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1266 Shining through Qualitative Rigor: Practical Application

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Why Qualitative Rigor Matters

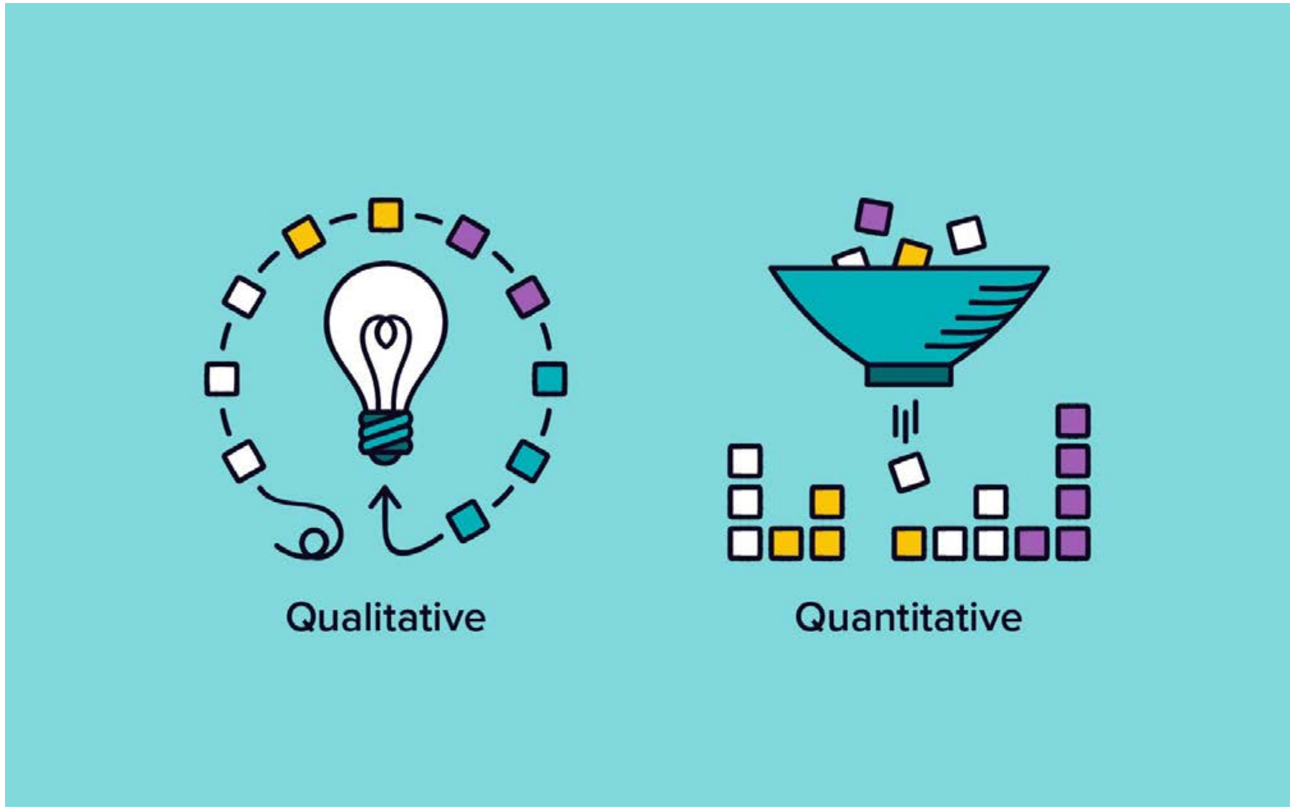

Photo: Renwick, D. (2019). A beginner's guide to qualitative and quantitative research. Optimal Workshop. Retrieved 28 October 2020, from https://blog.optimalworkshop.com/a-beginners-guide-to-qualitative-and-quantitative-research/.

