Using Qualitative Methods in Public Health Law Research

Jennifer Wood, PhD
Methods Core Member
National Program Office, PHLR Program
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This presentation

- Describes how qualitative research can advance the goals of PHLR
- Provides examples of qualitative data collection methods
- Outlines key elements in the design and implementation of qualitative PHLR
- Provides a qualitative research checklist for applicants to the PHLR program
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What is PHLR?

- Scientific study of the relation of law and legal practices to population health
- More than law ‘on the books’ – what happens to law ‘on the streets’?
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What is qualitative research?

- Explores the meanings people attach to particular experiences
- Discovers what people think and how they act in natural settings
- Uses *text* (written, oral) and *human action* as key sources of empirical data
- Concerned with depth, detail and sensitivity to context
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<th>Examples of research questions</th>
<th>Potential sources of empirical data</th>
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### Examples of questions that qualitative PHLR can help answer

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## Interviews

### What interviews can do

- Tap into the unique knowledge and experiences of individuals
- Generate exploratory, descriptive and explanatory data

### Example of an in-depth interview study

**Study objective:**
Identify factors shaping the development and passage of childhood obesity laws and regulations

**Methods:**
Key informant interviews with state-level policymakers working in different political contexts

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Focus groups

What focus groups can do

• Yield exploratory insights into a little known area
• Create a dynamic and interactive conversation among participants

Example of a focus group study

Study objective:
Understand how drug-involved club- and street-based populations are diverting regulated pharmaceuticals from legal markets to the illegal marketplace, or obtaining drugs that have been previously diverted

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Focus groups with four distinct drug-using populations (e.g. ecstasy users, methadone maintenance clients)

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• Capture human activity as it happens
• Gather data on ‘hard to study’ groups

Example of an observational study

Study objective:
Assess the strategies deployed by an Indian non-governmental organization and sex worker community-based organizations to influence the law enforcement practices of police in a region of southern India.

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Detailed observations of NGO activities and interviews with sex workers and others including police and lawyers

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Thursday, January 20, 2011
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What mixed methods research can do

• Blend qualitative and quantitative methods to answer different, but connected questions
• Qualitative research can help explain quantitative findings

Example of a mixed method study

Study objective:
Examine the public health impact of criminal prosecutions for the sexual transmission of HIV in the UK

Methods:
Quantitative and qualitative data gathered through the annual Gay Men’s Sex Survey of homosexually active men

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Using mixed methods

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Measuring Law for Evaluation Research

Charles Tremper¹, Sue Thomas², and Alexander C. Wagenaar³

http://www.publichealthlawresearch.org/node/178
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Beyond data collection methods:
Other key elements of qualitative research
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Sampling

- Need to find a sample size that is ‘just right’
- Sampling choices are shaped by:
  - Research question
  - Chosen approach
  - Availability of participants
  - Resources of researcher

- Things to keep in mind:
  - Understand generalizability issues
  - Monitor data saturation
  - Consider variation in sample to elicit multiple perspectives
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• Criterion sampling
• Maximum variation sampling
• Homogeneous sampling
• Opportunistic sampling
• Snowball or chain sampling
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Recording and transcribing data

- For interview-based studies, digital audio recordings provide for more detailed data than hand-written notes, but sometimes note-taking is more appropriate
- Detailed notes, or accurate transcription of recordings is essential to high quality data analysis
- For observational studies, rich field notes are essential
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Analyzing data

- Analysis is iterative - Generating concepts and linkages from the data and then going back to the data to check on their applicability

- General analytic procedure
  - Documentation – preparing and organizing the data
  - Reduce data to themes through a process of coding
  - Present data
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Initial or open coding

- Initial or open coding
- Data consists of ‘raw’ material
- Organize data into small segments
- Assign names to segments
- Later on, codes may be added, changed or unused

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Focused or selective coding

- Combine initial codes into larger categories
- Move from literal codes into more conceptual codes
- May re-code data to look for variations in each larger dimension

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Making use of computer software

Software such as Atlas.ti and Nvivo can assist with:

- Creating and editing field notes
- Organizing written transcripts
- Searching text segments
- Coding
- Writing memos
- Content analysis
- Displaying data (e.g. networks)

- But, the researcher still does the analysis…
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- Avoiding/minimizing risk to participants and researcher
- Sensitivity to signs of discomfort or distress
- Guaranteeing confidentiality
- Respecting individuals’ rights to privacy and ability to withdraw at any time
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A checklist for the design of a qualitative PHLR proposal

- Project articulates a clear research question that engages innovatively with established theory
- Significance of the study to both theory and practice is very clear
- Proposal is clearly and accessibly written to appeal to a wide range of audiences
- Research design is well described and will generate the data needed to answer the research question
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Data collection will be rigorous.

Procedures for recording and transcribing data are established.

Data analysis will involve multiple levels of abstraction achieved by strong and iterative engagement between theory and data.

Project team has relevant theoretical and methodological expertise.
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Other examples of qualitative PHLR


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Other PHLR program resources

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