Region IV Public Health Training Center
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Leading Public Health: Data-Driven Leadership

Episode 5: Using Qualitative Methods to Strengthen Evaluation

Elizabeth Kidwell (EK): Welcome to Leading Public Health, a podcast from the Region IV Public Health Training Center at Emory University. Through this podcast, we explore current leadership challenges, strategies, and ideas to help build the capacity of the current and future public health workforce. In this series, Data-Driven Leadership, we explore the essential role leaders play in incorporating fairness into program evaluations. You'll gain valuable insights from experts who share practical tools and strategies for measuring and enhancing program impact. This series features pre-recorded sessions from a project ECHO Initiative offered by the Region IV Public Health Training Center, the Injury Prevention Research Center at Emory, and Safe States Alliance. Today's episode explores the role of qualitative methods in evaluation. While quantitative data can help us measure change, qualitative approaches allow us to capture lived experiences, highlight community perspectives, and provide a deeper understanding of program impact. In this session, you'll hear from two experts in the field, Mehra Singh and Christina Ore. They discuss participatory multimedia approaches, indigenous-centered methodologies, and strategies for incorporating key concepts into process evaluations. All resources shared in the episode will be linked in the show notes, so be sure to check that out after you listen. Let's dive in.

Presenter 2: Today, we have two presenters. They're going to introduce themselves more as they present, but I at least wanted to say our first presenter and subject matter expert today is Mehra Singh. She is the founder and principal at MK Singh Consulting, which is an evaluation and research consulting firm that centers equity in storytelling. Our second subject matter expert and presenter/panelist today is Christina Ore. Christina is an associate director for indigenous systems alignment and data stewardship at Seven Directions and research assistant professor at the Center for the Study of Health and Risk Behavior in the UW School of Medicine. So welcome to both of you. We're so excited to have you here. Mehra, I'll let you get started.

Mehra Singh (MS): I think you're going to be going first. Good morning. Good morning, everybody. I have the pleasure to talk about a topic I am super passionate about, and that is qualitative methods and equitable evaluations. I titled this session called Digging Deeper, partially because when I think of qualitative methods, I always think of depth. When we do surveys, when we collect quantitative measures, we're usually looking at a very wide range of people over a large demographic span. But when we're doing qualitative methods, we're trying to get into deeper reasonings of why a certain

question is asked in a research project, and that's super exciting to me. So thank you for being here.

A little bit about our agenda. I'm going to start with a little introduction about myself. I'll go into learning objectives, some defining and the purpose of qualitative research, some common examples of qualitative methods, and then a little bit of a dive here on qualitative content analysis. A little bit about what it is, why you might want to do it, and how you do it. And then we'll summarize our talk.

Okay. So a little bit about me. I was born and raised in Buffalo, New York. It's the second largest city in the state of New York. I'm also a daughter of immigrants. Both of my parents are from India. My father's from the region of Punjab in India, and my mother is from West Bengal, for any of you familiar with India. And I identify religiously and racially as a Sikh American. I am a person living with a disability. That's something that I've kind of come to share a bit more as I move through my life, but this is something that very much colors the way that I live. I'm an orange theory enthusiast. And those of you who have participated in orange theory, Hell Week was wild this week. I'm also an avid baker. I love baking, especially during this season. I'm the founder and principal of MKC Consulting, as Katie mentioned. It's a consulting firm centering equity and storytelling. I have about over a decade of experience in mental health, equity and diversity inclusion, and research and evaluation. I'm a 2022 health equity awakened fellow from Human Impact Partners.

In terms of our learning objectives, I am going to start with identifying ways to include kind of equitable concepts in process evaluations of health equity initiatives. I'm going to go into kind of what is qualitative research and its purpose and health equity initiatives, looking at some benefits of common qualitative methods, and then we'll kind of close with kind of uses, types, advantages and disadvantages of a very common type of qualitative analysis, which is content analysis.

So when we think about equitable evaluation, that can feel like a lot sometimes. And so I'm going to narrow a few different ways I like to approach an evaluation from an equitable lens. And so I love to start with focusing on your participants in your evaluation and really thinking about what the experience can be for participants themselves. And so that can look like thinking about their comfort as well as their privacy, which in a lot of ways is related to one's comfort.