RIGOR: Efforts are conducted according to the highest standards of the methodology that is best suited to the desired use and guiding questions. Efforts must adequately address issues of both internal and external validity and ensure accurate reporting of results while protecting sensitive subject data. High standards of rigor ensure the integrity of evaluative processes and results, a precondition for research that is respectful of participants and usable by stakeholders.[1]

- Qualitative data provides explanations of **how** or **why** efforts are working, not working, or how things are being influenced.
- Implementing standards of rigor provides **trustworthy**, useful, and actionable information.
- Improved standards in the field makes the argument for continued **investment** in evaluation and learning efforts and moves the conversation from RCTs as the gold standard, to determining validity of methods based on **best fit**.

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Essential Truths of Qualitative Rigor

- Qualitative approaches are not inherently less rigorous than quantitative approaches, it is all in the **application**.
- Qualitative approaches differ for MEL work and programmatic results, and the two should not be mixed when focusing on rigor.
  - **Programmatic qualitative work**: Highly beneficial to participants and can be used programmatically to great effect when done in an ethical and contextually-sensitive manner (e.g., having trained, local psychologists on board to protect against and help with processing trauma). (Youth-led research, Sensemaking, etc.)
  - **Evaluative qualitative work**: Higher standard of rigor in methods selection and application focused on contributing to an evidence base and/or supporting decision making. (Process Tracing, Developmental Evaluation, etc.)
- Conducting interviews or focus groups is not a qualitative approach, they are ways of collecting qualitative data. Qualitative rigor is dependent on selecting a **method** (e.g., Process Tracing, Outcome Harvesting, Most Significant Change, etc.) that is best fit to provide answers to the identified evaluation questions and then ensuring the evaluation team has the **technical expertise and capacity** to implement the chosen method according to existing standards.

