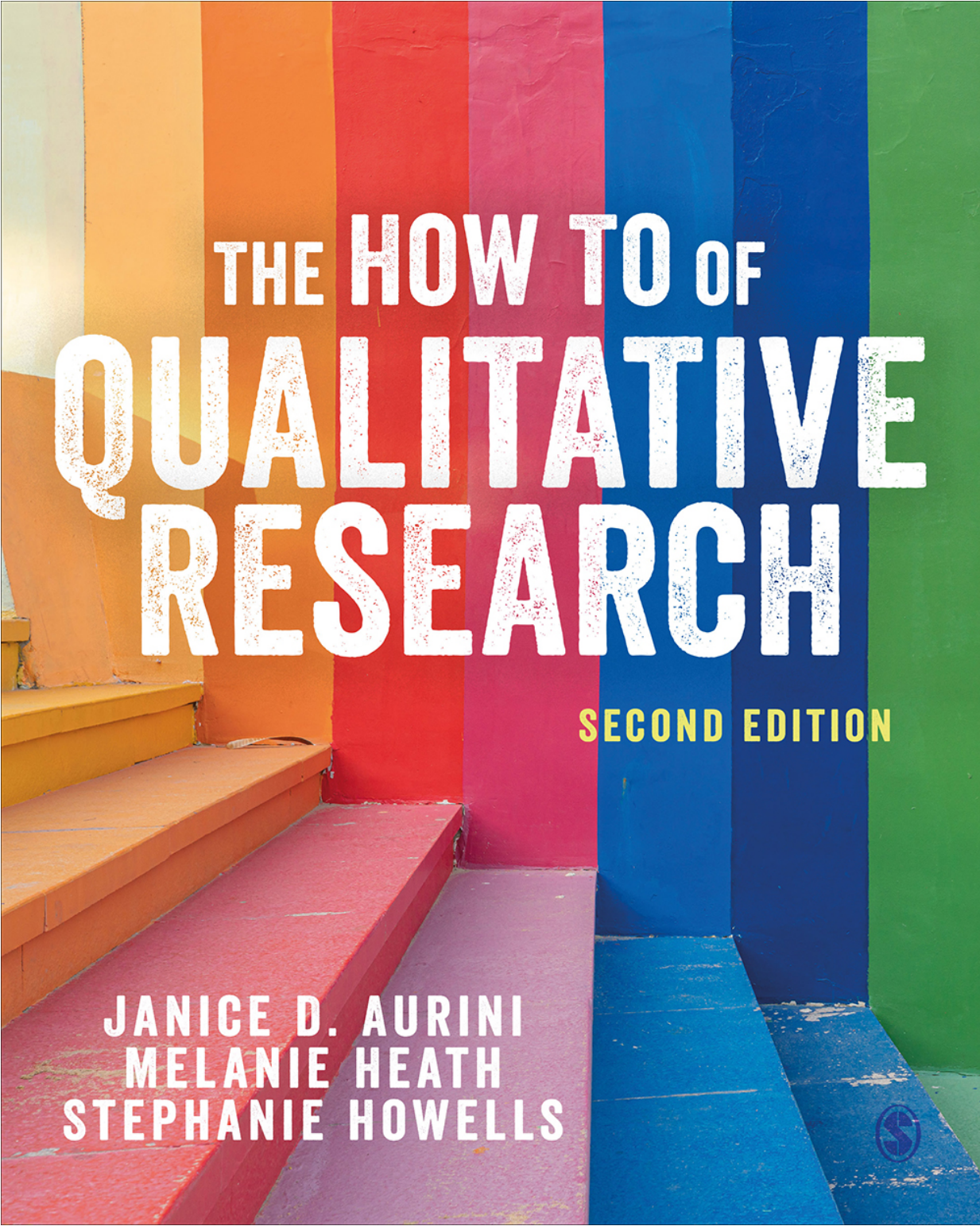
The book cover features a vibrant background of vertical stripes in shades of yellow, orange, red, blue, and green. In the lower-left corner, a set of concrete steps is visible, with each step painted to match the color of the stripe it sits on. The title is printed in a large, white, distressed, sans-serif font.

THE HOW TO OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

SECOND EDITION

JANICE D. AURINI
MELANIE HEATH
STEPHANIE HOWELLS



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THE HOW TO OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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THE HOW TO OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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This book is dedicated to the hundreds of people who have graciously participated in our research projects over the years.

