



Methods for Change

A Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation

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A Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation



Taking a Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation means that quantitative approaches for evaluation complement qualitative research elements.

This can include various forms of interviewing, observation and documentary analysis, and different combinations of methods and materials depending on the nature of the research problem at hand. While quantitative approaches, such as those found in surveys and experimental studies, often allow researchers to produce and analyse large amounts of data, they tend to frame the problem rather narrowly. Conversely, qualitative approaches (e.g. interviews, observations) do not reduce problems to numeric values, instead providing a detailed picture of what is happening. Integrating qualitative elements challenges standard ways of doing evaluation, illuminating avenues for unexpected, fresh insights. The flexible perspective of such approaches enables researchers to consider significant institutionalised and systemic circumstances that shape the problem and its implications. This approach is instrumental in complex settings where interventions have repeatedly followed established dynamics in the past, but their impact remains unclear.

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How does a Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation create or contribute to change?

A Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation aims to ascertain the conditions that produce change by identifying and understanding the realities of the relevant actors. Also, it requires being adaptable and open to exploring unexpected routes, leading to defining problems through new lenses. Evaluation often focuses on the impact of implementations on one specific group and therefore offers one side of the story, asking questions such as: How is an organisation implementing solutions, and how do these tackle the problem? What benefits is an instrument delivering? Taking a Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation, on the other hand, explores different sides of the story, gaining insights as to how and why impact is happening for a diversity of target actors, by asking questions such as: What are the structures and circumstances that contribute to the identified problem? How do these structures and circumstances affect the success of an instrument? The research problem is looked at from new angles and in a non-predefined way. This allows researchers to look not only at the motivations, expectations and experiences of users. Instead, they can recognise the responses and experiences of the beneficiaries concerning the implementations of instruments within broader societal and personal contexts that lead them to respond to, and perceive the impact of the instrument in a particular way. In doing this, this approach relies on traditional methods but expands its application beyond normative evaluation methods that look only at the expected change, while ignoring other effects or changes occurring as direct or indirect consequence of an intervention or policy.

A Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation considers 'target groups' as part of the process of change. A Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation can thus allow for those seeking to promote change (e.g. policymakers, organisations, intervention instrument designers) to regard beneficiaries', users', or target groups' own interests and circumstances in the design process. Giving a more active role to beneficiaries when designing and planning interventions could generate new interpretations of the problem and, consequently, new solutions and ways to address it.

What ideas and concepts are related to a Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation?

This approach draws from science, technology and innovation studies, which aim to understand what creates technological change and innovation, what conditions can prompt innovation, and what are the effects innovation produces in terms of productivity, economic development, technological and scientific change and entrepreneurship. This approach is further influenced by some contributions of evaluation theory that call for a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of change (impact) and the context in which this happens.

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Why might I want to use a Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation?

- A Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation supports ongoing communication with end users or beneficiaries. Social problems cannot be solely understood through numbers. Taking a qualitative approach to evaluation allows us to go and speak to people, to hear and see their stories. Working closely with the target group helps build trust, which is likely to increase response rate, access to new sources of information, and openness. This can lead to detailed responses about the process that underpins their understanding of the implementation and its impact.
- A Comprehensive Qualitative Approach to Evaluation helps to challenge pre-existing judgement and bias towards policy beneficiaries. Rather than quantifying effects and variables that could explain such effects, zooming in to the context of peoples' lives, observing and interacting with people in real-time allows researchers to comprehend their attitudes and behaviours amidst the complexities of their lives. This can enable researchers to find the roots of the problem.
- Bringing in a Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation means asking questions in a slightly different way. Be prepared that this might change how the problem is approached. A Qualitative Approach to Evaluation requires being open to unexpected findings or findings that open further questions rather than answering pre-existing questions. Evaluation exercises taking this approach might, for example, reveal that an intervention is not alleviating the problem as expected, or even tackling the problem at all, or that it can be more impactful if paired with other forms of interventions.

The power of qualitative research is not always evident for some, leading to misconceptions of what this type of research entails. Also, because quantitative evaluations tend to be more well-received by people in policy-led research, there is often little awareness of what qualitative research offers to design and implement better policies. Once qualitative evaluation methodologies are conscientiously introduced, people involved are often positively surprised and their assumptions challenged.