I like to do focus group agreements, which is one type of qualitative method. And so that's a way for me to create like a brave space and create a space of psychological safety to kind of start off the session. And so I usually take like a group, maybe a list of like five or six agreements that I come up with. I also provide ways for our participants to add to that list of agreements if there's something that I've missed. I also really like to consider how someone might want to communicate with me in a focus group. And so I always like to make sure there's different options. So that can look like something like coming off mute, using the chat. And you can even use things like mirror boards, jam boards have been expired now, but Zoom whiteboard is also another way you can provide options.

I also like to be really mindful around the collection of demographic data. Here, you know, collecting demographic data can be really powerful for any type of research, you know, you get to learn who it is that's in the room with you. Well, it can be really problematic too when we think about participant privacy, especially if we're talking about a small group. And especially if we're talking about specific space, it would say you're interviewing staff or you're doing a focus group with staff in an organization. There can be a lot of safety concerns and demographic data can be very revealing. And so you want to really think carefully about whether you choose to to collect that demographic data or not.

I also like to move away from perfectionism. When I think about equitable evaluations, you don't center yourself necessarily at all moments as an expert. And I think one way a lot of evaluators can show that they're learning as well is getting feedback on how you're facilitating a focus group. So I think unless you have a huge background in facilitation, most of us are kind of learning as facilitators as we go. And I think one way I like to bring learning process in for myself is getting feedback from my participants about how I am facilitating a focus group. Not only does it create a cultural learning, it also creates a way for you to actually just get better. And that's always a good thing.

Last but definitely not least is focusing your content on equity. So ways you can do that and it can look a little bit different for everybody, but when you're asking questions to ask questions that are related to equitable processes. And so some of the things that I like to think about when I'm thinking about an equitable process is how you're talking to people, how you're working with people. There's a lot of ways we can be equitable or inequitable in how we're talking to people and how we're working with people. As well as a relationship to time, urgency, whether you choose to act in urgency or not, is very much an issue of equity, especially if we weren't thinking about things like white supremacy culture for those of you who are familiar with the trends. So really thinking about how you're relating to time in your initiative is a great kind of question to ask in your focus group or interview.

Okay, so what is qualitative research? I use the definition from Stanford University Libraries. And it is the naturalistic study of social meanings and processes using interviews, observations, and the analysis of texts and images. Researchers use in-depth studies of the social world to analyze how and why groups think and act in particular ways. And so what is the purpose of qualitative research, specifically in health equity initiatives? Number one, it gathers lived experience data. So when I talk about lived experience, what I'm really talking about is individual or community personal experience. And you're actually creating data out of people's stories, which in a lot of ways are very, very powerful and a great way to move the needle on equity.

So in health equity initiatives, that could look like talking to community residents. That could also look like, especially if you're looking at things from more of like an equity diversity inclusion standpoint and looking at organizations that could be talking to staff, staff or leaders in an organization. What I think is really powerful about qualitative research is it allows for the compilation of multiple subjective truths. And so when we're compiling the different subjective truths of individuals, we're actually painting a

very nuanced story of a specific initiative or a specific experience. And that's really powerful.

Okay, so some examples of qualitative methods. So many of you must be familiar with interviews and focus groups. They're pretty common types of qualitative methods. And both of those can provide ways for you to explore kind of how and why people kind of, you know, behave the way they do or written the way that they do. And I think focus groups can often be the method of choice because they are more efficient than doing one-on-one interviews just from like a time perspective.

You also want to consider doing observations. They can be kind of planned or scheduled or they can be kind of off the cuff. And what's cool about observations is it helps you to report on kind of like what's actually happening or actual behavior rather than self-reported behavior. Ways you can estimate your observations is just a little bit of a note-taking. And I personally feel like observations can be a really cool way and useful way to collect qualitative data, especially around culture change initiatives. So something to keep in mind right there.

Also, document review. This is pretty, you know, self-explanatory. It's the review of written materials related to a research question. They're usually provided to you by your partners or by your clients. In the case of a process evaluation, as to specifically looking at organizations, this could look at like standard operating procedures as well as program descriptions.

So you might be thinking now, okay, so I have different methods, but how am I engaging my participants and how am I working with my participants and developing questions for a focus group? And so group agreements is a great way to create psychological safety within a focus group. Or you could even do that in terms of an interview, right? There's still two people involved and you're committing to creating a certain type of environment together. You might want to have, again, various methods of participation.