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ONLINE RESOURCES



The How To of Qualitative Research is supported by a wealth of online resources for lecturers to aid study and support teaching, which are available at <https://study.sagepub.com/auriniheathandhowells2e>

PowerPoint decks covering the key information for each chapter, which can be downloaded and customized for use in your own presentations.

Testbanks containing questions related to the key research concepts in each chapter can be downloaded and used in class, as homework or exams.

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PART I JUMP STARTING YOUR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT

1 INTRODUCTION: FROM WHY TO HOW IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand? (Spradley, 1979, p. 34)

Spradley originally made this classic statement about ethnographers; yet for many it captures the broader essence of what it means to be a qualitative researcher. Doing qualitative research involves describing the context and meaning of individual and group life and understanding how people make sense of the world around them. Broadly, qualitative research is a scientific method of gathering non-numerical data to answer one or more research questions that focus on meaning-making and the patterns of social phenomena. Spradley's quote sounds straightforward: to be a qualitative researcher you need to be curious about how other people feel and understand things. While curiosity and empathy are key, qualitative research also requires many steps that take planning and theoretical sophistication. Sociologist Annette Lareau (featured in this chapter) describes a difficult moment that she experienced while conducting fieldwork, a qualitative method that requires building a close relationship with a group of people. Her story underscores how a good qualitative researcher needs to be prepared for the unexpected and learn as they go. As you read Lareau's story, consider what steps enabled her to get into the car with the family she was studying.

Putting on the Safety Belt When Conducting Qualitative Research

Annette Lareau

As part of a study to learn about child-rearing practices for white and African-American families of varying social class positions, summarized in my book *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, my research assistants and I did interviews with parents of 88 children and conducted intensive family observations of 12 families. The family observations were usually daily for about three weeks, and they often included one overnight stay. The visits were often unpredictable. You would show up, and then you would see what would happen. Sometimes this was stressful as in this instance when I am hanging out with a young, 10-year-old white girl in her grandmother's home:

It is Friday evening, and Katie Brindle and I are hanging out at her grandmother's house. Her uncle Brian, a white, working-class man in his 40s who is divorced, has his daughter Sarah visiting there too; Sarah and Katie, who are the same age, are playing. All of a sudden, Brian announces he is going to go buy a Christmas tree; the girls are excited, and they want to go with him. We all pile in the car, and I am in the front seat. As we get in, he talks about his car having a problem: 'Something is wrong with my steering or else my brakes. I don't want to go to no shopping mall or anywhere far away.' Normally I wear a safety belt whenever I drive or ride in a car, but no one moves to put on a belt. I later write in my notes: 'No safety belt. I desperately want to put one on, but no one else does. I feel unsafe.'

I had just met Brian that evening, I didn't know if he had been drinking, what kind of driver he was, and the state of the car – especially since he openly complained about the car possibly having a problem with the brakes. But, worried about looking pious and implicitly judgemental, I did not put on my safety belt for either of the short (i.e. 10-minute) trips to get the tree. This came at a cost: I was frightened.

Today I would put on my safety belt, and I would make a little joke about it. ('Don't mind me if I pop this on, my mom taught me to be a nervous Nellie.') But, since participant-observation unfolds in unexpected ways, it is hard to know how you will act until you are at the moment. And inevitably, you will make mistakes.

What is one lesson? You can and should speak up if you feel unsafe.

Indeed, in their book *Harassed: Gender, Bodies, and Ethnographic Research*, Rebecca Hanson and Patricia Richards suggest possibly using local research assistants, sharing your concerns with community members, and breaking down the myths about 'the lone ethnographer'.

But, at the same time, a lot of observations means that you are powerless and deferential. You are trying to make yourself 'smaller' to be part of the scene. You are trying to fit in. So, you don't get to do things your way. This powerlessness can be uncomfortable.

The value, however, is that you get to learn about a new part of the world. It can be exciting and rewarding. I learned that although all parents want their children to be healthy and happy, they have different approaches. Middle-class parents see they have a duty to promote children's talents in a strategy I termed 'concerted cultivation', while working-class and poor families spent scarce resources on getting their children through the day, and wanted to protect them from looming challenges. These parents met their children's basic needs, and then presumed that the children would spontaneously grow and thrive, a process I termed 'the accomplishment of natural growth'. This insight only emerged gradually in the fieldwork. There were many moments when I had few insights into my overall argument and what I would learn. Instead, it came bit by bit. Thus, in the darkened car that night, I learned about the varying ways that families respond to institutional standards – in this case wearing safety belts – which was one piece of the puzzle as I sought to understand class and race differences in family life for young children. But next time I would put on my safety belt.

