

Methodological approaches to researching attitudes to standards in public life

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Requirements for successful research on public attitudes

- Clarity re aims of the research
 - purpose, outputs, concepts, issues
 - The public should:
 - understand the concepts/issues
 - have relevant knowledge, attitudes, opinions
 - be willing and able to articulate them

What questions should the research address?

- What are the key issues?
- What sort of information is required?
 - Importance of standards in general and which standards in particular
 - Acceptability of different types of behaviour
 - Behaviour of public office holders
 - Measures of proportions of people with different opinions/attitudes/values
 - Measures of change over time

What were the problems?

- No previous research to build on
- Public's lack of knowledge/understanding of the issues
- People have difficulty thinking about abstract ideas - need to make it concrete
- All starting at different places
- Potentially influenced by specific/recent events

Stages in the research

- Exploratory research to clarify the issues and focus the research questions
- Development and testing of questions and measures
- Quantitative survey
- Repeat survey over time
- Further qualitative research on 7 principles

NatCen qualitative study

- 15 focus groups
- 6 locations
- Report published by National Centre for Social Research in January 2003:
J. Graham, W. O'Connor, J. Curtice and A. Park
Guiding Principles: Public Attitudes towards Conduct in Public Life

What do focus groups tell us?

- How people structure their thoughts about a topic
- Understanding of general concepts
- Use of terminology/vocabulary
- Opinions about difficulty/sensitivity of questions
- Exploit group dynamics to generate differences in views and raise things not everyone would have thought about

Outputs of qualitative work

- Generates view of understanding of and reaction to issues
- Provides indication of important dimensions and topics to cover
- Provides material for developing questions
 - appropriate language
 - level of understanding and knowledge
 - willingness to answer

Views about standards

- Importance of maintenance of standards
 - Explored reasons for this
- Lack of trust in public office holders, especially elected politicians
- Less agreement on scope of standards
 - whether they applied equally to all public office holders
 - whether they applied to private life

Views about the 7 Principles

- The 7 Principles were generally endorsed and seen as relevant
- Some thought their scope was wider than it is
- Most important principle is Honesty – others follow from this
- Lack of clear distinction between some of the principles
- Use of different language/some terms not understood
- Some distinctions in applicability to elected and appointed office holders

Views about behaviour

3 scenarios of possibly unethical behaviour used to make things concrete

- Little agreement about how the principles should be applied
- Different principles evoked by same scenario
- Brought in other factors in addition to the principles
 - trust
 - perceived benefit
 - power
 - reasonableness etc

Value of the qualitative research

- Provides valuable understanding of how the public views standards in public life
- Demonstrates the sort of language they use/terms they are not familiar with
- Can't ask directly about 7 principles
- Value of using scenarios to find out views of specific behaviour

What we can't research directly

- Can't ask people directly what influences their attitudes
 - Lots of potential influences
 - Lack of conscious awareness
 - Rationalisation
- Can't ask people how much their views are influenced by the media