

## Part 2: Qualitative Research Methods<sup>2</sup>

The three most common qualitative methods are participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups.

### Interviews

Interviewing can be structured, with questions prepared and presented to each interviewee or interviews can be completely unstructured, like a free-flowing conversation. Qualitative researchers typically use a “semistructured” interviews which involve a number of open ended questions based on the topic areas that the researcher wants to cover. The open ended nature of the questions provides opportunities for both interviewer and interviewee to discuss some topics in more detail. If someone has difficulty answering a question or provides only a brief response, the interviewer can use cues or prompts to encourage the interviewee to consider the question further. In a semi structured interview the interviewer also has the freedom to probe the interviewee to elaborate on an original response or to follow a line of inquiry introduced by the interviewee. An example would be:

Interviewer: "I'd like to hear your thoughts on how you changed your curriculum this year to include more contemporary artists. How have the students reacted to this?"

Interviewee: "The students are more engaged than they used to be. But some are confused by certain works."

Interviewer: "Interesting, can you share some specific stories or examples?"

To prepare for interviews create a “topic guide” which is a list of topics the interviewer wishes to discuss. The guide is not a list of questions and should not restrict the interview, which needs to be conducted sensitively and flexibly allowing for follow up. Many interviewers will email or send a list of questions to the interviewee beforehand. It's also a good idea to make a simple infosheet that explains the purpose of your study, and covers logistical concerns like the consent form (has it been signed?), the voice recorder (is it switched on?). A good interviewer needs to be able to put an interviewee at ease, needs good listening skills and should choose a quiet, comfortable location. Most interviews are audio recorded. Interviews may also be video-taped if details such as non-verbal signals are needed for the analysis.

### Focus Groups

Focus groups resemble interviews, but typically involve small group of people. Focus groups are considered to work well with approximately 8 people, but this is not always easy to arrange. Like preparing for an interview, create a focus group guide that explains the purpose of the study, and lists a few guiding questions to help facilitate conversation. Make sure to audiorecord the

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<sup>2</sup> Adapated from: Hancock, B., Ockleford, E., & Windridge, K. (2009). *An introduction to qualitative research*. Sheffield, UK: National Institute for Health Research.

session and note who is talking when. Focus groups are ideally run in accessible locations where participants can feel comfortable and relaxed

### **Observation**

**Written descriptions.** The researcher can record observations of people, a situation or an environment by making notes of what has been observed. The limitations of this are similar to those of trying to write down interview data as an interview takes place. First there is a risk that the researcher will miss out on observations because s/he is writing about the last thing s/he noticed. Secondly, the researcher may find her/his attention focusing on a particular event or feature because it appears to be particularly interesting or relevant and miss things which are equally or more important but their importance is not recognised or acknowledged at the time.

**Video recording.** This frees the observer from the task of making notes at the time and allows events to be reviewed repeatedly. One disadvantage of video recording is that the participants may be more conscious of the camera than they would be of a person and that this will affect their behaviour. They may even try to avoid being filmed. This problem can be lessened by having the camera placed at a fixed point rather than being carried around. In either case though, only events in the line of the camera can be recorded, limiting the range of possible observations and perhaps distorting conclusions.

**Artifacts.** Artifacts may be objects which inform us about a phenomenon under study because of their significance to the phenomenon. Examples would be doctors' equipment in a particular clinic or art work hung in residential care homes.

### **Collection of Documented Material such as Letters, Diaries, Photographs**

**Documentation.** A wide range of written materials can produce qualitative information. These can be particularly useful in trying to understand the philosophy of an organisation as may be required in ethnography. They can include policy documents, mission statements, annual reports, minutes of meetings, codes of conduct, web sites, series of letters or emails, case notes, health promotion materials, etc. Diary entries may be used retrospectively or may be given to research participants who are asked to keep an account of issues or their thoughts concerning diet, medication, interactions with school services or whatever is the subject of the research. Audio diaries may be used if the written word presents problems. Notice boards can also be a valuable source of data.

**Photographs** are a good way of collecting information which can be captured in a single shot or series of shots. For example, photographs of buildings, neighbourhoods, dress and appearance could be analysed in such a way as to develop theory about professional relationships over a given time period. Photographs may be produced for research purposes or existing photographs may be used for analysis.

### **Collection of Narrative**

A story told by a research participant, or a conversation between two or more people can be used as data for qualitative research. Data collected should be entirely naturally occurring, not shaped as in a semistructured interview or focus group. Narrative data can however be collected in the course of a form of interview. The “narrative interview” begins with a “generative narrative question” which invites the interviewee to relate an account of their life history or a part of it. This could be an account of living with a chronic illness or with a child with special needs or as a carer for an elderly relative. During the first part of the interview, the interviewee should listen actively but should not interject with further questioning. When the narrator indicates that the narrative is completed, there follows a questioning phase where the interviewer elicits further information on fragments which have been introduced. This may be followed by a balancing phase where first “how” and then “why” questions are asked in order to gain further explanation of aspects of the narrative.

### **Recruitment in Qualitative Research**

A recruitment strategy is a project-specific plan for identifying and enrolling people to participate in a research study. The plan should specify criteria for screening potential participants, the number of people to be recruited, the location, and the approach to be used. In this section, we address some of the questions that may come up during the recruitment of participants.

### **Recruitment**

Ideally, the researcher will work together with a teacher, school or community leaders to develop a plan to identify and recruit potential participants for each site. Recruitment strategies are determined by the type and number of data collection activities in the study and by the characteristics of the study population. They are typically flexible and can be modified if new topics, research questions, or subpopulations emerge as important to the study, or if initial strategies do not result in the desired number of recruits. The criteria for selection can also be changed if certain data collection activities or subpopulations of people prove not to be useful in answering the research questions, as discussed in greater detail below.

### **What if we disagree with recommendations from local leaders’?**

It is important for the research team to be respectful of and responsive to the guidance and advice of local experts and community leaders. Remember that they have had more opportunity to establish rapport with the local community and they will also have to maintain that rapport after the study is complete. Remember also that community members may hold community leaders and local organizations accountable for any misunderstandings or other problems resulting from the behavior of the field staff.

### **What should we say to participants?**

Each research team develops guidelines for the introductory comments staff make to potential participants at each site. These guidelines need to be sensitive to the social and cultural contexts from which participants will be recruited. They should also reflect the researcher’s awareness that willingness to participate in an interview or focus group will depend on how well

the participants understand what the study is about, what will be expected of them if they participate, and how their privacy will be respected.

**Can we include youth?**

Yes, you may recruit minors, but you must obtain informed consent from the parent or guardian, as well as from the potential participant. Exceptions to the parental consent requirement include pregnant adolescents and homeless minors, but you should always consult the guidelines of the relevant ethics review boards before proceeding with recruitment. Moreover, recruitment of minors must be specifically approved by all relevant ethics review boards. Because they are considered a vulnerable population, recruiting minors for research studies is a highly sensitive issue, and extra measures are required to ensure their protection.

**Do we always need to obtain informed consent? If so, oral or written?**

Typically, formal informed consent is necessary for all qualitative research methods directly involving people. Whether this informed consent is oral or written depends on a number of factors and ultimately upon approval by the ethics committee. During recruitment, obtaining informed consent for qualitative research involves clearly explaining the project to potential study participants and getting a consent form signed and dated.