

Using Qualitative Methods in Public Health Law Research

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



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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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 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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Examples of questions that qualitative PHLR can help answer

Examples of research questions	Potential sources of empirical data
Why existing legal and regulatory strategies are, or are not, effective in reducing unhealthy behaviors of interest	Legislators; persons targeted by the law; agency personnel; law; policies; procedures; reports
How a law is designed and adopted and why	Legislators; interest groups; politicians; public health officials; official documents; reports; communications
How a law is implemented and why	Agency personnel; politicians; policies, procedures; reports; training curricula
How people interpret and respond to a law and/or law enforcement practices	Persons targeted by the law; specific sub-groups; agency personnel; law; policies; procedures; reports
Whether a law generates unintended consequences for public health	Persons targeted by the law; specific or vulnerable sub-groups; agency personnel; public health officials; politicians; law; policies; procedures; reports

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Examples of qualitative data collection methods



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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

Source:

Dodson, E.A., Fleming, C., Boehmer, T.K., Haire-Joshu, D., Luke, D.A. & Brownson, R.C. (2009) Preventing childhood obesity through state policy: Qualitative assessment of enablers and barriers. *Journal of Public Health Policy*, 30, 161-176.

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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

Methods:

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

Source:

Inciardi, J., Surratt, H.L., Kurtz, S.P. & Cicero, T.J. (2007) Mechanisms of prescription drug diversion among drug-involved club- and street-based populations. *Pain Medicine*, 8(2), 171-183.

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Direct (field) observations

What direct observations can do

- 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.

Methods:

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

Source:

Biradavolu, M.R., Burris, S., George, A., Jena, A. & Blankenship, K.M. (2009) Can sex workers regulate police? Learning from an HIV prevention project for sex workers in southern India. *Social Science and Medicine*, 68, 1541-1547.

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Using mixed methods

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

Source:

Dodds, C. (2008) Homosexually active men's views on criminal prosecutions for HIV transmission are related to HIV prevention need. *AIDS Care*, 20,5, 509-514.

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Using mixed methods

Measuring Law for Evaluation Research

Evaluation Review

34(3) 242-266

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Charles Tremper¹, Sue Thomas², and
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<http://www.publichealthlawresearch.org/node/178>

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**Beyond data collection methods:
Other key elements of qualitative research**

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Other key elements of qualitative research**

- 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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Examples of sampling strategies

- Criterion sampling
- Maximum variation sampling
- Homogeneous sampling
- Opportunistic sampling
- Snowball or chain sampling

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Recording and transcribing data

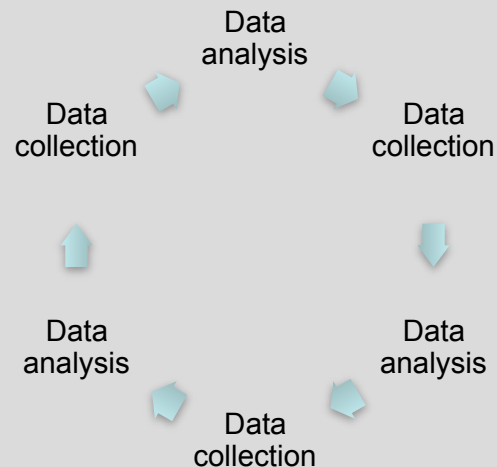
- For interview-based studies, digital audio recordings provide for more detailed data than hand-written notes, but sometimes note-taking is more appropriate
- Detailed notes, or accurate transcription of recordings is essential to high quality data analysis
- For observational studies, rich field notes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

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Analyzing data

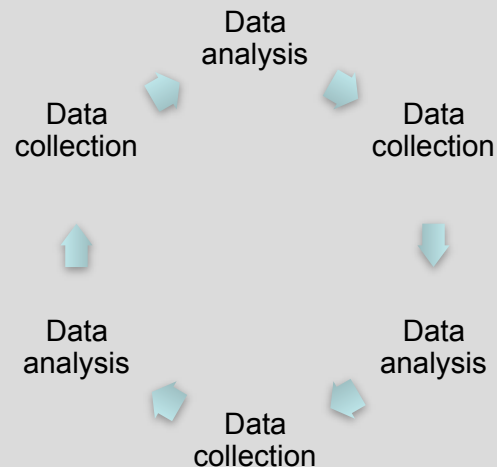
- Analysis is iterative - Generating concepts and linkages from the data and then going back to the data to check on their applicability



