in present times. Written texts can provide good clues into how issues are framed and articulated. They can capture forms of reasoning that help us understand human practices.

Research Strategies

The data collection methods I have described can be deployed, singularly or in combination, for different purposes depending on one's legal or health topic, research question, and broader research strategy. This section briefly describes some common qualitative research strategies of use for PHLR.

Ethnography

Ethnographic studies are ideal for understanding the behavioral or cultural norms/rules (both formal and informal) that guide the practices of groups or organizations. They help describe and explain the everyday activities and logics of other groups, about which little may be known. Direct observation of behaviors and practices is the tool of choice in ethnographic studies, but it is common to deploy interviews or focus groups as well. Regardless of how one mixes data collection tools, an ethnographic study focuses on a group or a collective – its norms, traditions, everyday behaviors and forms of "practical reasoning"(Brewer, 2004)– as its central unit of analysis. "Ethnographers", writes Herbert, "unearth what the group takes for granted, and thereby reveal the knowledge and meaning structures that provide the blueprint for social action" (2000, p. 551).

One example of ethnographic research comes from India, where researchers set out to uncover the ways in which an HIV prevention non-governmental organization (NGO) and female sex worker community-based organizations (CBO) worked to transform the legal and normative environment in which sex workers were being policed. In a context where law enforcement practices were arbitrary, corrupt, and a significant threat to the physical and mental health of sex workers, an NGO (with funding from an international donor) worked with CBO's to alter power dynamics. Through extensive community mobilization efforts, sex workers were given the tools to identify police abuse and to set new standards of police behavior, thus transforming the "regulatory

space" of police work (Biradavolu et al., 2009). An ethnographic approach, involving prolonged engagement in the field, made it possible for researchers to understand this community transformation process, and in particular the sophisticated legal, political and normative strategies deployed by the various actors to make this transformation happen. The researchers collected data through detailed observations of NGO and other activities, as well as through interviews with sex workers, intimate partners, police and others. This data was gathered over a two-year period, and involved the use of four trained observers. The researchers used this extensive time in the field to understand not just what was being done, but how all of the activities observed were understood by participants.

Case Study Research

Case studies help illustrate a process, an action, or an event (Creswell, 2007). In PHLR, a case study approach might be best suited for answering questions related to how a law was crafted and passed, or how it was implemented at the administrative level. Methods of data collection can include observations, interviews and analyses of laws, policies or other guidelines for action. A strong case study uses as many data sources as possible, including individuals involved in the process or event under study, and documents that help elucidate what unfolded (for example, media articles, meeting minutes, court decisions). All of these sources shed light on "how things get done" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Stake, 2005, p. 444).

The case study researcher has to make a choice about parameters of the empirical "case," including a beginning and end time period for an observed process, and size of the subject population or institution involved in the phenomenon (an occupational sub-group, a whole organization, a community). Both of these "time and size" choices determine the scope of the study. Given the need for multiple data sources in a case study, researchers must determine whether

they have sufficient time and resources to study multiple sites or whether it is more feasible to focus on a single case. Frattaroli and Teret (2006) focused their research on the single case of Maryland and its provisions under the state's Gun Violence Act that authorized judges to order the surrender of firearms on the part of batterers and also authorized police to remove firearms from the scenes of alleged domestic violence occurrences. Within this case, they studied the implementation of these provisions by both judges and police, drawing on three key sources of data: observations of protective order hearings, semi-structured interviews with key informants including, but not limited to judges and law enforcement officers, and documents related to the implementation process such as training materials and media coverage. Given the finite resources of the project, the researchers selected 4 particular study site locations covering urban, suburban and rural areas within the state. Thus, while the focus of this study began with the state of Maryland, the researchers homed in on specific sites within Maryland and on particular samples of actors within the Maryland judicial system and made clear to their readers the time period during which they collected their implementation data.

Grounded Theory

The purpose of a grounded theory approach is to produce a theory of a process, behavior or interaction through the research, rather than to apply an existing theory at the outset. The pioneers of the grounded theory approach, Glaser and Strauss (1967), stressed the importance of generating theory inductively from the data, rather than imposing pre-established theoretical concepts and relationships onto the data. Over time, proponents of grounded theory have provided clearer and more structured guidelines to readers about how to perform the method. A central text in this regard is Basics of Qualitative Research, written by Corbin and Strauss (2008).

