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Collecting or 'constructing' qualitative evaluation evidence addressing highly sensitive and marginalised issues? Lessons from evaluating Australian Clean Needle Programs

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Why Clean Needle Programs?

- Injecting Drug Use (IDU) problem in 148 countries
- HIV amongst IDUs in 120 countries
- 16 million IDUs; 3 million have HIV (prevalence up to 40% in 9 countries) – both figures rising (WHO)
- AIDS biggest cause of death among 15-59 year olds (Ministerial Advisory Committee on AIDS Sexual Health and Hepatitis: Hepatitis C Sub-Committee, Oct 2006).
- IDU big driver of HIV, of heterosexual HIV 60-100% in US and UK (D. Riley & O'Hare, 2000)
- 330,000 IDUs in Australia – HIV epidemic prevented by CNP – 1% are HIV positive (Ministerial Advisory Committee on AIDS Sexual Health and Hepatitis: Hepatitis C Sub-Committee, Oct 2006).
- Infection spread can be very rapid – need vigilance
- Many IDU still not accessing CNP in Australia
- Qualitative understandings needed
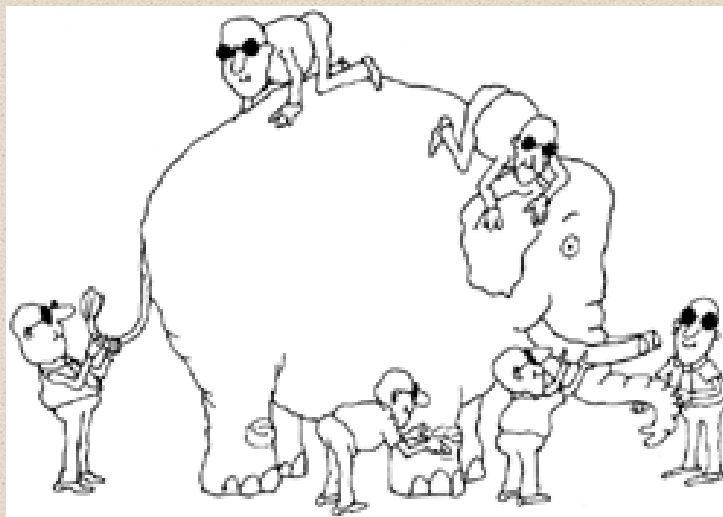
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What are Marginalized/Sensitive Groups?

- Vulnerable and suspicious
- Hidden and silent
- Shamed and stigmatized
- Lack power to voice interests
- Hard to reach and access
- Often engaged in taboo behaviour (injecting) and fear disclosure
- Emotionally challenging
- Interventions often local and low cost

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Each blind man gets an accurate idea of a part of the elephant, but no one 'sees' the whole beast.

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Qualitative Evaluation

- Accounts acquired are:
  - Accurate/valid ;
  - Trustworthy/authentic
- Clear messages / mutual understanding / meaning
- Co-operation and collaboration of subjects
- Openness Honesty and Trust

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evaluations or WOMBATs
(a waste of money, brains and time)

Unfair to wombats!

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'Barriers from Service Providers'

- Build up (fragile?) trust relationships over time
- Concerns over cultural misunderstandings and incongruity
- Concerns over techniques/methods use
- Fears of service being jeopardized by 'bungling' evaluator
- Fears of inadequate evaluation
- Possible negative responses to 'threats'
- Empathize with vulnerable clients

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Ontological base of traditional Interviewing

- Advocates 'standardized' procedures to 'objectively' access an external (realist) reality
- Interviewer rendered practically 'invisible'
- Qualitative interviews as 'lubricants' and 'teasers' to reveal the uncontaminated 'truth'
- Sensitivity, value, encouragement, confidentiality as technical devices
- Interviewer as facilitator of free if 'guided' subject expression

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"An interview… is a situation in which respondents are required to demonstrate their competence in the role in which the interviewer casts them"

(Dingwall, 1997) (58).