Questions for reflection

1. What is the purpose of Lareau's research?
2. Why is qualitative research unpredictable?

References

Hanson, R., & Richards, P. (2019). *Harassed: Gender, bodies, and ethnographic research*. University of California Press.

Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life* (2nd edn, with an update a decade later). University of California Press.

Lareau, A., & Rao, A. (forthcoming). Intensive family observations: A methodological guide. *Sociological Methods and Research*.

Before entering the field, Lareau had an idea from previous research that class and race were likely important in the ways that parents raise their children. Her research design connected theory and data by studying middle-class and working-class Black and white families to see what was important to them in bringing up their kids. She had to carefully think about how to recruit families and how to study their lives.

Beginning a major qualitative research project for the first time, and even for those who are more experienced, can feel overwhelming. How do you decide what to study? What are the right methods to answer what you are searching to understand? This book provides a methodological toolkit for those who are embarking on a research project for the first time or who want to sharpen their skillset. We guide you through the steps to conduct a qualitative research project, providing guideposts along the way. Qualitative research helps us understand how broader structural, historical, and cultural conditions influence people's perspectives, experiences, and choices. Interviews, field observations, and physical and social

traces tell a unique story about the complexity of human development and group life.

As qualitative research continues to thrive, so too have the number of books about qualitative research methods. If you are new to qualitative methods, you will find no shortage of excellent books that broadly describe types of qualitative research, questions that different methods address, approaches to qualitative research, and ethical issues (e.g. Creswell, 2018; Hesse-Biber et al., 2010; Silverman, 2009). Other sources focus on a specific approach such as grounded theory (e.g. Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Complementing these books, you can also find edited volumes that provide useful overviews of the field, including discussions of competing paradigms and broad explanations of interpretive traditions (e.g. Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

If you are ready to design and collect qualitative data, you will not be so fortunate. In our search for the right book, we found few that take researchers from the 'what' and 'why' to the 'how' of qualitative research. Our book *The 'How To' of Qualitative Research* fills this void and will take you from understanding what qualitative methods are about, to identifying the steps to execute a high-quality qualitative research project. We have written this book to be accessible to more advanced undergraduate students, while providing enough methodological detail to make this book useful for graduate and postgraduate researchers interested in conducting a project that includes qualitative data. Before moving to the 'how', let's take a brief look at the 'what' question of qualitative research.

WHAT IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

Identifying exactly what we mean by qualitative research would seem simple and intuitive. However, qualitative researchers have not found an exact definition that is easily agreed upon. Aspers and Corte (2019) analysed 89 sources in textbooks and empirical work that sought to define the term 'qualitative', finding insufficient and imprecise definitions. The definition we would like to present follows that of Becker (2017) and Aspers and Corte (2019) who focus on the similarities between qualitative and quantitative research to delineate each. While there are certainly differences in epistemological and substantive approaches between the two, the relationship can be

seen more as a continuum rather than as a dichotomy. On the one hand, quantitative research focuses on operationalizing and measuring predetermined variables (Small, 2008). Qualitative research, on the other hand, seeks to investigate such variables to consider nuances and further distinctions. Aspers and Corte (2019) provide the following definition: 'Qualitative research [is] an iterative process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied' (p. 155). Importantly, we argue that qualitative and quantitative research complement each other, and that there is a qualitative element in quantitative research as it seeks to develop variables and answer research questions based on past research. Thus, there is not anything inherently qualitative about specific methods – field research, qualitative interviews, and so on. Qualitative research allows us to study a phenomenon in a continual fashion with the goal of discovering new findings to understand the social world. We now turn to what this book can teach you.

A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: WHAT THIS BOOK IS (AND IS NOT) ABOUT

You will benefit most from our book if you have already taken an introductory research methods course and are familiar with the variety of approaches, such as feminist or post-positivist ontological and epistemological positions, and types of methods, such as interviews and field research. Why? Our book is not about describing or theorizing qualitative methods, but rather *doing* qualitative research. That is, regardless of your 'approach', you still need to know how to design your project and data collection instruments. Our goal is to provide you with the practical tools you will need to answer critical questions such as: 'What are some ways to sample potential participants?'; 'How do I construct an interview schedule?'; 'How many interviews are enough?'; 'Should I be thinking of a single case study or a comparative study?'; 'What and how should I record in the field?'; 'How do I manage participants in a focus group?'; and 'What other sources of data should I consider?'.