And in terms of developing the questions, this is a very key part of a qualitative data kind of engagement. And you want to start kind of creating your questions based on your overall research questions. What do you want to learn from this data collection process? And so I love to start with the research questions and start to think about topics I want to ask. And I always want to do that in collaboration with your partners. You know, we're not working in a vacuum and you can always get feedback from your partners when developing your focus group guide or your interview guide.

You do want to be mindful of ordering your questions to allow for a natural flow of conversation. And I really like to start pretty broad and get a bit more focused as I continue the conversation. One kind of key component that you hear often around qualitative methods is to ensure that your questions themselves are open-ended because you do not want to lead your participants in one direction or another. You want to really create that open space and openness.

And so speaking of openness, it's a key benefit of qualitative research. And so what's nice about that is qualitative research creates a lot of blank space, I like to call it, whether that's kind of within a survey or within an interview or focus group for participants to share their individual experiences. And you can actually continue this level of openness in qualitative data analysis, particularly around inductive approaches, which I can share about a little later. It helps you to provide multiple truths. So again, thinking about the relationships between individuals and groups. And it can very much move the needle on equity by capturing with experience. We're actually expanding our definition of research and capturing experiences of those with marginalized identities. So we're taking people's experiences and we're almost adding a layer of legitimacy by bringing it into a data analysis process, which can be really powerful for equity.

And of a type of qualitative analysis I'd like to share with you, I want to start with content analysis because that's a very common type of qualitative data analysis. And by definition, it's a research tool to determine the presence of themes or concepts within qualitative data. Some of the uses include kind of thinking about the way someone is intending their actions or the way they're communicating, thinking about describing an attitude or behaviors, or also determining psychological or emotional state of people or groups.

Some of the different types of content analysis is conceptual and relational. Conceptual looks like looking for the existence of a concept or code or the frequency of concept. And relational can examine relationships between concepts within a text. And then in terms of why you might want to use content analysis, it does allow for a very in-depth and direct view of the text. And you can do it qualitatively or even quantitatively in a lot of ways, which can be a little confusing.

But what I mean by quantitative or pro of content analysis is you can take concepts or codes and you can create a frequency table of how often you're seeing that concept or code. So that's one way you can do your content analysis. In terms of another advantage, is it provides a researcher a very close view of the text. What I like to call it is like a good grip. And what I mean by that is especially if you're doing it by hand or in a software tool, you're working very closely with your transcripts or with like your documents of your text. And so by the time you're done with content analysis, you really know that content. And you're in a better place to develop recommendations. You're better place to really like write that report you're looking for. I will say it's not as impactful if you are using AI powered tools. It's harder to have a good of a grip on tests. It's a little bit of a longer discussion.

In terms of disadvantages, it is time consuming, especially if you're going to do it by hand. I think software tools can make it a little bit more efficient. And it can sometimes disregard the context that actually created that text. And that really looks like when you are going so deep into a text that you're not thinking about the larger context in which it's created.

Finally, a little bit about the how I'll go through this pretty quickly. But you do want to decide the level of analysis, whether you're thinking about a word, phrase, or a sentence. You want to decide on whether to do an inductive or deductive approach. Inductive is basically when you let the data decide what the codes are going to be. And deductive is when you have kind of more of a deconstructed code. You want to decide whether you're going to code for existence or frequency of a concept, how you're going to handle content that's not necessarily connected to your research questions. And then you want to code the data. And then you may even want to analyze that code of data once more.

So a little summary here. I believe qualitative research can be a really powerful equity tool. We're really capturing and making meaning from marginalized voices. And that is moving the needle on equity. We don't want to minimize that power of blank space because that is what qualitative approaches is. And we're giving space for people to fill with their stories. And that's a huge deal. And finally, I think just a more tactical tip is organization is a very key in qualitative research. You're able to stay organized. You can increase kind of an adherence to your system of coding, which ultimately really increases that legitimacy of your research.

I have a few work cited and some additional resources. I will also be sharing that after today's talk. But thank you so much for your time. And I will pause and allow Christina to start sharing her presentation.

