

Formative Research: What, Why and How

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Formative Research and Its Applications

Formative research is used in a variety of settings for multiple purposes.

“... the basis for developing effective strategies, including communication channels, for **influencing behavior change**. It helps researchers identify and **understand the characteristics** - interests, behaviors and needs - of target populations that influence their decisions and actions. Formative research is integral in **developing programs** as well as **improving existing** and ongoing programs.”

“... Research conducted during the **development of a program** to help decide on and describe the **target audience**, understand the factors which influence their behavior, and determine the best ways to reach them. It looks at **behaviors, attitudes and practices** of target groups, involves exploring behavioral determinants, and uses a **myriad of methods** to collect data. Formative research may be used to **complement existing** epidemiological and behavioral data to assist in **program planning and design.**”

“Formative research looks at the **community** in which an organization is implementing or plans to implement program activities, and helps the organization to understand the interests, characteristics, and needs of different populations and groups in their community. Formative research is research that occurs **before a program is designed** and implemented, or **while a program is being implemented** to help “form” or modify a program. Formative research should be an **integral part** of developing programs or adapting programs, and should be used to help **refine and improve program activities.**”

When to Use Formative Research

Before (always)

- Critical - formulates the intervention

During

- Monitoring and evaluation framework
- Quality of intervention delivery
- Intended effects
- Respond to concern

After

- Program evaluation

Characteristics

- **Practical**- informs decision making
- Designed to support **change**
- Improvement or **reform** of project
- **Process**-oriented
- **Systematic**

Methods

- Conduct a literature review
- Address gaps in knowledge through primary data collection
- Adaptable methods- address questions that arise from the data

Three General Methods

1. Qualitative Research
2. Quantitative Research
3. Mixed Method Research

Qualitative Research

- In-depth Interviews
- Focus Group Discussions
- Other qualitative methods
 - Social mapping
 - Pile sorting
 - Free listing
 - Observations
 - Participant Observation
 - Rankings

