

Using Qualitative Case Study in Program Evaluation: A Malleable Model for Actionable Insight

Introduction: Historically, program evaluation in behavioral health has employed quantitative approaches that include experimental and exploratory designs. However, qualitative methods can add value to program evaluation both by supplementing quantitative approaches and by using qualitative designs when quantitative approaches are not methodologically appropriate. Specifically, using a qualitative case study design, we were able to achieve quicker research-to-practice pathways for quality improvement, engage stakeholders in the evaluation process as co-creators of knowledge/research, and embed an evaluation approach with evaluators partnering with participants at various stages of the program evaluation process (i.e., implementation, baseline, problem-based).

Goals and Methods: An instrumental qualitative case study design provided the primary evaluation method as the phenomenon being evaluated became the case. This design presented a rich understanding of program implementation, baseline assessment, and solution-focused approaches to address problems in service delivery. Techniques used in this design included individual semi-structured, open-ended interviews, a focus group for member checking and long-term engagement with the data, and thematic analysis. Instruments for data collection and analysis included interview guide development and transcription. Coding organized the data gathered from the participant interviews, and categories and subcategories were identified through a flexible, collaborative, and creative process which allowed for identification of discrepant data and potential themes.

Results: Results informed programming at practice and administrative levels. A university/community partnership in the Mid-Atlantic United States developed and implemented this qualitative program evaluation model as part of project evaluations for three distinct federal grants (i.e., rural health outreach, adult drug court, and family treatment court). Results of this program evaluation model included the development of rich and meaningful themes to guide programming/quality assurance, offering transferable recommendations to other entities.

Conclusion: Qualitative case study program evaluation offers opportunities for evaluator and stakeholder collaboration and a quicker quality improvement loop in the tradition of participatory evaluation methods.

Keywords: program evaluation, behavioral health, qualitative, case study