Christina Ore (CO): As I was presented earlier, my name is Christina Ore. And my background, I was born and raised in the Tonotum and Nuiame tribal and ancestral lands in West Arizona and Northeast Mexico. My family, my paternal family is from the Juancavalica region. They're from the mixed Ketchum communities. So you'll see there an image of the Rio Montarro and also the Hummingbird. Being born and raised away from paternal lands, the Hummingbird has become a really important symbol. It represents being the messenger. And so a lot of our work that we do is cross-cultural and working with many communities, often as guests.

So part of this presentation is really to share the importance of relationship building context and how qualitative methods and Indigenous-centered methodologies, when you go into collaborations to use those methodologies or be part of those, how important they are for providing context as well as can additionally support with what we refer to as the triangulation of data. I think Mehra provided a background around qualitative methods. And another way of integrating them into your work is to consider them as part of your mixed methods or triangulation, which is a term we often use. So I would like to share with you some examples.

So I introduced myself because that's really an important way of, again, establishing relationship understanding who we are or where we come from, how we will bring that to our collaborations as we map out strategies, think about research questions or evaluation questions, and think about the methods. So to the point of the even doing

process evaluations of organizations, the language is very important and who we are is equally important. So I welcome and thank Safe States for this invitation and the Region IV Public Health Training Center, as well as the Injury Prevention Research Center at Emory University. Thank you so much for welcoming me here and welcome everybody to this work that we're doing.

So what I'll be sharing again is some qualitative methods that we've been involved in, participatory multimedia, and then also some background on Indigenous centered methodologies, in particular story work or vis-a-vis. I would like to give you some background. I'm coming from Seven Directions, which is an Indigenous Public Health Institute. We're the first but not the only public health institute that was established in 2018. We followed about a seven-year feasibility phase or study where we reached out across the country to hear from tribal leaders, health directors, community members around the need and the interest in an institute that would connect the various health system, which is quite complex and diverse, given the diversity of tribal nations and Indigenous communities in the U.S.

We identified seven directions and these really guide our work. For the past five years, we've primarily worked around opioid overdose prevention work, developing resources to put into practice. We've also been involved in determinants of health work and public health capacity, or early days or around public health accreditation, tribal public health accreditation work. So I want to give you some context of where I'm coming from. We have 574 federally recognized tribes across the country that we serve and work for. There are 200 state recognized tribal nations, and that's not including the unrecognized tribes, U.S. territories, and Indigenous peoples are part of a diaspora in the United States now. So there's quite a diversity of stories, history, and context for the qualitative work that you may engage in, or the communities you may be working with in your counties, states, for health equity initiatives.

The federal tribally recognized tribes have a government-to-government relationship with the federal government, trust responsibilities, and then varying relationships with state health departments. The area in the southeast doesn't have a lot of facilities. There are fewer tribal nations, and yet there are large Indigenous communities, state recognized and federal recognized in the area. And so really I wanted to reiterate that we're coming from a rights-based perspective with tribal engagement, qualitative work, and so with that, I'd like to move into sharing some of those examples of the work that we've done over the past two years.

Digital stories has been around for a long time. It's both a qualitative method. It also fits very well with the work that we do in Indigenous health research and evaluation. It's an equitable concept. We're thinking about creating spaces for sharing, hearing, and listening to people's experiences, incorporating those learnings to come to an understanding of the context of individuals and communities, which engaged in the evidence-based programs. It's a way of ensuring relevance and meaning and benefit.

So I always like to think about the quote from Shimanda Adici. Consequences of single story is that it robs people of dignity. It makes a recognition of our equal humanity

difficult, and it emphasizes that we are different rather than that we are similar. So these methods around digital storytelling and photo voice are really instrumental in creating that space again to hear stories, to see the shared experience, and see how that can be either complement the surveys and quantitative work that you may be involved in, or represent the grounding to either do quality improvement on our program or even start program planning.

And so this is a resource that we have, and we went into collaboration with, this is for NACHO, and we were collaborating with Creative Narrations who have decades experience working with many communities geographically across the country, in particular with Tribal Nations. They are a non-indigenous group and yet have had wonderful workshops that they've held with Tribal Nations and Alaska Consortiums. They provide training. So what we did was provide trainings to local health departments, and then we were able to put together this toolkit. It's a step-by-step guide with agendas and worksheets and prompts, ethical and cultural considerations for going into storytelling from a participatory, equitable approach and perspective.

