# Doing Research to Learn about Effectiveness of Your Efforts and Clients' Progress, with Focus on Qualitative Research

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**What is research and its uses?** Research is the close and careful study of anything that merits your time and attention. It may seem to require special training and skills as well as take attention away from the doing tasks at hand. However, effective research can save time, resources and effort in the longer run.

For past efforts, studies can help you confirm what you did well and provide guidance about how to improve your work. For future efforts, integrating research design from the outset can result in a flow of information for fine-tuning work. From either focus, you may also discover what changes in the organization, mission and process of work will be valuable and how to implement those changes effectively.

This eight-page handout is designed to capture basic ideas about research in a quick, user-friendly way. Focus is on qualitative research which is not as well known as quantitative research. Either approach to research and its complement, evaluation, can be can be done at different levels of complexity.

In fact, capturing useful information from experience is best done at the simplest level appropriate. After all, finding out what's really going on has enough complexity, given how people interact in activities, the passage of time and the nonlinear nature of what's going on. View it as a continuous learning process for beginners to experts. *(For discussion of this, request handout on The Complexity of Worthwhile Problems, Issues and Opportunities.)*

If you keep your research approach at the level most apt for your time, skills and goals, the process is more likely to be viable, productive and satisfying. At first, seek assistance from individuals, groups, education, training and publications. With experience, your own understanding and confidence will strengthen.

Among other advantages, the process of inquiry you use and the information you develop contribute specifically to:

- making sound decisions
- using resources effectively
- modifying directions
- identifying and telling stories about your successes
- deciding how best to share what you learn and do
- strengthening credibility about what you do with such stakeholders as supporters and current and new contributors

- validating your assumptions and approach
- learning from detours and mistakes
- doing strategic and short-term planning

**Who can do research and what capacities are necessary?** Most anyone who wants to be responsible for seeing a study through can do useful research and get the benefits. Here are qualities that can contribute to successful outcomes:

- willingness to learn about the basic types of research and their appropriateness for your situation
- capacity to keep an open mind and accept ambiguity
- interest in using critical thinking
- curiosity about the possibilities and opportunities that could emerge
- willingness to get assistance from a variety of sources
- common sense
- discipline, patience and a sense of humor
- self-reflection to be alert to conscious and unconscious agendas and biases
- capacity to see the big picture and deal with the details
- interest in engaging stakeholders in the study process

**Where can you start?** Research often starts with an important question, curiosity about an issue or opportunity or description of what you want to know. These frames for focusing research can be developed through brainstorming, ideally involving a heterogeneous group, including stakeholders. (More sophisticated versions of brainstorming include synectics  http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synectics and nominal group technique http://www.asq.org/learn-about-quality/idea-creation-tools/overview/nominal-group.html .)

 Examples of "research-starters" are:

- What factors contribute to clients' self-sufficiency?
- What are the characteristics of successful participants?
- What are the three most significant contributors to meeting our mission?
- What external influences contributed to the effectiveness of our project?

The question you want to explore, focus of curiosity or description of a situation that merits attention will suggest a road map or direction for finding the information you need. Once agreed to, the next step relates to developing a design or methodology for collecting information. That includes a range of possibilities that can be used alone or in combination. Each has its advantages and disadvantages to be considered, addressed, and accommodated. In essence, you are looking for the methodologies or processes that are appropriate for your focus as well as viable, given your resources and time constraints.

Here is a partial list of data collection methods and sources that can be used individually and in combination.
- surveys
- observation
- case studies
- focus groups
- evaluations
- interviews and questionnaires
- archives, records and other documents
- quasi-experiments (omits random sampling)

Recognize that *how* research is done is not entirely rational nor controllable, just as the human beings who do it are not. Nor are perfect efforts required. Different people have their own preferences about what is credible, regardless of what's appropriate or manageable. Time and resources dictate certain choices, as do availability and accessibility of information and willingness of information providers. Politics and power relationships affect choices and outcomes too. Finding enough of a balance among these tensions to proceed is where your patience, savvy and sense of humor come into play.

**How can you make sense of the data collected?**  There are essentially two types of data analysis, quantitative and qualitative. Simply put, the former deals primarily with numbers, the latter with words. A rich, powerful study design will likely make use of both types. Just keep in mind there is no one right way to do anything.

Quantitative analysis requires some comfort with using numbers as well as a basic knowledge of study design and statistical analysis --- though today much can be accomplished with computer packages. Especially in the design stage, get assistance with understanding and using these processes to ensure you save time and proceed in useful ways.

Making sense of qualitative data can also benefit from use of computer software on occasion and from advice from people experienced in this type of analysis.