A grounded theory project starts with a general research question which guides the start of the data collection. The researcher then begins research, moving back and forth between data collection and analysis. This analysis is aided by coding, which involves assigning emerging concepts or ideas to segments of the data. Through the coding process, the researcher works to establish tentative relationships between concepts. The researcher then engages in more focused data collection and analysis by engaging in a process of "constant comparison," which involves comparing new data with previously collected data in order to discover similarities or differences in their conceptual properties or relationships. The process of constant comparison allows the researcher to refine concepts and develop higher level concepts (often referred to as categories or themes). Theory emerges through this refinement of concepts and conceptual relationships. The researcher continues this cyclical process of data collection and analysis until no new concepts or conceptual relationships emerge. At this point, described as the stage of "theoretical saturation", the theory developed is determined to be robust enough to explain all of the data gathered, and there are no negative cases (that is, actions or behaviors that can't be explained by the theory). In other words, the theory is considered to be "grounded" in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Lacey & Luff, 2001).

A grounded theory approach can be used with one or more sources of data, such as narratives from interviews, observations from field notes, or written texts such as media clippings or correspondence, or all of the above. Cooper and colleagues (2005) used the grounded theory approach in analyzing interview data on drug injectors' health risk behaviors in the wake of a New York Police crackdown. "Throughout the analysis", they write, "the authors discussed emerging concepts, categories, and their inter-relationships; negative cases were sought to extend and enrich our findings" (p.677). Using the grounded theory approach, they established theoretical relationships between specific policing tactics and drug users' sense of sovereignty over their bodies

and the spaces in which they lived, and users' abilities to practice harm reduction. Their theoretical model was general enough to capture the experiences of all of the users they interviewed, while providing enough specificity to distinguish between the experiences and practices of users with different socio-demographic characteristics or circumstances.

Action Research

In an action research approach, researchers and practitioners (or members of a community of interest) work hand-in-hand in all stages of a research project, from conceptualizing the problem to identifying a needed change, to developing ways to improve practice (and ultimately human wellbeing) (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003; Stringer, 2007). Doing action research involves collapsing traditional boundaries between researchers and subjects. Research teams include members of a targeted group, such as a mental health consumer working with research investigators who are studying a legal intervention to improve community mental health, or HIV-positive individuals providing ideas for a more promising legal intervention that assists in prevention. The assumption is that such participants possess unique insights into the relevant risk behaviors and environments, and how best to study them (Schensul, 1999). Action research therefore centers on "change *with* others", serving as a strong critique of, and alternative to "ivory tower" research (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 1).

Within PHLR, an action research method called Rapid Policy Assessment and Response (RPAR) has been recently developed to bring together researchers and community stakeholders to improve law's working on the ground. Community-based researchers, together with a Community Action Board, gather and interpret data about the implementation of law in the community and its effect on local health. Researchers and the action board use facilitation techniques like "power maps" and a "root causes" exercise to analyze who is wielding power in the community, how law

relates to practice, and where there might be "pressure points" for healthy change (RPAR, 2004). This approach has been deployed especially in relation to drug and sex-related behaviors, but the method applies to any regulatory problem (Sobeyko et al., 2006; Vyshemirskaya et al., 2008).

Models like RPAR can benefit marginalized populations whose experiences with laws have been unfavorable or whose ability to influence lawmaking has been limited, or even non-existent. While incorporating the knowledge and experience of such groups is a key to the research process, participants also benefit by acquiring skills in data collection and analysis. The purpose of action research is precisely to link researchers and the research process to stakeholders in the locale who are in a position to translate knowledge into action.