Within the digital storytelling and photo voice, photo voice is much more discrete and it can be used to really set the assessment phase of a program planning while digital story is much more, takes more time. It can take up to two to a week, depending on the amount of time you can dedicate to creating small stories, video stories that reflect the stories of individuals. Whereas photo voice can be individual but yet come in as the data to share. So as Mehar was saying, these stories are the data that can be interpreted later depending on your program. They can be very powerful. They can either, again, as I said, be at the beginning of program planning or be used at the end in particular digital stories are often used for advocacy for taking the findings from a program, the findings from a research and advocating.

So for example, in Tucson, Arizona, students engaged in digital storytelling to talk about their experiences being recent immigrants to the area and to advocate for support of our public health systems and put them up on bus stops. So it was really getting the message out. Other times they're used when there was often an education cut in funding to advocate to share that personal story of the importance of the programs. So they're very exciting and powerful and can be useful for your program planning.

So to reiterate some of the benefits that we see, it is creating that space for creativity, innovation, participation, really listening and hearing. We hear that a lot from community members that listening is really critical to really successfully engaging in the programs and hearing feedback that can support, again, if you're evaluating for making changes or planning. The benefit of triangulation, so that bringing together as many either methods or sources to ensure that what you're hearing is shared across and that it is as again that sense of integrity and untrustworthiness.

Examples of how to strengthen evaluations, that is again something that we can do by engagement or collaboration, having advisory councils and having committees that will plan alongside and this example, it's for the themes of a conference. So that's how

they've been used in the past. So it's really almost like multi-dimensional and supports really a lot of co-creation.

Some of the work that we've done really centers the healing health and wellness, strengthening those systems as a public health institute. In indigenous health research and evaluation, often turned to Dr. Twyla Baker's quote here that was written around prevention, suicide prevention and really calls to the resurgence that we're seeing in indigenous language and culture revitalization. So in complement with the sovereignty, there is this time of resurgence and we're seeing that with a lot of public government support for for basing work and grounding work in indigenous knowledge.

So going into partnerships, as she would say, as has shared, we have children to raise, elders to care for, languages to revitalize, sovereignty to exercise, dances to celebrate, bloodlines to honor, rights to assert, water to protect, lands to love, seeds to cultivate, medicines to propagate, lifeways to love. Do you see why we need you? So this is really an impetus and it continues. The calling that we have to support the healing and health in our community through the public health practice from an indigenous perspective.

So when we talk about indigenous methodologies, it really is the we often use methodologies rather than methods because the way of knowing and doing is very much interconnected. So the way you approach community relationship partnerships and what you do is is intimately connected. So how you choose those methods is really informed by that. So as was mentioned in the beginning, that time for relationship building is really critical and often thinking about those value-based, place-based perspectives is really also critical.

So as we're going through engaging in support for indigenous centered methodologies, many of us are guests and guest relatives because often we're working outside of our own indigenous communities. So but these translate across and can support some of the work that you may be doing in your community. So it's really taking that time to critically reflect on protocols and practices. So the introduction, opening prayers, ensuring that you have the funds and to provide foods because you're engaging in a reciprocal, respectful relationship for the work going ahead and for community. Critical to that is benefits and giving back.

So the work that I did in Sonora really became that methodology. So it was a qualitative method you could say of interviews. But in reality, I didn't come in and do interviews. It was a whole process of going through cultural protocols and engaging in conversation. And that's the richness of that deeper dig, digging deeper and the nuance of the stories. So the critical importance is doing it well and telling it well. So digital stories is an important format. It can be visual, even creative expressions. And then always giving back. So thinking about how I am bringing back either for interpretation or for action that follows.

I think the key takeaway messages I wanted to share were seeing this as a potential as also a compliment to the work you do, compliment to the quantitative methods of triangulation, the importance of creating that space for sharing, listening and hearing.

And then the action that follows and the co-creation, the co-engagement is really critical to really effectively and respectfully, I'm engaging in these approaches.

We hope you enjoyed this episode of Leading Public Health, a podcast from the Region IV Public Health Training Center at Emory University. We value your feedback, so please take a minute to complete the evaluation located in the show notes. Thank you for joining us.

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