Although quantitative analysis is preferred by many who are fans of scientific method and other approaches that are neat and seek predictability, it is not always a good fit for situations that are:

- interactive
- occur over time
- multi-dimensional
- nonlinear

As you've seen, individuals and groups have many characteristics such as age, sex, education, attitudes and experience. What is done with and for them may also have many aspects. They are also in motion, not always forward. Nothing is apt to stay the

same or be constant, an assumption in economics known as *ceteris paribus*.

For example, an intervention to assist a person or group involves who does it, how it is done and when it is done, how long it takes to see a result, the sequence or lack thereof of progress and the context or environment, among other matters. Each consideration and aspect may interact with the other, making it difficult to be clear about just what causes, leads to or influences what. This contributes to the challenge of creating a design that's appropriate and possibly elegant. Ultimately, compromises between acknowledging real-life complexity and seeking a viable design are often made.

**Given this complexity, here is a brief discussion of the underlying  issues researchers face when dealing with real life situations.** For example, there are differing assumptions about the value of objectivity and subjectivity. Read on to learn about one way to resolve such differences that also contributes to improved communication.

*The tradeoffs between objectivity and subjectivity.* Although there are several definitions of objectivity, the one that's relevant here is: "uninfluenced by emotion, surmise or personal prejudice." Given this ideal, it's unlikely that human beings as well as the facts and methods they develop, observe, chose and apply can be entirely objective.  Each person has her or his filters of reality, whether through the senses, mind or experience --- and likely all three.

While not always appreciated as valuable, the other end of the spectrum is subjectivity, defined as "existing only within the experiencer's mind and incapable of external verification." Considered to have significant limitations just because of the lack of objectivity, "pure" opinion, gut feeling, or intuition is certainly not a robust enough basis to base action and use of resources. Nonetheless such insights are often built on deep knowledge, according to Herbert Simon's work on intuition. The large number of neurotransmitters in the intestines also support the reality of gut feeling. The challenge is to distinguish between worthwhile subjective information or perspective and mere bias or prejudice.

*Reconciling objectivity and subjectivity:* One option is intersubjectivity, a process of sharing perspectives and perceptions to agree on "truth" in a responsible, mutually beneficial  way. (See Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*.) This is also a useful process for developing consensus, team building and conflict resolution.

By definition, finding common ground through intersubjectivity avoids imposing a particular view and possibly creating resentment and resistance. The process of intersubjectivity merely recognizes that no one human being or way of seeing reality is privy to The Truth, not that "everything's relative." In fact, the mere presence of a so-called objective observer can affect outcomes as shown in the Hawthorne experiments which demonstrated a relationship between being observed and employee behavior at work.

Another insight related to the continuum of objectivity and subjectivity comes from the history of science.  What is acceptable and deemed valid today may not be so tomorrow.  Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* shows how definitions of truth and accepted descriptions of reality, or paradigms, have changed over time.  New information calls into question previous assumptions, language use, interpretations and beliefs. As exceptions  accumulate, what is "true" becomes reinterpreted.  Then new conventional wisdom emerges and the cycle repeats again. The world goes from flat to round to metaphorically flat, as Thomas Friedman would have it.

**What researchers can do to ensure they are as fair-minded and effective as possible.** Whatever research design and methods are adopted, critical thinking is important. It involves a  level of awareness and honesty with oneself that:

- identifies and challenges assumptions, related to human nature and rationality, that underlie ideas, beliefs, values, actions, interpretations
- investigates how context affects perceptions, practices, structure and results
- imagines and explores alternatives outside the obvious or safe
- is skeptical about claims to universal truth or ultimate explanations
- appreciates, recognizes and adjusts for the natural limitations of any study and the people who do it

**How qualitative research can strengthen nonprofit effectiveness.** If you're looking for a silver bullet, unfortunately qualitative research processes don't have a precise meaning in the social sciences. At best, they are an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate and otherwise come to terms with **meaning.** (John Van Maanen, ed., *Qualitative Methodology*, p. 9)

When doing qualitative research, seek a network or web of interpretations that makes sense of what you are studying. Use descriptions of situations to focus, extracting information from what exists. While quantitative methods tend to identify the field of inquiry, or what is being studied, from the outset qualitative methods seek to find the field of inquiry by noting what's there first. In other words, quantitative approaches jump right into a study by defining what's important up front and qualitative approaches stay open about what's important. Thus, in qualitative research the data emerges through an almost Zen-like openness to what's there.  In turn, this may lead to unimagined insights and understanding that the pre-defined focus of quantitative research does not encourage so explicitly.