Post-Modern Challenges to Orthodox Interviewing

(Gubrium, &Holstein 2004)

- OI assertion objective external reality is act of fabrication
- OI assumes participant as a passive vessel of answers to be tapped
- Meanings generated during interviews are co-constructed at that time and in that space
- Replacement of singular 'truth' by 'relative truths' challenges authenticity

"One can only deal effectively with problematic situations once they are defined as problems"
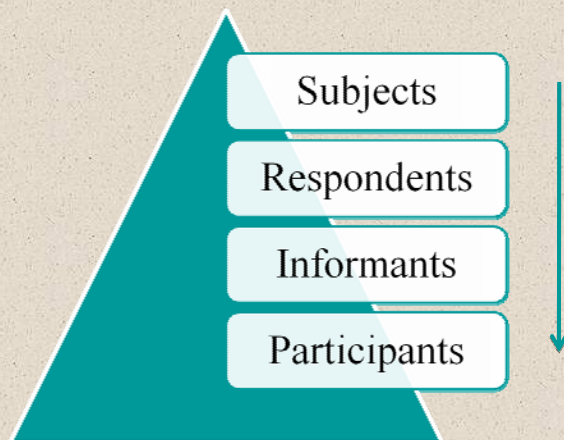
(Rubinstein, Scrimshaw, & Morrissey, 2003).

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Signifying Research Engagement
(Morse, 1991)

Subjects

Respondents

Informants

Participants

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IDU Orthodox Interview Problems

- Over-management (Kuhn 1962)
- Natural Conversation v Phlegmatic detachment
- With-holding my opinions?
- Managing appearance v Inevitable Deceit? (Norris 1993)
- Coercion, power differential, exploitation
- Sabotaging the 'selves' of others (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2002)

Need to move from 'subject' toward 'participant'

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Rapport Difficulties

- 'Over-disclosure' (Morgan 1998)
- 'Under-disclosure'
- Lip Reading the Simpsons...Intoxication
- Access and Consent
- Ascribed features of the Interviewer
- Reading non-verbal signs
- Gender and culture issues
- Unreliable Interviewees
- Deceit

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CNP and Deceits (also: Broadhead, 2001)

- Outreach workers deceiving CNP organisation
- Outreach workers deceiving evaluators
- CNP organisation deceiving funders
- CNP organisation deceiving Outreach Workers
- Everyone deceiving the evaluators!

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Adapting Participatory / Ethnographic Approaches

- Outreach Workers and Managers as partners & quasi-ethnographic sponsors *
- Locating oneself at the site – helping out
- Understand contexts
- Reflexive Diaries
- Engaging partners and critical reference groups (Wadsworth, 1998)
- On-going feedback

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Sponsors and Ethnography
William Foot Whyte, 1955

- Getting in and Getting on (Lee 1995)
- Link to different vulnerable groups
- Cultural guide
- Sharing meaning and (inside) knowledge
- Interpersonal trust
- Value and participation

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Approach to Interviewing

- Interviewing in a safe place
- Auditing my Performance
- Mini Focus groups and Conjoint Interviews (Booth & Booth, 1994)
- Repeating Interviews
- Outreach worker Interviewers
- On-going analyses in tandem with fieldwork
- Adaptive sampling (Thompson & Collins, 2002)

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- Indirect Questioning
- Reflective questioning
- Iterative questioning
- Naive Apprentice and Acceptable incompetent (Fielding, 1993)
- Conversation Partners (Rubin and Rubin 1995

Conversation Partners

"The term conversational partner has the advantage of emphasising the link between interviewing and conversation, and the active role of the interviewee in shaping the discussion. Moreover the term suggests a congenial and cooperative experience, as both interviewer and interviewee work together to achieve the shared goal of understanding" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) (11).

Interviewer Self-Disclosure

- Reciprocity (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005)
- Common sharing promoting ease (Oakley, 1981)
- Allaying distrust (Dunbar et al 2002)
- Tricky in practice!!!

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The Intimacy of the Outsider

- *'The stranger on the train' where being unfamiliar with a conversation partner and aware that they may not meet you again promotes a 'freedom' to express personal issues beyond how they might be discussed with friends or family'* (Morgan, 1998) (91).

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Tentative Conclusions

- Post modern critique of orthodox interviews present challenges we need to consider if the evidence we provide as evaluators is credible
- Broader and specific contexts and the 'active' nature of interviewees influence the nature of interviews and evidence generated
- Collaborative and flexible approaches which value participants and allow naturalistic contribution from the interviewer may enhance evaluation evidence
- Addressing the 'construction' of qualitative evidence strengthens its credibility

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Detachment and author objectivity are barriers to quality, not insurance of having achieved it, (Lincoln, 2002) (334).

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