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Talking to Landlords

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Abstract

Although evaluations of housing programs have increasingly incorporated a qualitative component to help researchers understand the mechanisms and meanings behind the statistical findings, systematic collection of data from housing suppliers (landlords, property managers, builders, and developers) has been lacking. Indeed, no comprehensive set of best practices exist for evaluation teams looking to incorporate the voices of supply-side actors in their work. In response to the lack of information on housing suppliers and a desire to understand what motivates landlord participation in the Housing Choice Voucher Program, HUD funded the first ethnographic study of landlords, Urban Landlords and the Housing Choice Voucher Program: A Research Report. *This study involved a 5-year data collection effort in Baltimore, MD; Dallas, TX; Cleveland, OH; and Washington, D.C., and conducted 150 interviews with landlords and property managers, most of whom were drawn from a random stratified sample.*

Abstract (continued)

In the article, we explore lessons learned across four key components of the ethnographic study: (1) sampling, including the process of developing a sampling frame, stratification, and pulling a sample; (2) recruitment, focusing on the "under the hood" techniques for getting landlords to participate; (3) the interview itself, exploring how to elicit candid responses that can inform policy development; and (4) ethnographic methods, focusing on how field observation can enrich the interview data and reduce analytic bias. We believe the technical details provided will be of great interest within the housing policy evaluation community and advance the use of qualitative and ethnographic methods in evaluation research going forward.

Introduction

Evaluation researchers have long understood that "for the results to be useful in the policy process, it is imperative that the nature of the program and the characteristics of its participants be carefully documented" (Orr, 1998:16). Indeed, it is now fairly standard for large-scale policy evaluations to include some form of qualitative data collection. When programs fail to have a significant impact—or unexpectedly succeed—we can often learn why by talking directly to program participants. In this way, researchers can glean insight into the mechanisms that drive take-up rates, program attrition, effect heterogeneity, and durability (for an examples of this approach related to the Moving to Opportunity Demonstration see Clampet-Lundquist et al., 2011; DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin, 2016; Edin, DeLuca, and Owens, 2012; Smith et al., 2014).

For housing programs, however, success depends not just on program participants, but also on another set of actors: the rental property owners who decide whether or not to participate by renting to subsidized tenants. On this issue, most evaluations are nearly silent, leaving core questions unanswered. What role do landlords play in explaining why voucher families struggle to find housing in low-poverty neighborhoods? What motivates some landlords to market their properties to subsidized tenants and others to avoid them? For these questions, tenant interviews fall short.

Although the behaviors of rental property owners are highly motivated by profit maximization, the story is much more complex, requiring a more sociological examination of their business strategies, motivations, and ideologies. What little data exist on landlord behavior suggests that for the past 50 years at least one-half of the urban housing stock has been owned by individuals with limited expertise, whose behaviors are hard to predict based on traditional financial metrics (Garboden and Newman, 2012; Mallach, 2006; Sternlieb, 1966). It is necessary, then, to study landlord decision making as one would study any other social group—directly.

Our recent study, conducted in partnership with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, has confirmed the value of this approach (Garboden et al., 2018; Garboden and Rosen, Forthcoming; Greif, Forthcoming). For example, the seemingly straightforward question

of why landlords choose to house subsidized tenants was based not only on their comparative evaluation of voucher and market tenants, but on their personal experiences with voucher program administration and the ideological lens through which they view those experiences. By capturing a systematic random sample of landlords, and engaging them in open-ended interviews and field observations, our goal was to provide empirical data that can be used to guide policy reform.

In this article, we describe the application of indepth interviewing and qualitative field methods (Becker, 1998; Weiss, 1994) to housing policy evaluation. These methods are drawn from a long tradition, especially in the study of urban populations (Anderson, 1999; Duneier, 2001; Edin and Lein, 1997; Liebow, 1967; Pattillo McCoy, 1999; Suttles, 1968; Venkatesh, 2002), but have rarely been applied to supply-side actors. Given the relative paucity of studies that have engaged rental property owners in this way (for exceptions, Greenlee, 2014; Rosen, 2014; Varady, Jaroscak, and Kleinhans, 2017), and the limitations of the sampling designs in the extant literature, the goal of this brief methodological article is to present a set of best practices learned during our data collection process.

Developing A Sampling Frame

Although qualitative studies rarely have sufficient statistical power to generate precise population-level inferences when utilizing a random sample, we do not think it is appropriate to jettison the concept of sampling all together (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin, 2018; but see Small, 2009). When possible, is vastly preferable to select 100 respondents with stratified random selection than to introduce the bias associated with convenience, venue, or snowball sampling. Like other industries, real estate consists of dozens of niches and hundreds of supply-side networks. To sample based on location or referrals, then, is to introduce inaccurate homogeneity into one's sample and potentially miss significant sections of the market.