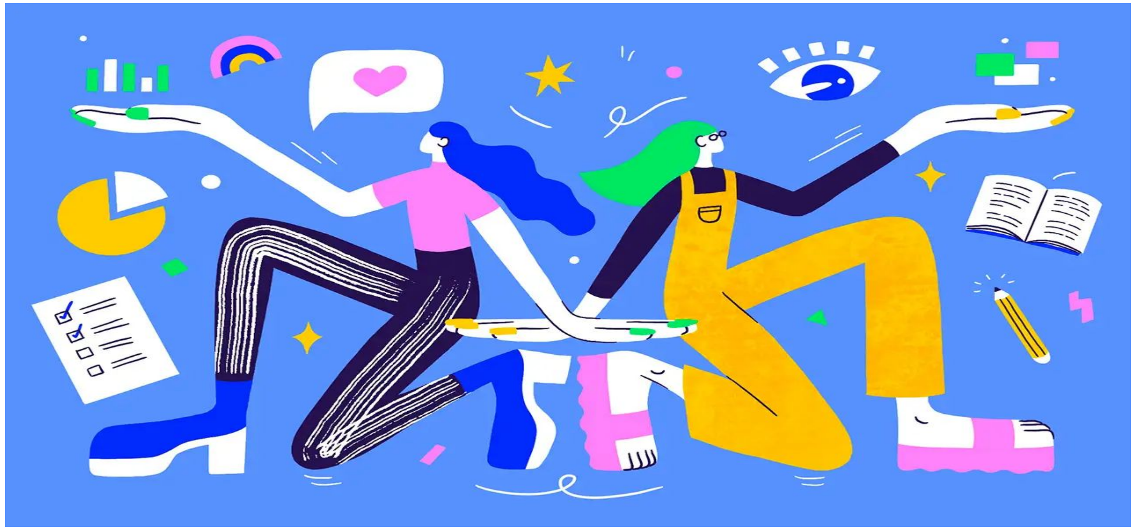

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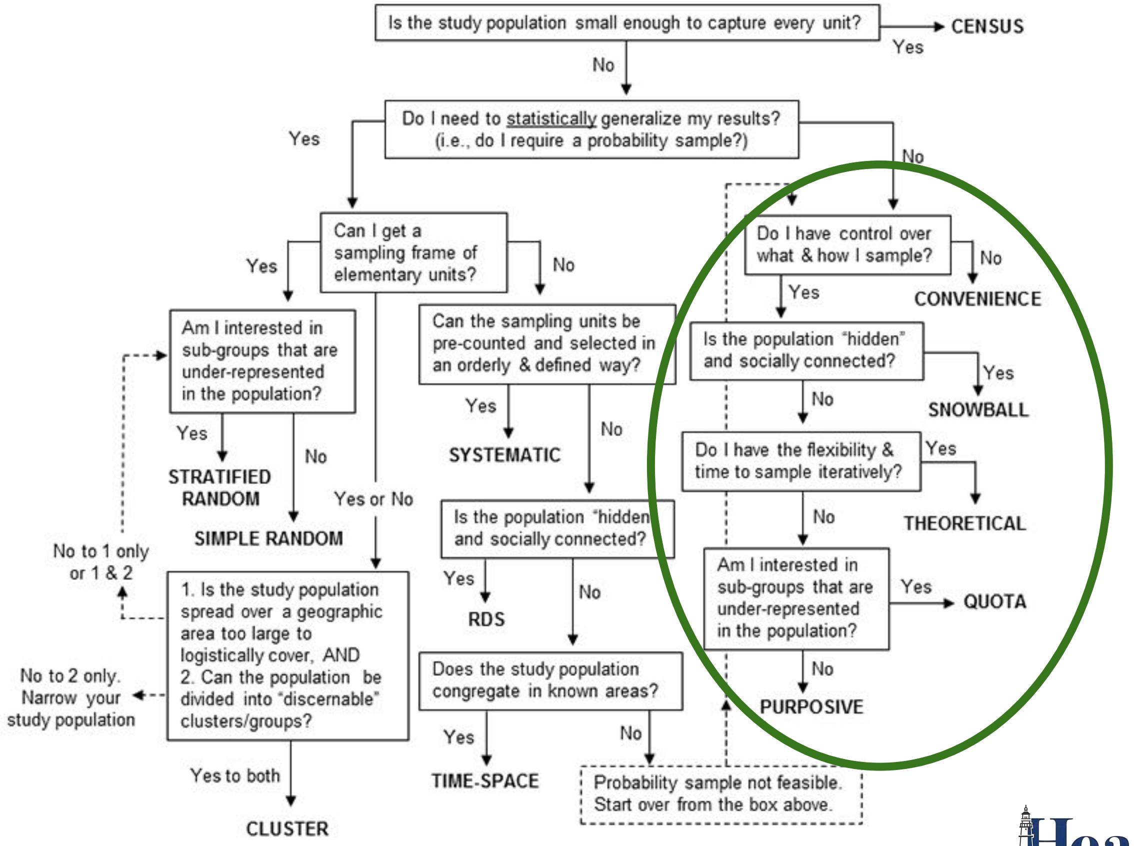
Photo: Humphrey, B. The difference between qualitative and quantitative research. Dovetail. Retrieved 28 October 2020, from https://dovetailapp.com/blog/qualitative-quantitative-research/.

Design Phase

Sampling Methods



Source: Guest, G. (2017). A pathway for sampling success [Blog]. Retrieved 26 October 2020, from https://researchforevidence.fhi360.org/pathway-sampling-success.

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Sampling Saturation Rates

Minimum of 6 KIIs per homogenous group

	Local Leaders	Single Mothers	Teens (F)
Village A	2	3	6
Village B	3	3	6
Village C	1	3	6

- Data limitation: No village has more than 3 local leaders (therefore cannot reach saturation at village level)
- One half of teens interviewed are also single mothers, therefore saturation is overlapping

Implementation: General

- Review tool questions to make sure they appropriately anonymize data, align with the relevant evaluation questions, are lean, contextually-relevant, and do not bias respondents to a particular answer.
- Conduct double-blind translations of data collection tools. This helps ensure accurate information is collected from respondents and that questions within tools take into account any contextual or potential interviewee sensitivities.
- Practice doing interviews with others on the data collection team to maintain consistency in protocol application and build capacity of interviewers on how to pivot or dig deeper as needed.
- **Conduct daily check-ins with yourself and team members during data collection to create intentional space to debrief, clarify, adapt, and reflect**;
- Keep clean notes with consistent capture of respondent information, ideally through **live transcription**. This may require note-taking training for the team before field work.
- Establish and adhere to a strict protocol for any post data collection transcription, upload/saving, and processing so that no data is lost or corrupted before cleaning and coding.
- **Push back against donors who want to see “preliminary findings” immediately after field work.** Without time for analysis, these “findings” are based on recall bias and a handful of statements that stuck out to a particular interviewer. Presenting “findings" this way does not adhere to core principles of rigor, sets up bad expectations about the evaluative work with the client, and can bias the analysis by altering the codebook.