- Qualitative research is not about just listening to people and producing stories. It is a reflective research process that involves re-thinking and questioning elements of a problem or a social phenomenon that have been ignored, and stepping aside from what is commonly believed and assumed. Qualitative research is not only about reporting the stories of beneficiaries; it follows a strict process of research design, collection and organisation of data, and logical analysis, which can lead to more significant interventions.

There is often a complicated tension between predefined ideas of what is needed and introducing a new approach. It may be important to bring in slightly different elements, whilst maintaining focus on the kind of evidence that is needed.

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Step by step guide to using a Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation

1. Start with the question you have at hand.

Find any information already available that may help you to answer your question, even partially. From there, you will assess the extent to which the existing data is relevant to your question and whether you need to collect additional data.

2. Design the instruments to collect the data you need.

Consider what instruments you want and can use. There are many different ways in which qualitative approaches can complement quantitative evaluation data. All come with advantages and limitations, which not only concern the data in itself but also the framing of the questions to be explored, resources needed and results.

3. Discuss and ask for advice.

Speaking to colleagues about what you are doing can help immensely. They can bring compelling ideas about how to go about your research question, how to access data and key informants. Communicating your problem is always a good idea to find meaningful and creative ways to tackle it.

4. Communicate the scope of qualitative research to your team and partners.

Sometimes, you will work with partners and team members with different skills and academic backgrounds, and they might have very different ideas about how qualitative research instruments work and what they are meant to achieve. They might not see the value in conducting interviews or may not know how to design an interview protocol and conduct an interview. In order to familiarise everyone involved with the requirements, benefits and drawbacks of qualitative research and to get everyone on board, it is crucial to communicate what is relevant

pertaining to the use of qualitative methods and to establish measures to prevent drawbacks from impairing your research process and findings.

5. Understand restrictions and work within these boundaries.

Restrictions should be considered when framing questions and designing the research process. The more you plan at the early stages, the more options you will have if limitations arise. It can happen that some restrictions may not affect the deployment of the project as initially foreseen.

Depending on the field and the programme or instrument under evaluation, you may encounter limitations as the research unfolds, which may negatively affect your endeavours. In these cases, it is important to reassess all decisions made and planned, questions asked, and contemplate changes in the study's design and implementation. For example, data restrictions might be in place, which will prevent you from speaking with service/programme users/beneficiaries directly. In this case, you won't be able to use ethnographic approaches to conduct in-depth interviews, but you can still re-design the survey to offer more open questions and encourage participants to respond openly and in creative ways, for example to write, sing or draw their stories. Pre-defined questions can be reformulated to further respondents' engagement and reflections.

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6. Make an inventory of what you have gathered.

You might explore widely, and you will keep a record of all the information you gather and process. Be systematic and strict when creating an information system that suits the project aims and resources. A good system will save a lot of time when looking for a particular piece of information, its status in the project and future tasks depending on it. A good system will be of great support when selecting the sources of information that are relevant to your questions. It is important to record everything that is searched, collected and produced, even if this is not directly incorporated in the final outcome.

7. Define the contribution that additional research instruments deliver. Qualitative approaches to evaluation might be implemented alongside existing instruments and become a secondary instrument corroborating the quantitative data that is already in place. Qualitative and quantitative instruments should be integrated into coherent instruments that work, within their own boundaries, towards a common goal.

8. Adapt the research instrument to the target group. If you want to get meaningful feedback from beneficiaries, you need to design and communicate your research instrument accordingly. Who is the target group you will evaluate? What are their characteristics? Are they young people, marginalised groups, households or customers of a company? Adapt your communication to their realities, and you will receive richer responses.

9. Communicate to your stakeholders.

There are decisions that will need to be made considering the interests of your stakeholders or your own interests in terms of the questions you want to explore and the findings you want to highlight. Regularly update stakeholders on your decisions and progress and ensure everyone involved is happy with what you are doing. This is also important to reduce the risk of leaving them with unmet expectations – make sure you stress what the data supports and what it does not support.

Be ready to be challenged about the validity of your study. You may be questioned about your approach and the credibility of your findings. Draw on your research process design, documentation and data supporting your findings and be clear about the additional benefits conferred by taking a qualitative approach. Communicate clearly the scope of your study and the paths and measures followed to guarantee its reliability.