Unfortunately, we know of no city that maintains a publicly available list of all rental property owners within its jurisdiction complete with updated contact information. Even if such a list existed, the issue is further complicated by property management companies, who do not appear as the owner of record, but hold key information regarding the management of particular units. This complication makes developing a sampling frame, from which a random sample of landlords could be drawn, extremely challenging.

No solution is perfect, but considering the key research questions that the study was designed to address provides some direction. In this study, we were interested in understanding the experience of poor families, with and without vouchers, searching for housing in four cities: Baltimore, Cleveland, Dallas, and Washington, D.C. It was therefore appropriate to construct our sampling frame from active real estate listings in each city, thus capturing the distribution of options available to poor families. Once the data were scraped and geocoded, we were able to construct a sampling frame from which to select our respondents.

Some poor families, of course, do not search for housing online. Instead they use either referrals from friends and family or spatial proximity to identify housing (DeLuca, Rosenblatt, and Wood, forthcoming). For this reason, it is important to assess the limits of the sampling frame by

comparing the distribution of respondents to a representative dataset. In our case, we had access to HUD 50058 administrative data, linked to HUD's Voucher Management System data, to include property owner information and housing type. This analysis enabled us to show that the patterns of ownership conglomeration identified in our qualitative sample were reflective of the overall distribution in each of our three cities: they were concentrated in Dallas, highly fragmented in Cleveland, and Baltimore and Washington D.C. fell somewhere in between. More generally, the administrative data enabled us to determine where each interview fit into a broader distribution, to distinguish between outliers and modal cases.

Getting to Yes: Recruiting Landlords

Once we scraped a sample of rental listings and collected the corresponding contact information, getting landlords to say "yes" to an interview proved less difficult than we had imagined prior to beginning the study. We would call the number listed and ask to speak to the landlord or property manager associated with the property, briefly explain the purpose of the study, and ask if the landlord would be willing to participate in an interview. In most cases—and to our surprise—landlords said yes with little hesitation. For example, when we called Roger, a long-time D.C. landlord, we told him we wanted to learn more about his work as a landlord and he was immediately enthusiastic and eager to share his story. "I'm happy to meet with you and help so that you have the landlord perspective," he told us. In general, landlords jumped at the opportunity to tell someone about the daily challenges of owning and managing affordable housing. In their role as landlords, most of them spend a lot of time thinking about how to make the system work better—yet they rarely have a listening ear.

However, not all landlords are so easy to recruit. Some simply do not answer their phones. For these folks, persistence is key. For example, after calling a property near the D.C. Navy Yard a few times with no answer, we decided to visit. On arriving we learned that the property was actually made up of three different apartment buildings, each one with its own property manager. The first manager sent us down the street to the next building. The receptionist there was very kind and gave us the card of the property manager, who wasn't in that day. The fieldworkers called a few times over the next month, and finally the same receptionist declared that the manager wouldn't have time for at least a month. Finally, after months of back and forth, we made one last visit. The new property manager at the desk who had just been promoted readily agreed to an interview. The people who worked at the front desk were very familiar with us at that point, and they seemed just as relieved as we were to get a "yes." Timing, in other words, is key. Many landlords are willing to talk but cannot sacrifice work hours to participate. Catching landlords when they happen to have a lighter week and meeting them where and when they are available can be essential.

In other cases, landlords expressed some healthy skepticism about our project and had some questions before agreeing to interview. Many property managers regularly undergo fair housing audits and expressed worry that their corporate office had sent us undercover to interview them about the company and see what they would say. In these cases, having a valid university affiliation was critical. Some asked for scanned copies of our university IDs or requested that the PI email them from an official university address to verify our credentials. We also found it to be beneficial

to have a *local* university affiliation with which respondents were familiar. After confirming that we were not auditing them, they were happy to participate and were very forthcoming.

Our interview stipend of $50 served an important credibility role in this regard. Although few landlords were meaningfully incentivized by the money (indeed, some declined to accept it), we found that it had significant symbolic value. Not only did it show that we respected their time and were willing to compensate them for it, but it helped remove lingering doubts regarding our legitimacy.

Finding a way to talk to landlords who are less forthcoming has important implications for inference. The busy, suspicious, or reticent respondents may have different skills, knowledge, ideologies, and practices than those who most readily agree to an interview. As with any other population, the landlords most willing to talk are often those with the most intense sentiments, whether positive or negative. These issues have affected previous work where resource constraints often necessitate the use of mass mailings for recruitment (Ellen et al., 2013; Greenlee, 2014). While efficient, this method tends to yield low response rates. In our study, we achieved response rates ranging from 35 percent to 75 percent, depending on the site. In all cases, the primary factor in the response rate was the amount of time we had in the field to make contact with hard-to-reach landlords. Notably, our refusal rate—those who actively said no—was below 20 percent in all cities.