Mixed Methods

Qualitative research may also form part of a mixed methods study that integrates numeric and text-based data to offer complementary or a richer set of answers than provided by quantitative or qualitative research on its own. Mixed methods researchers adopt the pragmatic view that quantitative and qualitative approaches to research are compatible, with each compensating for limitations of the other (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). At the design phase, getting the right mix involves determining the ordering of different research strategies (whether one component should precede the other, or whether data collection should occur simultaneously) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). For example, a focus group study exploring health risk behaviors could assist in refining hypotheses to be tested by a survey of a representative sample of the population. Alternatively, an experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation might produce evidence that a law is connected to a specified public health outcome. Direct observations combined with key informant interviews might then shed light on the mechanisms that "tell us why interconnections … occur" (Pawson,

2006, p. 23), as could ethnographies that are built in to randomized controlled trials (Sherman & Strang, 2004).

The term "mixed methods" therefore relates to studies that use both quantitative and qualitative tools and sources, and respective quantitative and qualitative analyses. There are various combinations of data sources, tools and analyses that can be achieved depending on your research question (see recent guidance on this by Creswell et al., 2011). One might choose to conduct two parallel studies of the same thing, such as doing a random sample survey and then conducting interviews with key informants, thereby comparing or integrating information from these different methods. In such a case, qualitative data are interspersed with results from the quantitative analysis as a way to unpack, interpret or confirm what the numbers are saying.

Standards of Research Quality

Scholars vary in their views as to whether qualitative research is more of an art (demanding the skills of improvisation) or a science (demanding structure and rigid adherence to procedures).
The former view suggests that researchers need to be flexible, ready to change aspects of their designs as they go along (for example, sampling). Researchers may experience such profound "ah ha" moments that the course of the research must change in order to pursue a potentially groundbreaking finding. Howard Becker, a seminal American sociologist and ethnographer, is a particularly vocal advocate of this improvisational orientation, arguing that "researchers can't know ahead of time all the questions they will want to investigate, what theories they will ultimately find relevant to discoveries made during the research, or what methods will produce the information needed to solve the newly discovered problems" (2009, p. 548). The research process is not linear, nor is the process of designing it. But this does not mean, Becker points out, that it isn't "systematic, rigorous, [and] theoretically informed" (2009, p. 548).

Notwithstanding Becker's view, researchers require guidance as they embark on the most systematic and rigorous study that they can achieve within the scope and resources of their project. From the perspective of funders who support research (quantitative or qualitative), it is important for researchers to justify their financial support by giving careful consideration to every aspect of their research, factoring in the chance that certain design elements may change or expand, and ensuring that such changes along the way can strengthen the research and advance its goals. Institutional Review Boards may also insist upon a well-defined research plan and set of objectives. Undoubtedly, qualitative researchers can't or shouldn't "imitate" guidelines designed for deductive, hypothesis-testing research, but the paradigms of quantitative and qualitative research do share core concerns about quality of data, appropriateness of data collection tools, validity and "generalizability" of findings, and robustness of the analytical process. Although some prominent qualitative researchers choose not to use such terms (because they align too closely with positivist research) and use others (for example, "confirmability", "authenticity"), we use the more traditional language here, in a qualified manner, to provide consistency, as well as a source of comparison, with the other monographs in the *PHLR Methods Monograph Series*. The considerations that follow are particularly complex when designing mixed methods research. Fortunately, this complexity is recognized by the National Institutes of Health, which recently commissioned a guidance document from prominent authorities on mixed methods (Creswell et al., 2011).

Sampling

Researchers must decide on the particular characteristics of people or texts that make up their sample as well as how large the sample should be. For example, if someone wants to interview injection drug users about their health behaviors, it's important to determine which set of drug user characteristics should be captured in the sample (for example, people living in certain areas, people

of a certain age, males, females, people who are wealthy, or people with few resources). Depending on the research question, one might prefer a sample of people with diverse characteristics, or alternatively, with similar characteristics. Determining how many people to recruit for interviews is equally important, and it's possible that this number can increase or decrease over the course of the research, depending on the emergence of new insights or questions. Qualitative researchers aim to reach a point at which additional data collection (increasing the sample) would not generate any new insights. The point at which this occurs depends on the research question. There could be little variation in views among a sample of family physicians in terms of their concerns with health information privacy, but there may be huge variation among injection drug users in their experiences of targeted policing, depending on whether users are living in certain parts of a city, or are wealthy or poor, or have access to support networks and social services. Researchers must think carefully about their level of access to the people or to the texts that will allow them to answer their question comprehensively, with depth, and with confidence that there aren't parts of the question that have remained unanswered.

