Using Qualitative Methods to Inform Criminal Justice Policy and Practice

Henry H. Brownstein, PhD
Distinguished Research Professor
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
West Virginia University
henry.brownstein@mail.wvu.edu
Review: “how to” for qualitative studies

- **Sampling**
  - Hidden populations
  - Convenience and key informant sampling
  - Theoretical saturation

- **Data Collection**
  - Ethnography
  - Open-ended interviewing: individual and group

- **Analysis**
  - Analytic induction
  - Narrative analysis

- **Validity**
  - Subjective adequacy: understand the phenomenon or experience as do the people you are studying
  - Intensive, repetitive reviewing of words and images from notes and interviews; multiple researchers as reviewers; regular meetings to debrief and discuss, contemplate, debate, and find common understandings
  - Feedback on your understanding from respondents and other stakeholders
Criminal justice becomes a field of study, criminal justice research a source of evidence

Criminology and criminal justice
- The Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA)
- Created in 1968 under the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act
- Replaced by the Office of Justice Assistance, Research, and Statistics in 1982
- The main purpose was to award and administer grants to reduce crime and improve the criminal justice system
Policy and practice

• **Decisions and actions**
  - Making decisions or taking actions to identify and define problems
  - In order to set priorities and allocate resources

• **Knowing what to do**
  - When
  - Why
  - How
Using social research to inform policy and practice

- **Informing**
  - Giving policymakers evidence they can use to make decisions or take actions
  - “If you do this, then that is likely”
  - Can be used by policymaker to make decisions or take actions to help constituents, or to justify decisions made or actions taken

- **Advocating**
  - Participating in the marketplace of claims
  - Competing with political, corporate, industry, and other advocates
  - Advantage for quantitative analysts: “nothing pleases a policymaker more than a percentage”
  - Findings from qualitative studies are a harder sell, especially if the researcher doubts their findings are valid
Poll Question #1
The measure and meaning of crime and justice

- Ultimately, **what we mean by crime and how we respond** to it is a function of how we conceptualize and measure it *

- Social scientists have long recognized the **difficulties and problems of trying to conceptualize and measure** crime with crime statistics

- Much has been written about the **validity and reliability of quantitative analyses** of official crime statistics in terms of their technical accuracy and adequacy

- **Validity for qualitative research** comes from subjective adequacy
  - understanding the phenomenon or experience as the people you are studying understand it
  - Important for both qualitative studies and for quantitative studies

Quantitative research: measuring crime and justice

How do we measure crime?

• **Official statistics** may be defined as “statistics that governments produce, finance, or routinely incorporate into their decisions” *

• **Crime statistics** are derived nationwide from records of local law enforcement agencies and include counts of specified crimes against people, businesses, organizations, and government agencies

The problem of measuring crime for quantitative research

• Official crime statistics reflect “specifically organizational contingencies which condition the application of specific statutes to actual conduct through the interpretations, decisions, and actions of law enforcement personnel” **

---


The problem of measure without meaning

We need to know the precise meaning of what we measure so we know what we are measuring and unambiguously how it compares to what we are trying to measure.

Validity of meaning requires a qualitative analysis of the meaning of what is being measured and why it is being measured.
Can we measure the important things?

“The difficulty here (and for all of social science) is that we can't measure all the important things, so we make what we can measure more important than it is.”

In 1985 David Nyberg, University at Buffalo professor, wrote a review for The New York Times of a book called Choosing Elites, by Harvard professor Robert Klitgaard. The book was based on a study of how students are selected for admission to elite colleges and the utility of “quantified achievement scores to predict academic success and success in later life.”
“‘Maybe there are things you can’t necessarily measure,’ Brady had suggested before the game. ‘But in the end maybe they’re more important than anything you can measure.’”

A quote from quarterback Tom Brady about what it takes to win football games in an article by Sally Jenkins in the Sports section of The Washington Post, February 3, 2022.
How qualitative research finds meaning in studies of crime and justice

**In qualitative research**
- Studying how people see the social world through the lens of their personal experience with other people
- Learning how people give meaning to their own experience with other people around them and why that matters
- Better understanding crime prevention, management, and control from the perspective of those who participate in the range of social activities designed and implemented for the prevention, management, and control of crime

**For quantitative research**
- Clarifying and specifying the meaning of measures used in a study
- Helping quantitative researchers identify measures that matter to participants
Examples from research informing policy and practice

- **Interview studies**
  - Drug Relationships in Murder (DREIM)
  - Female Drug Relationships in Murder (FEMDREIM)
  - MALTREATMENT

- **Ethnographic studies**
  - Taking Care of Business
  - Qualitative study of ecstasy dealers
Informing policy and practice

The path from theory to research to policy and practice is reticular

The process is fundamentally about decisions and actions about setting priorities and allocating resources

When a criminologist as a researcher provides information or advice

- **Quantitative researchers** as objective practitioners of value-free science have the advantage of a level of mathematical certainty
- **Qualitative researchers** are guided by subjectivity and have the advantage of findings grounded in real life social experience

Either way, in the marketplace of claims, researchers need to believe in the trustworthiness of what they say to policymakers and practitioners
Your Questions

Please enter your questions in the Q&A box.