Washington, D.C.—our most recent study site—represents an ideal case. Not only was our time in the field essentially unbounded, but the team had the benefit of substantial experience in the field. In the district, we successfully interviewed 75 percent of our random sample. Only 3 out of the 36 landlords we sampled actually refused an interview. We were unable to interview another five, who either never called back, or were too busy to schedule an interview. Persistence, and budgeting the time to be persistent is key.

Nail the Interview: How to Engage Landlords with Indepth Interviews

Once an interview is scheduled, it is important to maximize the quantity and quality of the data collected—particularly given that our meetings with landlords were often scheduled to accommodate their hectic schedules. We relied on a number of practices for best understanding how landlords make sense of their world and their actions within it. Interviews are best for learning about respondents' subjective experiences of the world, narratives, worldviews, beliefs, and meaning-making (Katz, 1999; Lamont and Small, 2008; Lamont and Swidler, 2014; Young, 2004). Although interviews do not always reflect exactly what people *do*, they are key for understanding how they *think* about (that is, make sense of) what they do (Becker, 1998; DeLuca et al., 2016: appendix; Katz 1999).

Moreover, the tools of ethnographic interviewing include a number of techniques to improve the accuracy and precision of retrospective accounts (Boyd and DeLuca, 2018). For example, Boyd and DeLuca suggest that recalling specific details of one's life is much more accurate when such details are embedded within stories that pertain to the topics of the research study, by "pegging" events of

interest to life milestones (Boyd and DeLuca, 2018). Rapport is key. Many landlords believe that public perception in general, and academia in particular, is normatively biased against supply-side actors. Thus, investing time and energy into building an atmosphere of trust is essential for candid data collection.

Above all else, our goal as interviewers is to say as little as possible while ensuring that the conversation rigorously covers each topic laid out in the interview protocol. Ideally, both the answers, as well as the questions, should come from the respondents as they reflect on their world (Spradley, 1979). Rather than prompting for specific details about, for example, negative experiences with tenants or bureaucratic troubles with the local Public Housing Authority (PHA), we started by asking open-ended questions that enabled our respondents to tell us detailed stories that encompassed details relevant to many of our topics of inquiry at once. When a respondent tells a story, they open a window into an entire experience related to a particular issue and are therefore less likely to massage specific details in response to the wording of a question (problems that psychologists call priming, or social desirability bias).

When we do speak during the interview, we try to elicit stories that are rich in detail. Because many respondents assume that we want top-level summaries, as might be requested in a marketing survey, we begin the interview by "training" them to provide descriptive details and define the terms they use. Rather than focusing on generalities, we ask for specific examples. We say things like: "Tell me more about that," "Can you give me an example?" or "What would that look like?" Rather than asking yes or no questions, we ask for stories about processes (Becker, 1998). We then follow up to ask if an example is an extreme one or a typical one in order to contextualize it.

Like most people, landlords love to complain and vent and rarely have a venue to do so. They are quick to recount the stories of their worst tenants ever. Roger, for example, opened the conversation by stating: "I have lots of crazy stories to share." Although we are certainly interested in his crazy stories, we are more interested in his day-to-day work and views. But letting landlords vent and air their grievances at the beginning of the interview is important for building rapport and empathy. Thus, the training portion of our interview typically entails between 10 and 40 minutes of open-ended "airing of grievances." Once these stories are shared, it is much easier to put these frustrations in context and learn how they fit in to a larger set of landlord-tenant relations, at least from the landlord perspective.

We mitigate against hearing only outlier cases using a number of interview techniques. When a landlord tells an extreme story, we ask them to put that story in context, asking questions to learn about how typical or common a particular event might be: "How many other times have you experienced something similar?" "Is that a typical outcome for you?" "Tell me about a time when a tenant responded to the same situation differently." Our goal of course, is not to produce a perfectly accurate retrospective count of a particular event or outcome, but rather to understand the process and how it varies in range.

Although we always attempt to verify details recounted in an interview with observation or outside sources, this is not always possible, and in some ways, it is not the most important part of the interview. In fact, we are less interested in whether the landlord has a perfect memory, and more

in their understanding and interpretation of an event. When Ben, a Baltimore landlord, told us about his tenant who "went ballistic" one day and threw her pots and pans out the window, we were cognizant that this incident may not have unfolded exactly as he recounted it. In Ben's case, we were most interested in learning about his interpretation of the incident, his views of the tenant, and how they informed his subsequent actions vis à vis his other tenants.

The interview is a speech act from which one can learn a lot about how a respondent thinks and sees the world (Lamont, 1992), as well as a social occasion from which much can be learned in and of itself (Spradley, 1979), but of course, limitations exist, which we address through ethnographic observations.

