

Reporting interview and focus group findings

Technote

Reports on qualitative data, such as interviews and focus groups, often appear imprecise and vague. Terms such as “some” respondents or “a majority” of participants (in a focus group) convey the impression that the writer wishes to obscure the exact count. Clients often request that interview and focus group reports contain the exact “n” for each response category.

To set this in context, consider that a sample survey treats all respondents equally and uses *closed-ended questions* with fixed responses. The question limits the range of responses. Large samples allow the researcher to statistically compare the responses for different classes of respondent. Using the “n” and percentages is mandatory for reporting 500 responses to the question “Has the program met your need?” with two possible answers: either a yes or a no.

Interview and focus group “questionnaires” use *open-ended questions*, where the respondent chooses how to frame the answer. Some respondents provide extended answers, others are brief, and still others decline to offer any information at all. Although part of analyzing interview/focus group data involves grouping the responses, the primary motivation for this form of data collection is to gain insight into a process or problem. Inserting the “n” may appear to increase the accuracy of the report, but in reality, using this approach can distort the report. Consider an example:

1. *In a recent study, 20 key informants participated in telephone interviews. On a specific question about the impact of the program on target clients, a majority (n=16) reported that the impact was positive, and a minority (n=4) stated that the program had important negative impacts. At this level, it would appear that the program has been endorsed by the key informants.*

What if the 16 supporters had only a casual relationship with the program, and many were using hearsay evidence? In contrast, the four who were negative each had a long history of direct contact, and for that reason, their views are more credible.

Using numbers alone places everyone at the same level and fails to qualify the data. The appearance of precision produces a wrong conclusion unless the researcher notes that the respondents are not sufficiently informed to render a judgement.

Another example illustrates the distortion caused by using numbers:

2. *In another study, only one key informant identified problems and potential solutions. To report that only one out of 30 key informants could identify problems and solutions could create the impression that most of the respondents believed that no problems existed with the program. If the sole critic can enumerate many problems and, further, can cite evidence for this belief, that single opinion should figure prominently in the reporting.*

Often, in an attempt to increase the reliability of the interview step, researchers add interviewees in the mistaken belief that, as in a sample survey, more data reduce error. However, if the new respondents are *uninformed* key informants, all they do is raise cost and create static for information provided by the rest of the interviewees.

3. *Imagine that a study uses 10 key informants, of whom six are positive, two are negative, and two are non-committal, stating that they do not know. To increase the credibility of the study, the researcher requests more key informants, and the client provides another 20 names. Often, the additional key informants will have less contact with the program. If the final count is six positive, two negative, and 22 non-committal, then rather than six of 10 being positive, we now have six of 30. Which is the more credible situation?*

Finally, note that the Marketing Research and Intelligence Association (MRIA) expressly states that focus group reports should not contain counts of how many respondents provided a specific type of response.

Here are some pointers:

- ▶ Prepare a concise interview guide. Twenty-five questions is a long interview. Ten to 15 questions is a much better basis for an interview.
 - ▶ Ask all the questions, or show explicitly in your notes that the question was not asked.
 - ▶ Select respondents on the basis of the information they are likely to provide. Note that for “political” reasons, some uninformed individuals may have to be included.
 - ▶ Do not include more key informants to raise the reliability of the key informant data.
 - ▶ Recognize that not all key informants are created equal. Sometimes, 20% of key informants provide 80% of the information. All researchers have had the experience where one insight frames an entire study. To use a simple percentage to report on this could severely downplay the importance of that insight. Of course, you must validate that view with other key informants, and that may mean going back to verify that others share the perspective.
 - ▶ “Challenging” interviewees to provide evidence for their views with prompts such as “what evidence exists for that?” has two benefits:
 - It qualifies the respondent and allows the researcher to assess how much weight to give to that opinion.
 - It may open new lines of evidence and strengthen the overall report.
 - ▶ As a preliminary step, a researcher may use percentages to organize the report. This is solely an internal process designed to ensure balance in the final report.
 - ▶ Report qualitative data using qualitative descriptors. Rather than saying that six of 10 respondents support the program (example 3), say that a majority of respondents who are familiar with the program support it.
 - ▶ Be consistent with terms. Sometimes, defining these words at the outset is useful. For example: “a few” is 10%, “a minority” is up to 25%, a “large minority” is between 25% and 40%, “about half” is between 40% and 60%, a “majority” is between 60% and 75%, and a “large majority” is more than 75%. Again, use judgement to assess strength of opinion and qualify the opinions.
- ▶ Quotations are very useful to illustrate a point. Try not to quote someone who provides a single perspective as this can run the risk of identifying the respondent. State something like “the following quotation represents the typical opinion of a minority/majority of respondents.” It is easy to use too many quotes, so be selective and choose only those that represent an important segment of opinion.
 - ▶ Where a key informant states a fact or program feature, such as eligibility rules, check it independently. For example, if a key informant states that a person over 35 is not eligible for the program, and this is the first you have heard about it, verify this independently and do not let the interview be the only source.
 - ▶ Report where agreement exists and where it does not. Reporting unanimous opinions is important, and making sure that minority views emerge in the report along with majority views is part of the judgement needed in presenting balanced information.
 - ▶ Most important is to be clear on the goals of the data collection. Interviews designed to shed insight into a process must focus on the insight and not how many had that same insight. If the need is to measure how strongly key informants view something, then have them complete a small questionnaire.

**For additional information, please contact
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