

QUALEVAL SUMMARIES

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Namey, E., G. Guest, K. McKenna, and M. Chen. 2016. ‘[Evaluating Bang for the Buck: A Cost-Effectiveness Comparison Between Individual Interviews and Focus Groups Based on Thematic Saturation Levels](#)’. *American Journal of Evaluation* 37(3):425–40.

Keywords

Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, qualitative methods, cost-effectiveness, cost, time, saturation, thematic analysis

Abstract

Evaluators often use qualitative research methods, yet there is little evidence on the comparative cost-effectiveness of the two most commonly employed qualitative methods—in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus groups (FGs). We performed an inductive thematic analysis of data from 40 IDIs and 40 FGs on the health-seeking behaviors of African American men (N 1/4 350) in Durham, North Carolina. We used a bootstrap simulation to generate 10,000 random samples from each data set and calculated the number of data collection events necessary to reach different levels of thematic saturation. The median number of data collection events required to reach 80% and 90% saturation was 8 and 16, respectively, for IDIs and 3 and 5 for FGs. Interviews took longer but were more cost-effective at both levels. At the median, IDIs cost 20–36% less to reach thematic saturation. Evaluators can consider these empirically based cost-effectiveness data when selecting a qualitative data collection method.

Summary by Arzu Abbasova

Discussing in-depth interviews (IDIs) and Focus Groups (FG) Namey et al. provides an answer to the question of which of these methods provide the most “bang for the buck” (426). Indeed, They note that while both of these methods are similar due to the open-ended questions and inductive probing, their structures and strength differ. Thus, FGs are known to be appropriate for group data gathering but IDIs are suggested for personal narrative gathering. However, to measure “bang for buck” they propose an alternative method for comparing cost-effectiveness of qualitative methods, by juxtaposing data sets (thematic content) from IDIs and FGs and measuring the point at which the thematic saturation takes place. Here “the number of IDIs or FGs required to reach a certain saturation level then

becomes the outcome that can be used to compare time and cost across data collection for these two methods” (427).

The data was collected from 40 IDIs and 40 FGs, which were digitally recorded and analyzed sequentially. For cost-effectiveness comparison, the total and the number of overlapping themes were identified and thematic saturation was calculated and only data points reaching 80-90% received attention. The findings were as follows: within 10000 randomly selected samples, the median number reaching 80 and 90% saturation was respectively 3 and 5 groups. As the authors summarized it clearly: “At the 90% level, reaching saturation took nearly 3 hours (33%) more data collection time for IDIs than for FGs based on the median values of the bootstrap samples. However, at both the 80% and 90% levels of saturation, FGs cost more based on our stated cost inputs” (43). Furthermore, reaching 80% saturation IDI was more-cost effective across all variables. Indeed, at 90% saturation, IDIs were once again more cost-effective except in the case where participant incentives were removed.

In all, considering few studies comparing cost-effectiveness of qualitative methods Namey et al. offer a very useful analysis. To reiterate, IDIs outperformed FGs in cost-effectiveness both at 80 and 90% saturation level. The limits of the analysis was not inclusion of recruitment time, analysis or space rental into the calculations. Thus, the authors believe that including these variables would increase FG costs vis-vis the IDI costs. However, it is worth reminding that besides cost-effectiveness the choice of interview method needs to mainly depend on the research objectives and the evidence sought to be obtained.