Different approaches to sampling in qualitative research can be used alone or in combination. Probability sampling, most commonly found in quantitative research, seeks to make sure that the sample represents the broader target population. This approach can be suitable for large-scale qualitative studies, although higher levels of generalizability can compromise depth, especially in projects with limited resources to collect detailed data (Lamont & White, 2005).

There is a variety of purposeful sampling strategies, and some common ones are highlighted here. Criterion sampling involves selecting participants who meet one or more criterion of interest, such as a legislator working in the area of childhood obesity prevention. Maximum variation sampling consists of choosing sites or participants that are differ along various dimensions or criteria, such as injection drug users that differ in terms of levels of wealth, and/or gender, and/or

ethnic background. Homogenous sampling refers to selecting participants or cases that are similar in some ways, such as judges who work in specialized domestic violence courts in the State of Maryland. Snowball or chain sampling refers to the process of expanding one's sample by asking previous participants to nominate other potential participants (Bailey, 2007). For instance, a police officer involved in a targeted foot patrol intervention in a violent area of a city might refer a researcher to another police officer from a gang unit who has extensive knowledge about drug market dynamics associated with the violent behaviors.

Respondent-driven sampling (RDS) is a relatively new approach used in the study of hidden or "hard to reach" populations, such as drug users, sex workers, gay men, or people experiencing homelessness. RDS was developed to help overcome the challenges of achieving probability samples with such groups. Depending on the research question, having a probability sample or random sample is important when the goal is to measure the effect of a law or its enforcement on *all* members of a wider population of interest, not simply those who are most visible or accessible. With hidden populations, however, the sampling frame can be unknown; there is no clear understanding of the extent of such populations or the varying characteristics of their members (Heckathorn, 1997). The RDS approach uses respondents to recruit their peers (as in snowball sampling), while researchers keep track of peer-to-peer referrals. This snowballing occurs through "waves" (with one wave having been recruited through the previous wave). RDS deploys a mathematical model that helps calculate the non-randomness of the sample, while implementing techniques for reducing bias, including lengthening referral chains and rewarding recruiters (Heckathorn, 2008; see Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004 and Heckathorn, 2007 for further information on the RDS process).

Validity

In qualitative research, the representation of data is very much a product of a researcher's own interpretation of meaning (Creswell, 2007, pp. 206-7). "Qualitative data," write Corbin and Strauss, "are inherently rich in substance and full of possibilities. It is impossible to say that there is only one story that can be constructed from the data"(2008, p. 50). There are however, several strategies that researchers can employ to make sure that findings are valid, which in the context of qualitative research refers to findings that are credible (capturing the 'truth' of peoples' experiences and perceptions) transferable (applicable to other contexts) and neutral (not distorted by researcher bias) (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

"Negative case analysis" (Creswell, 2007, p. 208) involves identifying or collecting data that might not be explained by one's existing analysis, and may even contradict it (Cohen et al., 2000). Conducting mixed-methods studies can also be useful in this regard, showing, for example, that quantitative data reveal a similar picture or pattern. A related form of analytical scrutiny is "communicative validity," a process where researchers subject their claims to other researchers with relevant content and theoretical expertise. Entering into such a dialogue with one's intellectual community can create an opportunity for one's interpretation to be refuted or refined (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006).

In ethnographic research, the validity of one's findings is strengthened when one commits a sustained period of time in the field, and offers a reflective account of the ways in which one gained access to a setting, developed trust with participants and made sure that one's own cultural predispositions did not distort or skew one's interpretations (Creswell, 2007, pp. 207-8). "Pragmatic validity" is particularly important in action research, and is important to PHLR more generally. This notion refers the ability of a piece of research to enable participants to better understand and navigate their environment, thus enhancing their ability to effect change, either to the lives of

participants, or to the contexts in which people live and work (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Marks et al., 2010).

