

Qualitative Approaches: Self-criticism and What Can Be Gained from Quantitative Approaches¹

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My brief is the strengths of quantitative approaches and self-criticism of qualitative approaches in poverty appraisal. What follows needs to be balanced by contrasting points on the strengths of qualitative approaches and self-criticism of quantitative approaches.

A. Gains from Quantitative Approaches

“Quantitative approaches” usually means research using standard sampling techniques, questionnaires and statistical analysis. The well known potential benefits include:

- time series comparisons to identify trends in whatever dimensions are measured,
- cross-section comparisons between different individuals, households, groups and communities, and across regions, countries and continents
- correlations which identify associations which raise questions of causality and covariant changes
- estimates of prevalences and distributions within populations and areas
- triangulation and linkages with qualitative data (Booth in this book)

¹ I am grateful to Karen Block for comments on a draft of this paper, and to participants in the Cornell workshop for relevant discussions. The usual disclaimers apply.

- the credibility of numbers in influencing policy-makers
- the utility to policy-makers of being able to put numbers on trends and other comparisons

B. Self-criticism of Qualitative Approaches

Benefits and gains from qualitative data from poverty appraisals and research have been documented in comparative analyses drawing on a range of experience (e.g. Norton and Stephens 1995; Booth *et al.* 1998; Brocklesby and Holland 1998; Holland with Blackburn 1998; Robb 1999; Brock 2000; Norton with others 2001). There is a literature on appropriate forms of rigour with qualitative approaches and data (e.g. Lincoln and Guba 1985) and the discipline of social anthropology is predominantly concerned with the qualitative. In poverty appraisals and research, as in qualitative research generally, self-critical epistemological awareness (Brock and McGee 2002) is at the core of rigour, with reflection on how context, process, agency and interaction influence what is presented and what is perceived by the researcher.²

This section does not consider benefits and gains but lists some of the main things that can go wrong in poverty appraisals and research. It points to weaknesses, dilemmas, dangers, tensions and trade-offs. These also apply to much other research. They fall into two main categories: methodological; and ethical.

A. Methodological

DESIGN AND FIELDWORK

- *Selection and training of research facilitators.* Not everyone has it in them to be a good participatory research facilitator. Selection is liable to be constrained. Consultants pop up all over the place to claim to be “PRA trainers” who are not competent, and who do not concern themselves with behaviour and attitudes. Training is too short. Training is not experiential in the field.
- *Selection of sites.* Only a few sites are selected, limiting representativeness. Purposive selection brings in biases which may not be

² For practitioners’ critical reflections, see e.g. Pratt 2001 and Cornwall *et al.*, 2001.

recognised. One is the choice of atypical communities where an NGO is working or where there is a special project.

- *Unrepresentative participation.* The views and interests of a dominant group in a community, or of dominant individuals in focus groups, are overrepresented. Marginalised groups and individuals do not come forward and are left out for reasons such as geographical isolation, social exclusion, poverty of time, sickness, disability, exhaustion, gender roles and conventions, discrimination, intimidation, fear, sense of inferiority and incapability, shame, hunger, and seeking security in being unseen. It is often then precisely the poorest and most excluded people who do not participate.
- *Agenda framing.* The realities expressed are overinfluenced by the agenda of the facilitators so that respondents or participants say and show what they are asked about and what they know or believe is expected and will be welcomed.
- *Insensitive and unobservant facilitation.* Facilitators may dominate, disempower and distort processes, and may fail to observe and assess what is happening. Yet with group-visual methods, credibility and rigour derive in part from observing the iterative and cross-checking processes (described as group-visual synergy) when knowledge is shared and built up cumulatively by several people together (Chambers 1997: 160).