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Examples of a Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation in social science research

Service Evaluation of a Career Service Provider

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The project aimed to investigate the factors that enable young people to successfully transition from Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) to Education, Employment and Training (EET) via a Career Service Provider. The evaluation, led by a multidisciplinary team, shed light on the impact, challenges and lessons from a career service provider's support approach.

The service provider that commissioned the evaluation work had produced a large set of data on the type of services provided to young people searching for opportunities to develop employability skills, gain knowledge of workplace culture and appropriate behaviour. There were some pre-defined ideas as to what the research team should do with that existing data. The service provider's main interest was for the research team to quantify how many users had accessed their services and quantify the amount of work their staff had put in when helping those young people. For instance, the research team would look at workloads to estimate hours worked, the number of staff working those hours, and the time spent and outputs of each activity performed by staff.

The research team proposed to the service provider an evaluation approach that included the use of quantitative methods and qualitative methods. The mixed-method approach would offer a more complete picture of the problem that the service provider wanted to understand, as it would look into the landscape in which the young people accessing their services lived, their

family situation, personal expectations and ambitions. The research team was convinced that by understanding the young people's side of the story, alongside analysis of the service provision approach and organisation of work, the evaluation would offer findings and recommendations closer to the needs and realities of the young people in NEET. This would, in consequence, enable the service provider to design and deliver more impactful support.

As the research team could not approach directly the young people using the services of the provider, the team conducted interviews with the staff that had been working closely with young people that had been in the category of NEET, or in and out NEET, for more than a year. The team also designed an online survey for the service users that was implemented with the assistance of staff working in NEET cases. After service users had contacted a staff member, this staff member asked the users to fill the survey. The research team designed the survey to be completed easily and quickly, and encouraged users to be as open as possible in their responses. In addition to the survey information, the research team identified in the service provider's data set a sub-set of crucial qualitative information that could validate the primary dataset's quantitative results and interview results. The team transformed that data into a format that would facilitate its analysis and comparison against other empirical results.

¹The evaluation team consisted of three members, all from the University of Manchester.

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This evaluation's different methodologies yielded results that were not expected by either the research team or the service provider. Results challenged initial assumptions as to why some young people were not coming out of NEET—some of these young people did not understand why they were in such a situation and why things did not seem to get better for them. This allowed the research team to identify recommendations including that the service provider needed to work closely with education providers, family members and employers.

The research team developed a report that presented the quantitative results first, followed by the qualitative results, and included a section of analysis that brought together all the results. This way, the service provider could see that the time a member of staff puts into supporting a service user can make a difference in how this user responds to the advice and support offered. The service provider was happy with the evaluation results, as this made evident the value of

the support they gave to young people and flagged the areas that need improvement in the organisation to continue changing the lives of young people for good.

For the research team, this evaluation work was transformative, as some members with quantitative background experienced for the first time the richness of qualitative research and it changed their preconceptions about the rigour and validity of this type of research. Moreover, this evaluation made the team aware of how a narrow understanding of social problems can lead to policies, initiatives or programmes that offer temporary solutions but do not tackle the real problem.

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Where else could a Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation approach be used?

A Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation offers an inclusive and creative way of thinking about policies in the more general sense, and is useful for governments, funders and service providers in various sectors, such as social benefits, public health initiatives and professional, employment and training services in schools, the community and in prisons. In a research context, this approach has been applied by sociologists in education studies, migration studies and studies of science.

Top tips

1. Create a good system to keep and record all the information you gather. This will save you time and help you identify key pieces of information.
2. Develop a robust research design. Consider all the necessary measures that will make your data and results reliable.
3. Trust your findings. If you have sound design and sound decisions backing them up, you can trust your results.
4. Be ready to be challenged. Remember that a solid research design will speak for itself, but you will still need to do some convincing.

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Further reading

- Understanding NEET users to provide a better service
- Changing research on research evaluation: A critical literature review to revisit the agenda.

To reference: Tirado, M.M., and Ehgartner, U. (2021). 'A Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation' in Barron, A., Browne, A.L., Ehgartner, U., Hall, S.M., Pottinger, L. and Ritson, J. (eds.) *Methods for Change: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems*. Manchester: Aspect and The University of Manchester.



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