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# Qualitative methods in evaluation: A Grounded Theory Perspective

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## Über die Autorin

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When I think about evaluative research, what immediately comes to mind is statistics. And for good reason, usually when one does evaluation research one wants to know the answer to a specific set of questions. Did a program or intervention bring about desired results and if so, by how much? Yet, we all know that there are events that occur when a program or intervention is introduced that can't be quantified. These unanticipated happenings that can't be measured or planned for in the end can be just as revealing as the statistic garnered through the most thought out quantitative study, if one could only understand them. This is where qualitative research comes in.

As a practicing nurse I could see that through my actions made a difference in the Nurse Managed Clinic where I worked with the elderly. However, I never formally collected data on what that difference might be. And that's a pity. My superiors at the university were always conducting quantitative studies on the population that I worked with. They somehow made the cognitive leap that the impact of nursing interventions could be measured as quality of life and life satisfaction. I would laugh to myself because I knew they were studying the wrong variables – the variables they chose were much too general and affected by conditions other than nursing care, like more practical considerations of whether their children came to see them that week. Our nursing interventions, and therefore our impact, were much more direct and illness focused. We provided emotional support, did early detection of problems related to chronic conditions, and helped persons integrate their regimens into their daily life activities. The elderly persons we worked with told us that were more comfortable and secure knowing that the nurses were in their facility and keeping watch over them and their chronic conditions. We saved them trips to the doctor by doing small things like taking their weight and doing blood pressure readings, then reporting these to their physicians. When our clients needed help with activities of daily living or resources they knew that they could come to us and we would provide them with a walker or give them information on where to obtain help. If the persons doing the evaluation of our program had made some on-site observations or done some interviews they would have chosen different variables to measure. And their data would have more reflective of what we did. But that is often the problem with evaluation studies, they obtain data, but that data may not be reflective of what is going on at a deeper level. But how would evaluators know unless they spent some time in the field gathering data. Sometimes quantitative researchers throw in a few interview questions into an evaluation study, but the questions are more of an afterthought than a focus. It is the statistics that are most important to them.

How does qualitative research fit into evaluation research because there are still some questions that are bettered answered by statistics? I can only speak from the perspective of grounded theory as that is my specialty. In regards to grounded theory methodology, I see two valuable contributions that it can make to evaluation research. The first contribution pertains to the development of theory about evaluation itself, or about programs or interventions in the more general sense. The second major contribution is the provision a set of techniques and procedures that can be used to analyze qualitative data. I'll address each of these in turn.

## Grounded Theory to Build Theory

There is a considerable body of literature about evaluation. However, there is always room for further explanation and understandings, therefore more studies about the evaluative process. When I think about developing a theory of evaluation I think about an explanation that might result from asking the following types of questions. Questions such as, how are evaluations conducted, for what reasons, and by whom? How does the very act of conducting an evaluation on-site impact a program? What sort of quantitative measures are being used and do they capture the most salient aspects of the program, bring out its potential negative effects as well? Since we know that evaluation studies are value laden, I would also want to know something about the ethical issues involved in conducting an evaluation study? Also what are the biases of those conducting the evaluation study as well as those of the program participants and how do these biases affect the outcomes? The findings of such a study could be added to the information that is already known about evaluation to expand our understandings and perhaps make the process more effective.

One might also study programs or interventions with the aim of learning more about these in a general sense rather than how a specific program or intervention is working. For example, one might explore the meaning of programs to those who work in them or to those who are the recipients. In addition one might want to determine if outcomes of interventions match goals and furthermore who initiates programs or interventions, why, what strategies are used to put them in place, and how long do they last? Again the purpose would be to generate general theory rather than specific findings about a program.

The interesting feature about grounded theory is its exploratory and emergent nature. By keeping an open mind the important features about evaluation studies, or programs, or interventions are discovered in the research process. By doing such studies we could learn a lot more about the why programs in general work or don't work – the conditions, contexts, strategies, and what happens to a site when evaluators or program directors go into a place to specifically change situations.

It is important to point out that if the goal of the research is general theory development and not specifics about a program or intervention, then one must follow through and develop theory. Too often persons say they are using grounded theory method to develop theory when in fact they fall short of theory development settling in fact for a set of findings. It's not that one is necessarily better than the other. It's that one must be clear on one's goals and on the procedures to be used.

## Grounded Theory as a Set of Procedures and Techniques

Most evaluation studies are not conducted for the purpose of developing theory about evaluation or programs per se but to gather data about the impact of a particular program or interventions on a specific population and setting. Sometimes persons are interested in doing both, as with a research group I am currently consulting with. It is with uncovering

the serendipitous events that grounded theory method can be most useful to evaluators. The method consists of a set of techniques and procedures that can be used for analyzing qualitative data as well as generating theory. One just doesn't have to carry them to the full extent of theory development. The qualitative data that one analyzes using these techniques might be the only data that is collected, or it may be part of a larger design using both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

The procedures of grounded theory can be used to discover the salient phenomena affecting outcomes in an evaluation study, explaining how these phenomena manifest themselves, and delineating the conditions or structure that allows what is happening to occur. Grounded theory can be used to uncover change over time, a very important process to make note of when one is introducing an intervention or implementing a program. Since the researcher when entering the field has no preconceived notions of what he or she might find, the mind is open to discovery of the very features of a program or intervention that give it specificity and generate outcomes.