Implementation: Data Cleaning and Coding Phase

- **Review before upload.** Make sure notes are clean and fix any misspelled words, acronyms, or shorthand used during note-taking. Copy-paste segments to corresponding interview protocol questions if any misalignment occurred during note-taking in the interviews.

- **Ensure you have a well-defined codebook.** The codebook should be structured around the evaluation questions, NOT "preliminary findings or trends." All codes should be well-defined with layman's terms so that any coder can check for proper application. The codebook should have space to evolve based on sub-trends identified during coding, but those sub-trends should be identified under the core codebook skeleton aligned with the evaluation questions.

- **Code the appropriate amount of information.** Ideally, this means coding only so much that another person who has not read the interview would understand the key point being made. Sometimes this is just a phrase, sometimes a sentence, sometimes a few sentences. You do not want to code only a few words and not know what they refer to when doing the analysis. However, you also do not want to only code whole paragraphs and have to re-read everything when doing analysis either.

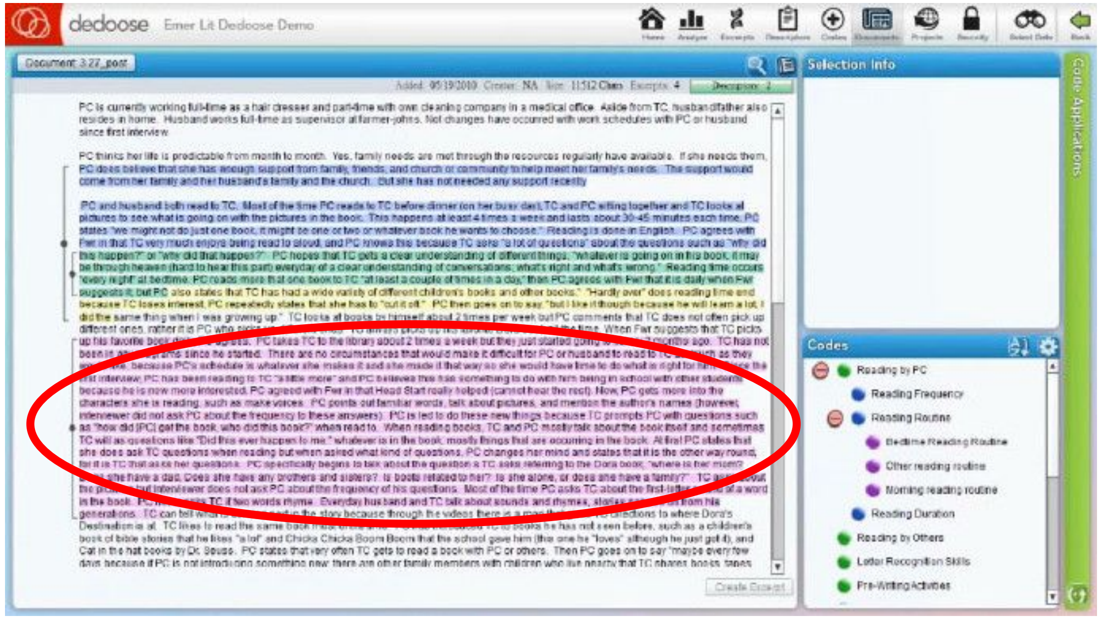

Photo: Stone, S. (2020). Dedoose: an Alternative Application for Qualitative Data Analysis - Academic Technology. Academic Technology. Retrieved 28 October 2020, from https://at.blogs.wm.edu/dedoose-an-alternative-application-for-qualitative-data-analysis/.

