Using Qualitative Research as a Means to an Effective Survey Instrument

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The academic medicine and health care fields have seen a recent spate of studies using various qualitative research methods.\(^1\) Even more recently, a move to establish standards for reporting qualitative research has emerged.\(^2\) The contributions of these qualitative approaches, which facilitate rich insight into an issue by focusing on the how and why of phenomena, are unique and important. Another way qualitative methods contribute to research is through their systematic use in the survey instrument development process. That is, explicitly applying steps of qualitative methods during the development of a quantitative survey can strengthen the instrument and yield more meaningful results.

Instrument Development Process, Enhanced Using Qualitative Methods

**INITIAL INTERVIEWS with key stakeholders and representative members of the intended survey population**

Interviews can enhance understanding of an issue and help formulate a more comprehensive topic guide.\(^3\) The purpose of an initial interview is to explore responses from different people to identify all the critical aspects of, and gather in-depth insights into, the topic before designing the survey.

*Do you think about “climate” when you evaluate your job situation? Why or why not?*

**FOCUS GROUPS with stakeholders and members of the target research population**

Semistructured focus groups help refine different content domains—developed in part through initial interviews—for the survey instrument. Focus group questions (as opposed to a formalized questionnaire) serve as guides, and emergent themes from the discussions can be used to generate specific survey items containing common and understandable language.

*What criteria do you consider when judging whether your department is providing a work climate that you like?*

**SURVEY DRAFT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have meaningful interactions with departmental colleagues.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FINAL SURVEY DRAFT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues in my department generally support one another.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel appreciated by my departmental colleagues.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Designing high-quality survey instruments can be challenging. Systematic use of qualitative methods during the instrument development process can lead to enhanced survey outcomes, including:

- a comprehensive understanding of the issues impacting the study,
- the discovery of issues or response options that may have been missed,
- insight into crafting focused items, and
- a more robust, accurate, and actionable survey.

References:

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