Talk the Talk, Then Walk the Walk: The Value of Participant Observation

A common critique of interview data is that what people say and what they do are not necessarily the same thing (Jerolmack and Khan, 2014). Issues related to this "attitudinal fallacy" can be greatly reduced using the interviewing techniques described previously, as well as being circumspect in what conclusions can be drawn from retrospective accounts (Lamont and Swidler, 2014). But it can nevertheless be hard for researchers to interpret interview data without any immediate observation of the phenomenon. Is a landlord describing, for example, how they think they behave in a particular circumstance, or how they *actually* behave? What components of a process are they glossing over, consciously or otherwise?

The most effective way to limit these concerns is to incorporate participant observation into the data collection process. Although it can be prohibitively expensive to implement at scale, moments of focused observation of landlord behaviors can enrich the researcher's ability to interpret their interview data and expose important areas of inquiry that can be used to improve the interview guide.

When done properly, the interview process can be a moment of trust and rapport building such that most respondents accepted our offer to observe them in their work. Having just described their work to us in great detail during the interview, they were excited to show us, rather than just tell, what it was like. In a few cases, the respondent was engaged in some relevant work immediately following the interview, in which case we would simply tag along. But more often than not, we would agree to meet them later in the week, sometimes spending the whole day with them as they went about their business.

Entire books have been written on the process of collecting ethnographic data (Becker, 1998; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011; Spradley, 1979), but here we highlight a few techniques that were particularly relevant to studying landlords.

(1) Managing Your Presence in The Field

During the participant observation, it is important to ensure that one's presence does not impact what one is observing; ethnographers work to be present yet non-intrusive at all times.

We were careful to disclose our role as researchers when directly engaging any third parties, but generally such introductions were unnecessary, and we were able to observe events in relative anonymity. Given that real estate is a fairly diverse field in terms of age, gender, and race, obvious demographic differences between our team and our respondents did not greatly impact the observations. But our fieldworkers were careful to blend in when possible, for example in their attire: a fieldworker in a suit at a construction site or a t-shirt at housing court can be a distraction.

More than physical appearance, we trained our fieldworkers to be extremely sensitive to the degree their body language or tone expressed any normative judgements of the respondent him/herself or any other actors they might encounter. When individuals feel they are being judged or evaluated, they may begin to behave unnaturally, damaging rapport and biasing the data. Thus the tendency to critically evaluate an experience—a natural tendency for academic researchers—must be carefully avoided. For example, we toured many investment properties under renovation. During such visits, it was standard to ask questions related to costs of the rehab, project funding, and so forth. It was important in this line of questioning to avoid passing judgement on the quality of the investment. Such a suggestion could put respondents on the defensive, jeopardizing the observation and the relationship.

(2) Ask the Respondent to Interpret What You Are Seeing

Although objective evaluation itself can be extremely valuable, the benefit of extended sessions of participant observation is that we could see something occur and then later hear from the landlord how he/she interpreted the encounter. These post-facto conversations were easy to fit in between observations, particularly in Dallas where we spent hours driving with respondents from one neighborhood to the next.

This technique proved invaluable to data collection related to tenant screening. For example, we spent several days observing a landlord, Clifton in Dallas. He got a phone call from a potential renter, said he was driving and couldn't talk but that he would text him. He immediately handed the phone to his son, who was working with him that summer. "Send him the photos of [the property]," Clifton said and his son complied. When the applicant texted back that he liked the look of the unit, Clifton told his son to ask what his annual salary was and if he could prove it. The applicant texted back a high enough income, but said he was a contractor and so had no pay stubs. "Stop texting him," Clifton said, and that was the end of it.

When asked to explain what happened, Clifton noted "that guy eats what he kills," meaning that he worked for cash and thus likely would not have reliable income with which to pay rent. Clifton also noted that the text messaging was orchestrated for the purpose of establishing a written record of the interaction with the tenant and his answers to the screening questions (indeed, Clifton had no trouble engaging in extended conversations while driving throughout the day). He said that if the applicant had been able to provide source of income, that a dozen other questions would have followed, and he was prepared to ask him about his previous residential history, downpayment, and so forth.

The key here is that just like the interview process, the observation occurs from the standpoint of a learner. Not only is the researcher in the field observing things, but they must recognize that they are ignorant of the correct interpretation of what they are witnessing. Having numerous events occur in real-time and having the respondent interpret them is a core element of data collection.

Conclusion

In this article, we have summarized our techniques for collecting high-quality interview and ethnographic data from a random sample of landlords. For the sake of parsimony, we have not included an exhaustive discussion of what can be learned in the field. However, we aim to provide some key direction for how to engage with landlords using qualitative methods. We make the case that qualitative data contributes to our empirical understanding of housing markets in critical ways. We hope, going forward, that rigorous evaluations of HUD's programs are accompanied by indepth data collection (survey, interview, and ethnographic) from housing providers.

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