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Implementation: Analysis

You cannot achieve Qualitative Rigor through summarization of qualitative data. Headlight strongly recommends using a Findings, Conclusions, Recommendations Matrix, which we will detail more about in a forthcoming blog post. Using this structure will help, but is not sufficient to ensure rigor in analysis by itself.

Theme	Findings	Conclusions	Recommendations
Enabling Environment - Positive	*7 excerpts across 5 sources state that ....*	*When x is found, then it magnifies the effects of y. More of x would likely improve program results.*	*If there's flexibility in the award, increase the funds and the scope for x activity in existing community engagements to strengthen achievement of desired result y. This is likely to enhance program sustainability, which can be monitored through z program metric.*

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So What?

1. We can do better. Rigorous qualitative practices are **accessible to practitioners at all levels!**
2. We need to be 360 degree champions. The fight for qualitative rigor and better qualitative practice requires both **internal** capacity building efforts and **external** convincing.
3. We need to push for qualitative efforts when they are the right fit, making sure we have the right information when we need it to **improve interventions** in our field.

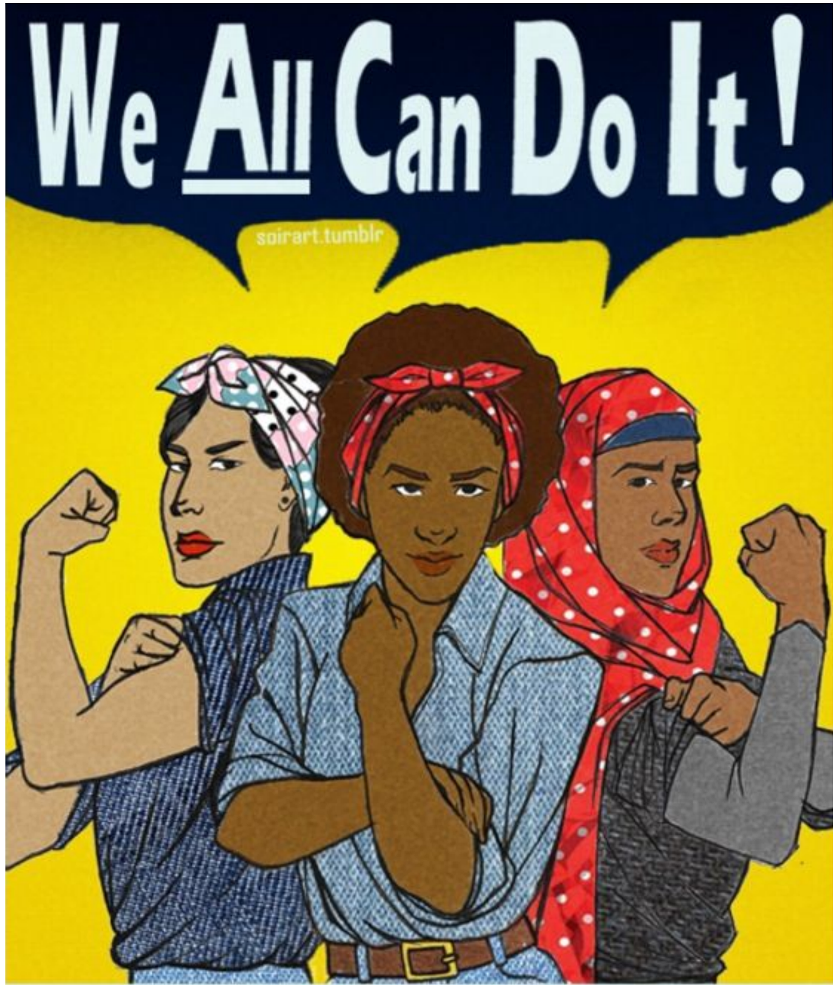

Photo: Serena Williams, Intersectionality, and Body Image. SoleyTennisTravels.com. (2015). Retrieved 28 October 2020, from https://soleytennistravels.com/serena-williams-intersectionality-and-body-image/.

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