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

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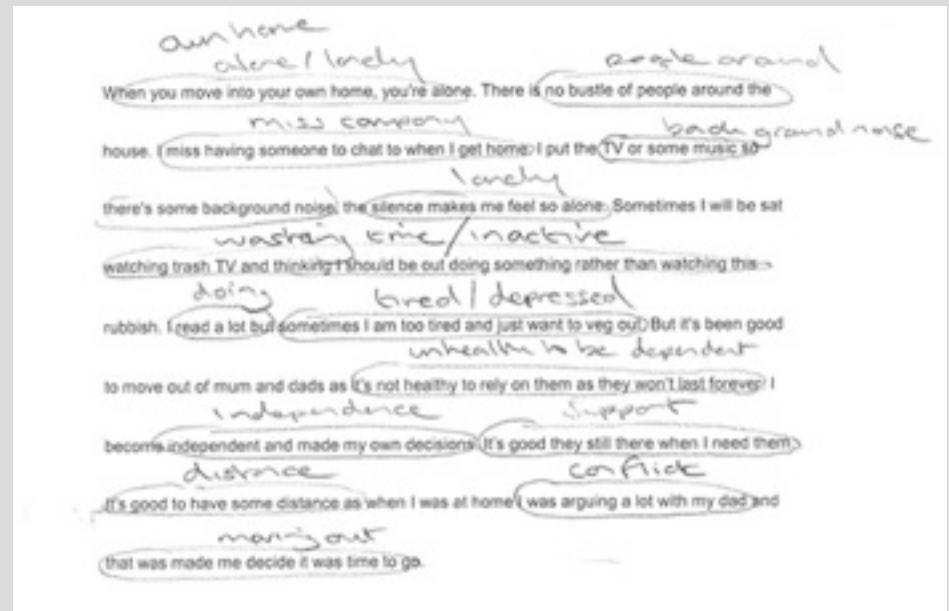
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Initial or open coding

- 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



When you move into your own home, you're alone. There is no bustle of people around the house. (miss having someone to chat to when I get home: I put the TV or some music so there's some background noise) the silence makes me feel so alone. Sometimes I will be sat watching trash TV and thinking I should be out doing something rather than watching this rubbish. I read a lot but sometimes I am too tired and just want to veg out. But it's been good to move out of mum and dads as it's not healthy to rely on them as they won't last forever. I become independent and made my own decisions. (It's good they still there when I need them) it's good to have some distance as when I was at home I was arguing a lot with my dad and that was made me decide it was time to go.

Annotations (codes) include: own home, alone / lonely, miss company, background noise, lonely, watching trash TV, doing, tired / depressed, unhealthy to be dependent, independence, support, distance, conflict, moving out.

http://onlineqda.hud.ac.uk/Intro_QDA/phpechopage_titleOnlineQDA-Examples_QDA.php

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Handwritten codes and phrases in the image include: *own home*, *alone / lonely*, *miss company*, *background noise*, *lonely*, *wasting time / inactive*, *doing*, *tired / depressed*, *unhealthy to be dependent*, *independence*, *support*, *distance*, *conflict*, and *moving out*.

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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

Question: "What in this course has helped you the most?"		
Response	Initial Coding	Focused Coding
<p><i>I appreciate how much the instructor encouraged us to voice our opinions and to ask questions in class. As much as possible, he took the time to respond to everyone's questions and opinions, to explain concepts, and then to make sure everyone understood his answers. This helped me because I felt like I was being heard and I became more involved in learning the material.</i></p>	Encouraging expression of viewpoint	Encouraging student participation
	Encouraging questions	
	Responded to questions	Presentation of content
	Explained content	
	Check for understanding	Student empowerment
	Student feels valued	
Student feels involved in own learning		

<http://www.utexas.edu/academic/ctl/assessment/iar/programs/report/focus-QualCode.php>

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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)
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- **But, the researcher still does the analysis...**



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Doing ethical research

- 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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- Setting, participants and textual sources are appropriate for the study
- 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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- Colgrove, J., Abiola, S. & Mello, M.M. (2010) HPV vaccination mandates – lawmaking amid political and scientific controversy. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 363, 8, 785-791.
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Other PHLR program resources

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