*Qualitative research is useful to learn about***:**

- the meaning of ideas such as courage, power, leadership, success, failure, mistakes and effective communication
- the interaction of forces and processes
- how something happens
- comparison of activities from site to site

- why certain outcomes occur
- the considerations for improving a situation

*Here are typical challenges in using qualitative methods. They:*

- can be labor-intensive and time-consuming
- require coordinating researchers when there is more than one site being studied to ensure comparability of data
- often use small numbers or examples that limit the capacity for generalizing results
- may have slipperiness of words that make for ambiguity and challenges to replicability (repeating the same results)
- use methods of analysis not as neatly formulated or accepted as quantitative analysis (Guidelines for protection against self-delusion and just being wrong are therefore important to follow.)
- do not lend themselves to summarizing data in visuals such as graphs and pie charts as does quantitative analysis

**How could you address these challenges?**

- Stay in conversation with yourself and others to explore and listen.
- Use critical thinking.
- Use metaphors and stories to capture data evocatively and memorably.
- Make the process open and accessible to all involved, including researchers, subjects and other stakeholders.
- Be honest and self-reflexive with yourself and others.
- Use interactive data analysis.
- Be forthright about the limitations of what you are doing.
- Create back and forth loops among all the following processes, reflecting the nonlinear, interactive nature of reality:

Collecting Data ⇨ Displaying Data ⇨ Organizing Data ⇨ Drawing and Verifying Conclusions

**Below are two descriptions of qualitative research processes; the second one has built-in protections and the first one is bare bones. Note that it is not always practical and necessary to follow the exact order described.**

**On the most basic level, here is one way to approach qualitative research:**

1. Identify subject, issue, need or opportunity that has meaning for you, preferably something for which you feel passion and has value for your work.
2. Start to define what you want to find out.
3. Learn about who will have something useful to say about the subject, in writing and face-to-face.

4. Identify a range of data providers using some sampling methodology (snowball, or each person name another, for example).
5. Refine your definition of what you want to find out, preferably in conversation with stakeholders.
6. Explore a range of ways of developing data and decide on what works best for your situation.
7. Gather preliminary data and try to make sense of it by identifying themes as well as exceptions.
8. Refine data collection and analysis.
9. Start to draw and verify conclusions, applying critical thinking to what you found out.
10. Check out results with everyone involved in the research and possibly the stakeholders.
11. Report on what you learned, verbally and in writing, in lucid, straightforward and engaging ways. Use stories whenever possible. Make sure all participants and stakeholders are informed.

**Here is an approach to qualitative research with built-in protections:**

- Describe the work you are doing, how you are doing it and for what purpose.

- Formulate research focus, hypotheses and/or assumptions, usually starting with how or what, not why, based on the bullet above.

- Decide on sources for collection of data and explain rationale for choices; choose sampling methods when appropriate.

- Choose quantitative methods and/or instruments to complement process.

- Collect data. Interviews can include feedback to and assessment from participants related to researchers' process and assumptions. As appropriate, bring third parties and sources into the exchange to provide checks and balances (triangulation). External sources include memos, meeting minutes, critical incidents, trends, reported conversations, videotapes and recordings.

- Analyze data: describe processes, identify patterns, develop propositions. Keep records of location and sources of information and ideas.

- Be alert to and document information that does not fit identified patterns (outliers) to use as part of findings.

- Display or array data, including critiques from participants and analysts.

- Seek and describe networks or webs of causality and meaning.

- Use ways to draw and verify conclusions such as counting themes, noting patterns, testing plausibility, looking for clusters, making metaphors, building logical chain(s) of evidence and identifying intervening variables. (See Miles and Huberman: *Qualitative Data Analysis*.) What stories are embedded in this?

- Do further verification such as checking for representativeness, identifying research effects, triangulating using independent measures such as conversations and literature search, looking for deception and ulterior motives, finding exceptions and outliers, considering alternative or rival explanations and getting feedback from informants.

- Share all processes and outcomes with participants, observers and researchers and preferably stakeholders. Encourage discussion and feedback, making that available to everyone too.

You can see from the foregoing two examples of the processes involved with qualitative research that there are many opportunities to include clients and other stakeholders. The community learning that occurs can contribute to cohesion, understanding and development of your organization, clients and other stakeholders.

*From the start, be alert to ways to use results to improve your own activities as well as others'. Explore non-traditional presentation and applications of results too. They can include using the arts to make your work accessible and engaging your clients in helping other clients.*

### RELEVANT READINGS

Skim some of these books, or at least their tables of contents, to see which speak to you before investing your time in reading one or two. Search for recent articles also, especially related to your situation. Your professional organizations and their libraries may have other leads. Also explore how you can integrate evaluation processes and research, perhaps getting two-fors for your time and effort.

Coghlan, David and Theresa Brannick, *Doing Action Research in Your Organization*

Miles and Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis*

Punch, Keith F. *Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*

Robson, Colin *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practioner-Researchers*

Stringer, Ernest, *Action Research*