

What is program evaluation?

A beginners guide

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<http://gsociology.icaap.org/>
Free Resources for Methods in Program Evaluation
<http://gsociology.icaap.org/methods>

What is evaluation

This is the fifth in a set of handouts on the key questions about program evaluation. This is about focus groups, interviews and observations.

Focus groups are structured discussions among small groups of people.

Generally, a facilitator leads a group of 6-10 people in a discussion about selected topics with planned questions, while allowing for interesting, new or unplanned follow up questions.

Typical focus group questions are like these:

- What is your overall impression of the program?
- What are the things you like or dislike about the program?
- What have you gained in this program?

From: Qualitative Evaluation of the Project P.A.T.H.S. Based on the Perceptions of the Program Participants. Shek, Daniel T.L., Lee, Tak Yan, Siu, Andrew, Lam, Ching Man. The Scientific World Journal. November 2006, 1, 2254–2264
<http://www.thescientificworld.co.uk/headeradmin/upload/2006.01.354.pdf>

Additional Resources about focus groups

Basics of Conducting Focus Groups
Carter McNamara, MBA, PhD, Authenticity Consulting, LLC
<http://www.managementhelp.org/evaluatn/focusgrp.htm>

Focus Groups.
From the National Park Service Northeast Region
http://www.nps.gov/phso/rctatoolbox/gatinfo_focus.htm

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Key informant interviews are qualitative, in-depth interviews of 15 to 35 people selected for their first-hand knowledge about a topic of interest.

Conducting Key Informant Interviews. Performance Monitoring and Evaluation. USAID Center for Development Information and Evaluation.
http://www.usaid.gov/pubs/usaid_eval/

Key informant interviews also include a planned set of questions on the topics of interest.

Key informant interviews are useful when candid information about sensitive topics is needed. Group discussions may inhibit people from giving candid feedback.

Interviews should include a very diverse range of people.

Additional Resources

Key Informant Interviews
University of Illinois Extension
<http://ppa.aces.uiuc.edu/KeyInform.htm>

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Observations are methods that yield a systematic description of events or behaviors in the social setting chosen for study.

Observation methods can be highly structured, for example:

Systematic Social Observation - a field research method in which teams of researchers observe the object of study in its natural setting. Researchers record events as they see and hear them and do not rely upon others to describe or interpret events. The researchers follow well-specified procedures that can be duplicated.

Systematic Observation of Public Police: Applying Field Research Methods to Policy Issues. Stephen D. Mastrofski, Roger B. Parks, Albert J. Reiss, Jr., Robert E. Worden, Christina DeJong, Jeffrey B. Snipes, William Terrill. National Institute of Justice, December 1998.
<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/pubs-sum/172859.htm>

Observations can also be unstructured, for example, participant observation, or taking an active part in group activities.

The premise underlying participant observation is that the researcher becomes a more effective observer by taking an active role in the performance of regular activities. In other words, knowledge gained through doing is of a higher quality than what is obtained only through observation. In many cases, involvement with ordinary chores will not only enhance the researcher's understanding of the processes, techniques, and words associated with these activities, but will also result in better rapport with informants.

Documenting Maritime Folklife: An Introductory Guide
Part 2: How to Document. Participant Observation
American Folklife Center. Library of Congress.
<http://www.loc.gov/folklife/maritime/twopo.html>

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Focus groups, interviews and observation are *qualitative* research methods, that is, methods that are less likely to rely on statistical analysis.

Advantages

- Useful to help figure out major program problems that cannot be explained by more formal methods of analysis.
- The evaluator may see things that participants and staff may not see.
- The evaluator can learn about things which participants or staff may be unwilling to reveal in more formal methods
- Useful when it's not clear what the program problems might be.
- Useful to give good ideas of what topics program participants and staff think are important.
- Useful in developing surveys, in determining what questions or issues are important to include.
- Useful when a main purpose is to generate recommendations
- Useful when quantitative data collected through other methods need to be interpreted.

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Disadvantages

- The evaluator's subjective views can introduce error.
- The focus of the evaluator is only on what is observed at one time in one place.
- Information from observations/ interviews/ groups can be time consuming and difficult to interpret.
- Focus groups could be dominated by one individual and their point of view.
- Generally, information from focus groups, interviews, and observations CANNOT be used to describe the client population.

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Advantages and disadvantages of focus groups, observations and interviews **quoted from:**

The Handbook for Evaluating HIV Education - Booklet 9
Evaluation of HIV Prevention Programs Using Qualitative Methods
http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/publications/hiv_handbook/index.htm

Conducting Focus Group Interviews
USAID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation
http://www.usaid.gov/pubs/usaid_eval/

Conducting Key Informant Interviews. Performance Monitoring and Evaluation. USAID Center for Development Information and Evaluation. http://www.usaid.gov/pubs/usaid_eval/

Additional Resources:

Ethnography, Observational Research, and Narrative Inquiry:
Commentary
- Advantages of Qualitative Observational Research
- Disadvantages of Qualitative Observational Research
<http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/research/observe/pop2d.cfm>

Strengths: Data Collection Methods
Washington State Library, Connecting Learners to Libraries, 2006
Retreat
http://www.secstate.wa.gov/library/libraries/projects/connecting/retreat_2006.aspx

Different Methods of Collecting Information
in What's the Best Way to Collect My Information?
<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/EdTechGuide/whatbest.html>

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I also benefited greatly from feedback from folks on various email lists, and I thank them all!

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