We take a practical approach to doing qualitative research and do not subscribe to or promote any particular approach or method of qualitative research. Instead, the book is written from a pragmatist perspective (Patton, 2015), which subscribes to the philosophy that you should select 'the right tools for the job'. To do this, this book has the following features:

- We bring together exemplary technical guides and research studies in one book to offer detailed explanations of qualitative methodology and design. Drawing on the trusted sources that some masters of qualitative research utilize (e.g. their own course outlines), along with a thorough literature review and our own experience as qualitative researchers, allowed us to distil the most salient strategies for designing, collecting, and analysing qualitative data.
- Our book includes clear step-by-step instructions for developing a research design and complementary research tools (e.g. interview schedule). Our book provides some background (the

‘what’ and the ‘why’ part of qualitative research) but focuses primarily on detailing *how* you actually create and execute these techniques.

- Our book identifies the practical issues that many budding qualitative researchers face. We provide a number of useful pedagogical features, including boxed summaries, diagrams, checklists (e.g. creating an interview bag), and templates for organizing and collecting data (e.g. demographic survey). These tools can be used as is, or easily modified to suit the specific needs of your study.
- If you are an instructor, we offer a number of complementary teaching materials, including PowerPoint slides, a testbank, and Applied Learning Activities for use in the classroom. The aforementioned student exercises, templates, and checklists can also be easily used as effective in-class exercises or as assignments.

We have added several additional features in this edition of the book. These include:

- Original contributions from some of our favourite qualitative researchers. These contributions include important lessons they learned along the way, and how they worked through various types of challenges in the context of conducting a qualitative research study. These contributions are paired with reflection questions that we hope will generate meaningful critical reflection and discussion.
- Further Suggested Reading and SAGE Case Studies that can be used as instructional resources. These resources are also useful for qualitative researchers who want to expand their knowledge further.
- Glossary of Terms and Definitions.

Our book is about preparing you to make informed choices that allow you best to answer your research questions and make convincing

statements about your data. How? When you have forged a clear methodological pathway, you will be in a better position to build trustworthiness and credibility into your project (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthy and credible qualitative research has the following qualities:

- *Self-Reflexivity*: You can show that you considered the ways in which your personal characteristics and history shapes how you approached, collected, and analysed your data.
- *Transparency*: You can describe and document your data collection and analysis procedures in a manner that can be reviewed and scrutinized by others.
- *Evidence-Based*: You can demonstrate clear connections between your data, how you answered your research questions, and any conclusions you made about the focus of your inquiry.
- *Built-in Credibility and Trustworthiness Techniques*: You are able to show that you thoughtfully and purposefully built-in specific credibility and trustworthiness enhancing techniques such as prolonged engagement, **triangulation**, thick description, and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Trustworthy and credible qualitative research does not happen by accident or luck, it happens through good research design. This book shows you how to accomplish this by detailing the specific methodological strategies for conducting high-quality qualitative research.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Each chapter can be used as a standalone piece. If you are a less experienced researcher, you will want to start with 'How to Conceptualize Research' ([Chapter 2](#)) and 'How to Design a Qualitative Project: Selecting the Right Tools for the Job' ([Chapter 3](#)) and its companion chapter 'Taking a Step Back' ([Chapter 4](#)) to reflect upon your research design, before moving on to the chapters about the specific qualitative methodology that will best answer your

research question(s) ([Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8](#)). [Chapters 9 and 10](#) will take you through the 'how to' of data analysis and writing up qualitative research projects. If you are a more experienced researcher, you will likely narrow in on different sections and chapters of this book that address a new kind of project, including the chapters on focus groups and unobtrusive methods. If you are an instructor, this book can be easily adapted for a one-term or two-term course as either the main or complementary text depending on whether it is an introduction or more advanced methods course.

This book is divided into three main parts.

[Part I](#) will provide you with the tools you need to conceptualize and design your project.

