



This newsletter is sent to you by **Insideout**, as part of our commitment to building greater understanding of monitoring and evaluation practice. We hope that the information will be helpful to you in the work that you do.

GREETINGS FROM INSIDEOUT!

It is a common misperception that there is a choice to be made between qualitative and quantitative methodologies. However, such an idea is misleading in two ways. Firstly, it implies that a decision about methods should stem from a personal commitment to a particular approach and, secondly, that it is a matter of using one set of methods *or* the other. On the contrary, the decision about what methods to employ is a pragmatic one, which should be based simply on the relative *usefulness* of the available methods to a given problem. And very often the answer will involve a combination of both quantitative *and* qualitative techniques.

Qualitative measurement is becoming more popular and is often well suited to the information needs of social interventions. The growing emphasis on *quality*, as opposed to mere quantity, of services provided may account, at least in part, for this shift in preference. It is not deemed sufficient that just any health care should be available to large numbers of people. Those people should have access to high *quality* health care. Intentions to extend education to all are not limited to a vision of education in its most meager form. The aim is to make *quality* education universally accessible. And meals provided to undernourished children are intended to do more than just fill bellies. They should provide nutrition of an acceptable *quality*.

For these and a range of other reasons many of us find ourselves in **need of the know how to measure the quality of the various matters** with which we are concerned. This issue aims to provide some basic information about the **usefulness of qualitative methods** in measuring certain phenomena, as well as in providing complementary information on quantitatively measured ones. In addition, it provides a guide to some **online resources** containing further relevant information.

ISSUE #9: QUALITATIVE MEASUREMENT

Some key arenas for qualitative measurement:

1. Qualitative techniques are particularly useful in assessing the **process** of a social intervention, as this frequently develops dynamically and is thus not always easy to capture in quantitative terms. This is especially true when the focus of a programme is on '**how we do what we do**' and not simply on 'what we do'. For example, *how* people interact might be central to a programme's process – how educators interact with learners in schools, how mentors interact with their adolescent partners or how health care professionals interact with their patients.
2. Qualitative techniques are also ideally suited to measuring programme **outcomes** when our interest extends beyond the numbers of people reached, or when outcomes are likely to be different for different people. For example, a programme offering counseling services may not anticipate the same result for all who make use of the service. The ways in which clients benefit will depend on their particular needs in the context of their particular life situations. In instances such as these, qualitative methods can elicit individual client's **stories** and provide insight into the **value** beneficiaries ascribe to the services received or the **meaning** they attach to the changes that have occurred in their lives.

Some of these outcomes may be difficult to observe with quantitative measurements but may nevertheless be noteworthy effects of our efforts. Michael Patton ¹(2002, p151) makes the same point

¹ Patton, M. (2002) *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. 3rd ed. California: Sage Publications.

more convincingly by means of a quote: "There is very little difference between one man and another; but what little there is, is very important."

3. Qualitative measurement techniques can also be useful when we want to **humanize** the ways in which we report on our interventions, portraying the people and stories behind the numbers (The Evaluators Institute, 2008). The following example illustrates:

Quantitative and qualitative findings from an adult literacy programme:

Quantitative evaluation of an adult literacy programme showed that it produced an average increase of 2.7 grade levels over a three month period.

Further **qualitative exploration** of the meaning of these changes in particular participants' lives revealed the following:

- A man, who had learnt to read English, was now able to help his daughter with her school work.
- An 87 year old grandmother who had worked hard all her life to ensure that her children and grandchildren received an education had learnt to read so that she could read the Bible.
- And a manager in a local corporation who had previously lied on her job application about having completed high school had studied at night to obtain an equivalent diploma.

Adapted from: Patton, M. (2002) *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. 3rd ed. California: Sage Publications.

Using numbers to describe quality

However, sometimes our interests in qualitative phenomena, for example the quality of health care delivered or the improvement in quality of life we hope to bring about, are not adequately served by stories and moving anecdotes. This is particularly so in **monitoring**, for which we need information that can be **compared** with baselines and targets. In such situations we may wish to use numbers to describe qualitative happenings. Rather than stories, our information needs might best be served by numerical data collected on **indicators of quality**.

For example, one might describe the quality of health care in terms of patient waiting times and the average length of consultations. One might measure the quality of education in terms of the number of children who pass a standardized test. Or one might measure the results of an HIV and AIDS awareness campaign by counting the number of youth who report feeling confident to negotiate condom use.

Most important in this regard is to note that it is your **analytic method** that will determine whether the information produced is in the form of stories or numbers. **Content analysis** is a method of analyzing data that involves counting the **number** of times a particular idea appears in a story, or in any other form of qualitative material. For example, one might count the number of times stigmatising constructions appear in health care workers' accounts of their experiences with HIV positive patients or the number of stereotypical constructions in schoolchildren's expressions of their views about people from foreign countries. While such findings may not provide the kinds of insights described above, they might be very valuable in telling us about the extent of the difference we have made – in other words, whether we have improved on our baseline or achieved our target.

Qualitative methods

The methods available for qualitative measurement are diverse and will have a profound impact on the nature of the information produced. It is therefore important to ensure that you use the methods that are best suited to your information needs. The following list represents only the most commonly used qualitative methods and is intended to serve merely as a guide to further investigation.

- **Interviews:** Qualitative interviews are particularly useful when you want in-depth information about people's experiences. They provide a flexible tool in terms of which the data you collect can be structured according to your needs and interests while allowing participants the space to express their views in their own terms.
- **Focus groups:** Focus groups are a useful way of getting information from more than just one person at a time relatively quickly. They are also particularly useful when you want to give greater weight to your informants' perspectives, as they stimulate discussion between participants with relatively little

contribution required from the researcher. They can, however, be difficult to manage and require a skilled facilitator.

- **Observation:** Qualitative observational techniques require a great deal of skill and are probably best used by a trained researcher. They are most useful for researching a topic about which very little is known or when you are not just interested in what people *say* they do, but in what they *actually* do.
- **Other qualitative methods:** case studies; document studies; analysis of video or photographic material; analysis of participants' drawings; analysis of diaries, and many more².

Online resources

While there are a great many websites related to qualitative research methods, the vast majority are of a highly academic nature and probably not very useful to anyone wanting basic information on the application of qualitative methods to applied research problems. The following links are, however, worth looking at as a starting point in accessing information on qualitative measurement:

<http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/1997/nsf97153/start.htm>. This link will take you directly to The Handbook of Mixed-Methods Evaluations, which provides basic information on a variety of frequently used qualitative research methods.

<http://www.qualitativeresearch.uga.edu/QualPage/>. This web page contains a very wide range of regularly updated resources for qualitative research, including handbooks and discussion forums.

<http://www.eval.org/Resources/instruments.asp>: This is a link to the American Evaluation Association's website, which provides an array of links to various other websites offering measurement tools for a wide range of research purposes.

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Your feedback would be greatly appreciated!

Simply go to:

<http://www.kdimension.co.za/InsideOut/InsideOutEvaluations.nsf/frmMW?openform>

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- Conducting programme evaluations
- Developing monitoring frameworks
- Running M&E training courses

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² Forum: Qualitative social research. (2008) Retrieved from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/issue/view/11>.