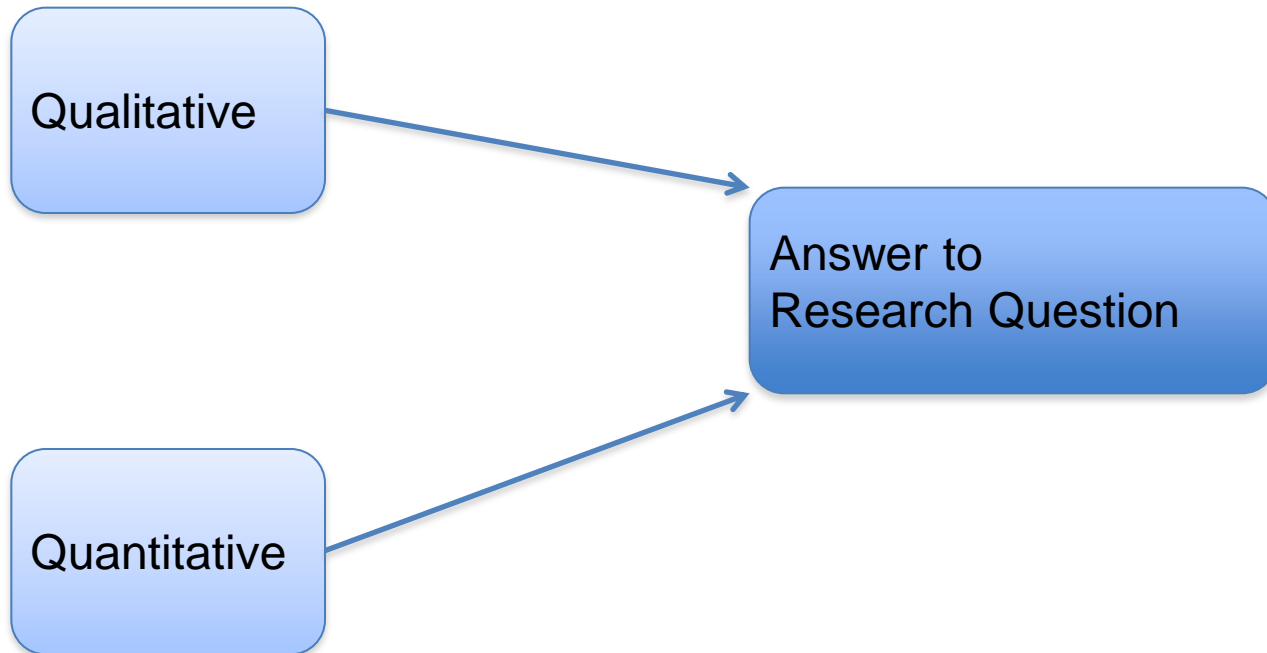


Quantitative Research

- Numbers/Percentages
- Measurable
- Statistical Analysis
- Employs mathematical models, theories, hypotheses
- Example: Surveys

Mixed Methods

- Mixing of methodologies
- Strengthens data
- Triangulation



Neonatal Health



Picture Source: Save the Children

Formative Research and Newborn Health

Example:

Newborn umbilical cord and skin care in Sylhet District, Bangladesh: implications for the promotion of umbilical cord cleansing with topical chlorhexidine

Methods

Mixed Methods Study

- **Quantitative:** Household surveys
 - Tables 2, 3, 4
- **Qualitative:** Unstructured interviews, structured observations, and rating and ranking exercises
 - Used to explain or expand upon the quantitative results

Outcomes of Formative Research

Unhygienic cord care practices in the region to target for the intervention

- 7% not tie cord prior to cutting
- Removal of vernix commonly practiced
- High proportion of infants receive mustard oil massage
- 24% of newborns had substance applied to stump
- Few wash hands before attending to newborn

Target population- mothers and other female caregivers

Local terms

- Shek dewa= method used to clean area around stump of umbilical cord
- Katha= blanket

Maternal Health



Source: Tripathy P, Nair N, Barnett S, Mahapatra R, Borghi J, Rath S, Rath S, Gope R, Mahto D, Sinha R, Lakshminarayana R, Patel V, Pagel C, Prost A, Costello A. Effect of a participatory intervention with women's groups on birth outcomes and maternal depression in Jharkhand and Orissa, India: a cluster-randomized controlled trial. *The Lancet* 2010. 375: 1182-92.

Formative Research and Maternal Health

Example:

Women's groups' perceptions of
maternal health issues in rural
Malawi

Methods

- Qualitative Research
 - Participatory women's groups
 - Identify maternal health problem
 - Rank problems
 - 6 FGDs with the women's groups
 - 3 FGDs with women facilitators
 - 4 IDIs with facilitator supervisors

Outcomes

- Commonly identified maternal health problems and priorities
- Women's groups as a possible effective method of reducing MMR
 - Community mobilization
 - Women's voices heard
- Future studies

HPV Vaccine



Photo Source: Partners in Health

Outcomes of Formative Research

1. Informs program planning and research design
2. Ensures program is culturally appropriate
3. Aids in developing partnerships with community members

1. Informs Program Planning and Design

- Identify gaps in knowledge and barriers
- Results are translated into interventions
 - Informs intervention design, programs, practices and initiatives
 - Critical to designing and delivering health programs that are effective and efficient in reaching target audiences
- Provides framework for developing interventions in other contexts

2. Ensures Program is Culturally Appropriate

- Increased understanding of the context of the study area
- Identifies “local expressions”- provides input for the research question and design
- Adapt and test key intervention messages
 - Culturally appropriate and sensitive
 - Acceptability at the family and community level
 - Modify interventions and approaches to fit local context

3. Aids in Developing Partnerships with Community Members

- Begins dialogue between community and researchers
- Learn from community members
- Promotes community engagement
 - Helps field staff see themselves as equal participants
 - Increases the possibility that effective, acceptable and sustainable interventions are developed

Take-Away Message

Formative research plays a critical role in

1. Understanding of why certain approaches work and others do not
2. Development of culturally appropriate and robust study instruments
3. Identifying the most appropriate interventions for testing
4. Understanding what causes an intervention to be successful

Question and Answer

References/ Readings

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*Note: These two articles came from a special edition of the Journal of Perinatology which focused on Using Research for Improved Delivery of Newborn Health Interventions. Volume 28; December 2008.