- [Chapter 2](#) is about conceptualization, the art and practice of formulating a research project. This chapter will take you through the process of moving from a general research interest to a concrete and researchable research problem.
- [Chapter 3](#) is about research design. This chapter is premised on the belief that the research question drives the method. To this end, the chapter outlines different types of research questions and the optimal qualitative methods for answering them.
- [Chapter 4](#) continues the conversation about research design. It provides an overview of the ethical concerns that you will want to consider in designing your project. The chapter also provides some 'take a step back' considerations to ensure that your research design will enable you to answer your research question.

[Part II](#) outlines the strategies and methods for collecting various kinds of qualitative data, including interviews, focus groups, field research, and unobtrusive methods.

- [Chapter 5](#) is about interviewing – one of the main qualitative data techniques used by students, researchers, and public and private firms. The chapter allows you to make an informed

choice about different interview types and methods of interviewing and hardware, software, and service options. We also provide you with concrete strategies for preparing for the interview, recruiting, developing an interview schedule, and conducting an interview. Finally, we discuss transcription options and provide you with concrete tools for managing interview data.

- [Chapter 6](#) is about focus groups. This chapter provides you with the information you need to make an informed decision about the structure of your focus group, size, group composition, and the number of focus groups you will need to answer your research question. We also discuss important planning issues, including differentiating facilitator and note-taker roles, considerations before selecting a venue, and materials needed.
- [Chapter 7](#) is about field research. Field research has a long history in a variety of disciplines – most notably anthropology but also sociology, labour studies, social or urban geography, organizational studies, and social work. This chapter outlines strategies for conducting non-participant and participant field research and writing high-quality field notes.
- [Chapter 8](#) is about unobtrusive methods. Materials produced by individuals, groups, or institutions are valuable unobtrusive sources that can be used as standalone or complementary sources of qualitative data. After we describe the types of unobtrusive data that are available, we then turn to detailing various methods of collecting unobtrusive data, including covert and non-covert, systematic and non-systematic, and manifest and latent approaches.

[Part III](#) of this book provides you with the tools you need to analyse your data and write up your research.

- [Chapter 9](#) is about using coding to conduct data analysis. The first part of the chapter provides you with practical tools for preparing your data for analysis, including how to develop a codebook. The second part of the chapter details the practice of coding, including pre-coding, and first-cycle and second-cycle coding techniques.

- [Chapter 10](#) is about communicating qualitative research findings. In this chapter we systematically outline the expectations of different audiences (e.g. policy makers; multi-disciplinary versus single-disciplinary adjudication committees) and how researchers should approach writing a paper, a book proposal, or grant application using qualitative data.

Now that we have outlined the spirit and intentions of our book, the [next chapter](#) takes you through the process of selecting a research topic and transforming that topic into a research problem. We specify sources of inspiration and guide you through the process of articulating your research problem.

FURTHER SUGGESTED READING

Aspers, P., & Corte, U. (2019). What is qualitative in qualitative research? *Qualitative Sociology*, 42(2), 139–160.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-019-9413-7>

We draw on this article for our definition of qualitative research. The authors explain the different approaches that social scientists have taken to defining qualitative research. Their definition is based on Becker's classic study of marijuana consumption to capture the core elements of what is meant by qualitative research.

Besbris, M., & Khan, S. (2017). Less theory. More description. *Sociological Theory*, 35(2), 147–153.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275117709776>

While many disciplines like Sociology advocate for the development of theory, the authors argue for something that qualitative researchers are well-positioned to accomplish: the production of rich description and evaluation of the social world (without re-theorizing or the creation of a 'new' theory).

Hammersley, M. (2013). *What is qualitative research?* Bloomsbury Publishing.

This book offers a good introduction to some of the key debates concerning qualitative approaches to social inquiry in an accessible

fashion. It draws on empirical research studies in sociology, anthropology, and political science to explain the variety and sometimes contradictory ways that scholars understand qualitative research.

Silverman, D. (2013). What counts as qualitative research? Some cautionary comments. *Qualitative Sociology Review*, 9(2), 48–55. <https://doi.org/10.31857/S013216250006160-9>

This article provides thoughtful commentary on the need to approach qualitative research as an analytic project to uncover the sequence of events and meanings in the social world.

2 HOW TO CONCEPTUALIZE RESEARCH: GETTING STARTED AND ADVANCING ONGOING PROJECTS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter you will have the tools to:

- Identify and conceptualize a research topic
- Formulate a research problem
- Anticipate potential 'Who cares?' questions

Chapter summary

Conceptualization, the art and practice of discovery, is the first and some may argue the most difficult part of research. This chapter will provide researchers with strategies for conceptualizing qualitative projects, including how to use the literature effectively and how to formulate a research problem.