When aiming for a grounded theory study that generates useful information about a program or intervention, the techniques and procedures must be used carefully and systematically. The data can't be skimmed over or all one would have is a set of themes with not much detail or insight into how these work. Full explanations take rigorous application and hard work. Some of the procedures and techniques of grounded theory that I think are most suitable to evaluation research are the following.

1. Line by line analysis, which I discussed at some length yesterday. The aim of line by line analysis is to discover concepts, their properties and dimensions, and some of the relationships between concepts. In evaluation studies, using line by line analysis would help the evaluators delve beneath the surface to uncover the hidden meanings, emergent issues and problems, and significant factors that may not be known ahead of time, therefore not measurable. The information discovered through line by line analysis would help round out explanations by delineating the how and the whys. The techniques of line by line analysis such as the making of theoretical comparisons, asking what if, and other generative questions help generate sensitivity to what is in data and make it easier to discover assumptions and biases that color interpretations.
2. Another procedure of grounded theory method that makes it potential useful to evaluation studies is the writing memos. Memos are a researcher's storehouse of ideas. Because memos are an ongoing record of discoveries, as well as an account of the research process, memos enable researchers to discover gaps in data. The discovery of gaps during the actual research is important to evaluation research because the researcher can redirect data collection towards more productive ends. One of the nicest features of a grounded theory study is the possibility of altering the design. For example, in the study I am consulting on, the researchers determined that in order to have more meaningful data about a program they were studying, they needed to collect data from patients as well as the nurses working in the program. They didn't just start out gathering data here and there, but let the data and the

gaps in knowledge lead them to where they needed to go next. Memos also keep the thinking on a conceptual level, so that one thinks in terms of larger phenomena rather than individual cases. Zooming in on the specific cases can be misleading and representative only of the extremes and not the overall impact.

3. Speaking of data collection evolving from analysis leads to theoretical sampling another major feature of grounded theory. Theoretical sampling is the purposeful gathering of data based on emergent concepts. If one discovers during analysis that nurses in a setting help clients keep their chronic conditions stable, then one could gather more data about when, where, and how they do this. Theoretical sampling makes the gathering and analysis of data very dynamic and flexible directed by what one is actually finding, rather than by preconceived notions might prove to be irrelevant.
4. A fourth major feature of grounded theory method is saturation. Now saturation is a term that is widely used but not necessarily understood. Mostly it's used by a variety of researchers to legitimate making closure on a study. But the logic behind saturation is not quite so simple. Saturation is supposed to denote that much of the variation in a study has been accounted for. This means purposefully seeking different situations or different groups through theoretical sampling to see what happens. One does not have to manipulate conditions as one would in experimental research – artificially creating situations is not what is meant. Life is complex one only has to look closely to discover all the variation. In studying programs or interventions we know that individuals will be affected differently. Saturation is said to occur, when one has accounted for sufficient variation to offer a fairly complete explanation (it's impossible to account for every variation) of why something happens or doesn't happen, to whom, when where, and how. Since it is not always possible to explain the why of differences quantitatively, this make doing grounded theory studies especially suitable for evaluation studies.
5. One of the basic features of any program or intervention is change over time. Here is where grounded theory really shines since it is designed to look for and account for change. It enables one to delineate the basic processes that are taking place when a program or intervention is introduced. This is especially valuable if one is conducting something like action research where one wants to make changes, do a formative rather than summative evaluation.

## In conclusion

In concluding I want to address what I believe are some of the major issues in evaluation research. Measurement using statistics is only one dimension of any event or happening, though admittedly a very important dimension of an evaluation study. It does give one directs answers to whether or not the intervention or program was effective or not so successful. However, when using instruments to measure it is important to measure

the salient variables, or the time and money put into evaluating are wasted. Qualitative studies can help researchers discover those important variables therefore design future studies that measure what is truly important.

Another dimension of evaluation is gaining insight and understanding of why and how things happen, so that in the future one can avoid mistakes or reinforce the positive aspects of a program or intervention. To gain this deep understanding one has to approach evaluation as a multifaceted complex process with many facets in need of exploration. Qualitative methods, especially grounded theory have the potential to open up the evaluation process giving it value beyond the tradition role of validating a cause and effect relationship. Here I'm talking about getting at the heart or the essence of what is going on when a program or intervention is introduced. And this is pretty powerful information. Funding agencies are often results oriented, they want to know if the programs they are funding are accomplishing their objectives. But of what value is having information that a program or intervention is or is not successful, if one does not understand why.

In designing an evaluation study it is important to chose methods that are flexible enough to allow for a change in data collection when new knowledge emerges and when it is necessary to pursue related threads that may increase understanding. Evaluation is laden with value, the value that we bring to the situation and the value that comes out of such studies in terms of understanding and meaning. Evaluation is more than just collecting data on some interesting situation. It has the potential to alter people's lives. It comes with a tremendous responsibility, even greater than that which accompanies non-evaluation research. Getting the correct information means capturing as much of the complexities and intricacies pertinent to a program or intervention that can possible known through research. One can do this only through statistics. That is why statistics are valuable only when complemented by qualitative methods such as grounded theory. They dig beneath the surface to explain what those statistics mean. There is no guessing or speculation. It's all there in the data.