ANALYSIS

However “good” the qualitative data, analysis is vulnerable to distortion, inaccuracy and unrepresentativeness, compounded by combinations of

- *Large amounts of data combined with deadlines and lack of time and resources*
- *Data which are not comparable or difficult to compare*
- *Imprecise analysis* in which items are sorted into categories with unclear boundaries, or where emergent boundaries change during analysis, or where different analysts make different decisions about categories or about what goes into them
- *Analysts with strong preconceptions and mental templates*—diagrammatic models in their minds into which they habitually fit complex realities.

- *Pressure and incentives for early and striking policy messages* and difficulty withdrawing these when further analysis shows them to be false or misleading.

These can then lead to:

- incomplete coverage of the data
- unsystematic coverage
- distortions through misleading or inconsistent classification
- falling back on conventional or personal categories of classification instead of allowing the data to generate emergent categories
- selective searching for data which fit the analyst's preconceptions
- circularities, where the method (through language, choice of site, process, etc.) itself contributes to an emergent category
- successive simplification and editing, excluding qualifications and exceptions
- unsubstantiated or not fully substantiated assertions based on the authority of the process rather than the actual data
- omission of qualifications, caveats and limitations of the data and statements
- oversimplification of complex realities
- overattention to striking quotations
- overgeneralising

B. Ethical

A. WITH PARTICIPANTS³

The most common issues are:

- taking the time of poor people, especially those suffering poverty of time and energy, without recompense. This is often a more serious issue with females than males
- raising expectations of benefits which are not realised
- failing to share findings with participants and their communities
- leaving participants exposed to later penalties (violence, prosecution, persecution etc.)

B. WITH POLICY INFLUENCE

There is often a conflict between traditional academic values and behaviours and those which derive from a desire to have a good effect

³ For further discussion of ethical issues see Narayan *et al.* 2000: 16–18.

on policy. To some extent these are incommensurable. To know what best to do is not a simple matter.

The desire to influence policy exposes the analyst to issues of what can be called the ethics of the soundbite. In order to make striking statements which may have an impact, there are dangers of oversimplifying, selecting quotations and stories, and presenting “facts” which variously are not based on adequately representative or adequately analysed qualitative data but which fit and further the analyst’s preconceptions and agenda.

C. Tensions, Trade-offs and Choices

Running through these issues are tensions, trade-offs and choices. Those which follow are some of the more notable and serious. They apply also to quantitative research but are articulated here for qualitative:

- Depth but narrowness in fewer places or with fewer people versus shallowness but breadth in more places and with more people.
- Scale and representativeness versus analysability (larger scale can increase representativeness but means more data which makes analysis harder, especially with qualitative data).
- Standardisation, shallowness and analysability versus open-endedness, depth, and difficulty in analysis.⁴
- Volume of data versus willingness to suspend habitual categories and preset ideas. Under pressure of volume of qualitative data the analyst is vulnerable to being driven to use familiar embedded categories to classify the data.
- Delegation of data analysis versus personal judgment and “ahas!” (Qualitative data analysed by several people, each with a different part of the data set, is vulnerable to inconsistency. Guiding those to whom analysis is delegated may demand prior categorisation, and

⁴ This was a central issue faced by those who designed the participatory methodology of the Consultations with the Poor in 23 countries in 1999. For manageability, the focus was narrowed to four themes—well being and ill being; priorities of the poor, institutional analysis, and gender relations (Narayan *et al.* 2000: 306–13).

“telling them what to look for.” This may mean that significant surprises and unexpected findings are overlooked).

- Resources available for follow-up actions with fewer communities or groups versus more communities or groups with fewer or no resources for follow-up. (This refers to ethical issues which to varying degrees apply with all research, but which qualitative researchers worry about more than quantitative researchers).

There is a considerable body of well-established social anthropological literature and lore on good fieldwork and analysis in qualitative research. There appears to be less experience, less well articulated, on tensions, trade-offs and choices with participatory research of a qualitative nature conducted on a scale which permits quantification. Fortunately, experience with aggregation, analysis and presentation of participatory poverty research which combines qualitative and quantitative is accumulating fast.

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