INTRODUCTION

We tend to gloss over conceptualization. Conceptualization is the process of not only selecting a topic but formulating a defensible and researchable [research problem](#); it is more than simply generating a list of interesting topics such as academic achievement gaps or homelessness. If you jump from a topic to data collection, you will likely end up with random bits of information that are of little use to the researcher or your intended audience. Such projects not only tend to lack analytical focus but will be plagued by the challenges associated with the dreaded 'Who cares?' question. Good conceptualization involves moving from a general topic to a clear research problem.

Arlene Stein (1997, 2018) – a sociologist who studies gender, sexuality, politics, and American culture and is featured in this chapter – offers reflections on her process of conceptualizing a research project. As a more mature scholar, she identifies two broad directions that her research has taken over the course of her career, one that considers individual and collective understandings of what it means to be LGBTQ, and the other that focuses on right-wing social movements. These identified areas influence the kinds of projects that she conceptualizes. While scholars who are early in their careers will not be ready to identify a long research trajectory in the way that Stein does, thinking about how a particular topic relates to a broader field or area can help to situate the importance of the topic and its potential contributions.

Stein describes how identifying a good topic for her often begins with a controversy – something that not only piques her interest but that symbolizes social problems that are greater than the question or controversy at hand. This can be a good first step to conceptualizing a research topic. In the following example, she outlines the ways that she conceptualized one research project early in her career and the other much later

after publishing several books and dozens of articles. Her account of the overarching questions that motivate these two research trajectories provide an excellent example of the importance of conceptualization that builds on sociological ideas such as group boundaries and identity.

Bound and Unbound: Conceptualizing Research over Time

Arlene Stein

Some people are content to develop an area of expertise and bore deeper and deeper into it over the course of their career. I find that I am intellectually restless, and curious about lots of different things. I like to move around and pursue different topics. My last book was about the lives of transgender men; I am now beginning to research the topic of forgotten American fascisms. These projects represent two different streams of work I have pursued over the course of the last 25 years. The first stream examines the evolution of queer identities. How have LGBT people come to understand themselves individually and collectively in 'late modern' societies? The other stream of work is on right-wing social movements here and abroad, and the lives of those who have been touched by them. Both streams of work, or obsessions if you will, derive from my own biography as a child of Holocaust survivors, and a lesbian. Just call me a sociologist of sex and death.

My work on gender and sexuality, which I'll focus on here, has tended to emerge from debates within feminism and LGBTQ communities. I spent my formative years in and around the queer world which has long been a hotbed of debate about belonging and identity – the 'who are we?' kinds of questions. Marginalized groups often define themselves through exclusion as well as inclusion. In conceptualizing a project, I often start with a controversy, something that seems to raise questions that symbolizes something greater than the question itself. So, for example, in my lesbian community in San Francisco in the late 1980s, I was struck by the painful public discussions which surrounded the issue of 'lesbians going straight'. What did it mean that growing numbers of women who had previously come out as lesbians were now declaring that they were actually 'straight' or 'bisexual'? And what did such controversies tell us about how sexual categories are defined, and politicized, and how group boundaries are developed and policed? I began by conducting interviews with a group of women who had 'gone straight', probing into the ways they accounted for their choices, and how they currently viewed their identities. That led me to argue that lesbian feminism was a generational project that was strongly invested in normative definitions of sexual community – which became my book *Sex and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation* (1997).

Twenty-five years later, I revisited some of these questions in my book *Unbound: Transgender Men and the Remaking of Identity* (2018). (There were, in between, a number of other books on other subjects.) *Unbound* was initially inspired by a new wave of anxious questioning by lesbians who were concerned about the growing numbers of individuals in the community who were undergoing gender transitions, embracing maleness. Questions of 'who are we?' and the permeability of impermeability of group boundaries had again come to the fore around these border transgressions. I decided to undertake an interview study in which I followed a group of individuals who were undergoing chest masculinization surgery over the course of a year, to understand their motivations for modifying their bodies. I wanted to understand them as individuals who were embedded in different social groupings, but who had made choices that forced them to move beyond the family, community, and subcultural contexts in which they found themselves. So, like my first book, I was drawn by questions of how people define themselves vis à vis sexuality and gender, and how new groups emerge to challenge prior notions of 'who we are'. But I wrote this as a considerably

older person than *Sex and Sensibility*, and as someone who, being cisgender, was not wholly part of the group I was studying. I was also involved in a feminist interdisciplinary community at my university, and because of this I was talking to more humanities scholars on a regular basis. Plus, because I no longer had to prove myself professionally, I felt freer to write the book I really wanted to write, which I did. Inspired by memoir and narrative non-fiction, I incorporated more of myself and my respondents' lives into the book.