Regardless of sampling strategy or size, it is important to be very clear about the ways in which one's findings may have relevance beyond the individuals, cases or sites studied. Although generalizability to the whole population, in the sense claimed by quantitative researchers, is usually not the goal of qualitative research, it is nonetheless important to discuss whether one's findings could be more widely applied to other groups, institutions or processes, and why (Lamont & White, 2005). Researchers can help readers judge this transferability by providing as much detail as possible on the context of the research setting and the characteristics of one's data and sample. With this information, others can compare this information with the characteristics of other potential research sites or settings.

Reliability

A reliable study is one where findings would be consistent if the data were to be collected for a second time or if the study were to be repeated. In qualitative research involving observations and interviews, it's not really possible to collect the same data twice (Trochim, 2005). For instance, if a researcher is observing people's behavior, there is no single instance where a behavior will be exactly the same as it was in a previous moment (although there are presumably common and repeated patterns in the behavior). An interview respondent could answer the same questions differently from one day to the next. Nonetheless, it is important to guarantee the reliability of the procedures for data gathering and analysis. This involves providing transparency into how the data was collected and the processes through which it was analyzed. This transparency is not only important to the outside world, but to members of teams that have different people collecting and analyzing data.

In large projects, it is critical to ensure that data is collected in the same way by different team members, and that the processes of data organization and coding are the same. In ethnographic or other observations studies, for example, observers should be similarly trained and should be producing the same quality of field notes. Being a good note-taker is not a trivial skill, and it is a true craft (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). If interviews are being carried out by multiple researchers, it is important for each person to follow the same general guide. Assuming there are open-ended components in such interviews, all researchers should be trained on interviewing techniques that elicit as much relevant information as possible from respondents.

Finally, if there are multiple people coding data, it is important that there be constant dialogue in the development and definitions of codes and emerging themes so that there is a shared overall interpretive framework and process. Doing so promotes inter-rater reliability. Team members must discuss their analysis regularly, particularly as new codes and themes emerge. It is also useful in the beginning of an analysis phase for two people to code the same piece of data to ensure that they do not differ fundamentally in technique or in the interpretation of codes. For very large, multi-site projects involving teams of qualitative researchers, it is useful to seek guidance on specific techniques for achieving inter-rater reliability.

Analysis: Inductive-Deductive Engagement

Qualitative research requires the researcher to cyclically engage particular descriptive data and higher levels of abstract understanding (Janesick, 2004). In conducting one's analysis, researchers must engage in a meaningful and iterative dialogue between theory and data. This analysis begins while the researcher is collecting data. Analytical insights gleaned from initial data can drive researchers to collect more or different data as the study progresses, meaning that the qualitative research processes we have described tend to be more fluid than quantitative research. Research findings

along the way can inform further sampling procedures, or choices about which elements or phenomenon in the data will become center stage as one works to form a story from the empirical material.

It is common for researchers to take advantage of qualitative analysis software that can assist with the organization and coding of data. Software such as *Atlas.ti* or *NVivo* (see Creswell, 2007) does not, however, serve to replace the analytic work of the researcher. The software helps enhance efficiency of the analysis process and provides useful tools for presenting data, such as charts and visual diagrams, including network views of relationships between concepts. The software also makes it easy for researchers to code text segments as well as to write and organize memos or reflections on those segments. Technology can therefore help analysts become more efficient in an otherwise labor intensive task.

Conclusion

When evaluating the effectiveness of law it is critical for researchers to design studies that can help support causal inferences (see monographs by Gerber and Green; Wagenaar and Komro). Thinking in causal terms both depends on and contributes to a fundamental understanding of mechanisms, or the ways which law has effects. In tracing causal pathways beginning with lawmaking and ending with health, qualitative research can help answer questions along the way that are important to practice and essential to theory. Moreover, it can help identify law's unintended consequences on health behaviors and risk environments.

As a complement to quantitative research, qualitative research strategies and methods help answer important questions about what law means to people, how it is experienced, and how law's agents might do a better job in furtherance of public health. Advancing the field of PHLR therefore depends in part on advancing qualitative research that is empirically rich, theoretically innovative and

pragmatically useful. Exactly how this is done in practice requires careful consideration by academics in partnership with agencies and communities intended to benefit from, and ideally contribute to, the design and conduct of research that matters.

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Please cite this document as:

Wood, J. (2012). Using qualitative research strategies for public health law evaluation. *PHLR Methods Monograph Series*.