Introduction to Qualitative Methods in Implementation Research

Key Takeaways:

· A naturalistic approach to inquiry informs qualitative research. This approach involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data (text, images, audio, objects) to understand social phenomena, concepts, experiences, and opinions in relation to their context.

· Qualitative research in implementation science tends to be more positivist and deductive in its orientation, targeting specifically identified research questions. It is also inherently multidisciplinary, drawing on any number of theoretical foundations while tending to be team-based (Cohen et al., 2018).

· Qualitative methods help us answer the WHAT, WHY, and HOW questions in implementation science and contextualize, complement, problematize, and explain findings from quantitative methods through triangulation.

· Some common qualitative methods in implementation science include observation, interviews, focus groups, and document review. Other creative methods like concept mapping, PhotoVoice, vignettes, and diaries can be extremely helpful in understanding participants' perceptions and lived experiences. The key is matching the methods to your conceptual model and research questions. At the same time, it is important to consider the pragmatic aspects of applying qualitative methods, such as access to sites and populations, sample size, participant burden, cost, and resources.

· When assembling a qualitative research team, consider diversity in experience and expertise; skills in quickly building rapport and eliciting needed information from participants; the ability to put actions, behaviors, and words into context; and the capacity to reflect critically on the work.

· Building a successful qualitative research team requires training and capacity building, regardless of individual team member experience. Consider a regular meeting schedule and a master reading list to keep members on the same page. Collective training before a project starts can help with team-building, developing shared knowledge about key study issues, and assuring a common understanding of the reasons for using specific methods.

· When approaching a qualitative assessment, consider the benefits and drawbacks of the methods selected, their practical utility, the level of engagement or trust required of participants, and how the data will be analyzed and disseminated. Structure the tools for gathering information, like interviews and focus group guides, to move from broader to more specific topics, engage iteratively in data collection (including observation), and maintain flexibility to capture emerging data and gather concrete examples.

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Qualitative Research Sourcebooks

Beebe, J. 2014. Rapid Qualitative Inquiry: A Field Guide to Team-Based Assessment. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

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Introduction to Qualitative Methods in Implementation Research

Qualitative Research in Implementation Science

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