At the same time, I had been reading more deeply in the psychology and sociology of the emotions, which led me to think more deeply about questions of personal subjectivity. My earlier work had been more focused on questions of group boundaries. As sociologists we know that the two dimensions are always connected: we come to know who we are in relation to others – our families, neighbours, significant others, the ethnic, racial and other groups we are a part of, and so forth. But in this research project, which focused on the lives of only five people, I was interested in the broader question of how people make meaningful lives. What I found is that my interviewees spoke a lot about questions of 'authenticity' – being true to themselves. They were transforming their bodies, and their identities in order to be recognized by others for the person they perceived themselves to be – which they defined mainly in relation to gender, but not exclusively in those terms.

In writing *Unbound*, I was pursuing a kind of authenticity project of my own, trying to write a book in my own voice rather than the voice of the dispassionate expert. While I made use of my own expertise as a sociologist of gender and sexuality, I was also drawing upon other influences, too, from psychology, anthropology, and literature. It was good to be able to expunge many of the voices operating in my head, which chastise those of us on the margins, including sociologists who are more interdisciplinary in their focus, and tell us 'this is not sociology'. Those voices can be so oppressive, and not altogether helpful. I ended up writing a work of sociology that was much more engaging because I refused to listen to them. (See A. Stein and J. Daniels, *Going Public*.) Yet when *Unbound* was reviewed in the *American Journal of Sociology*, a feminist sociologist praised it for being a 'great read' and yet disparaged the fact that it is 'not a research study as traditionally defined!' Though steeped in the discipline, my influences have always been interdisciplinary, and my approaches have at times been unconventional. I see that as a strength rather than as a weakness. It is personally gratifying to me that the book has moved beyond academia and led people from far flung places to write to me to comment on the book, take issue with parts of my argument, or ask me for advice. It was always my dream to use my work to be part of a larger conversation.

For me, the process of sociological discovery, often serendipitous, is always linked to writing. I rarely know my argument before I sit down with my interview transcripts and begin to write about them. I am always writing during the research process, trying to make sense of my 'findings' as I go along. It's when I'm writing that I am able to figure things out and see the big picture. Generally, I am not one to talk my ideas out, or present work in progress when I'm in the thick of things. I prefer to be alone in front of my computer, writing stories about my research, teasing out the surprises, the patterns, the nub of an argument. Some people find the writing process excruciating. For me, it's divine – though not without its frustrations. When the writing is going well, I am truly 'in the zone', immersed in the work, and can think of nothing else I'd rather be doing.

Questions for reflection

1. What are the first steps to take in conceptualization?
2. How can identifying controversies in societies help to shape a good research project?
3. Why is it important to take into account other areas of expertise other than one's own?

This chapter outlines concrete tools for conceptualization. We present them as steps, but fully acknowledge that in reality research happens in a non-linear fashion. We also note that some approaches are more exploratory, particularly at the beginning stages of a project and may evolve or change over time as your thinking about the topic matures. In the 'one step forward, one step back' section we push you to reflect on your audience and your purpose for conducting research.

1. *Step One: Select a Topic*: The first step of any project is to determine what you want to study.
2. *Step Two: How to Use the Literature to Conceptualize*: The second step to conceptualizing your project is digging into the literature.
3. *Step Three: Take a Step Back*: This section acknowledges that sometimes you need to take a step back to reflect on the problem that your project hopes to solve, including filling in a gap or extending the literature in a new and exciting direction.

STEP ONE: SELECTING A TOPIC

The common problem among students is the feeling that one has nothing to say ... you find the huge variety of things that *could* be said almost as overwhelming as the huge diversity of things that *have been* said. (Abbott, 2004, p. 85)

Key takeaways



- Identify key theories, terminologies, concepts, methods, data, and interpretations presented in the literature
- Identify what is not known, what is missing, or what is problematic in the literature
- Unless you are already very well versed in the literature, your initial review will require a lot of time

By design, researchers are deeply curious about the social world. If you are lucky, you may start a project with a topic that is inspired by your discipline, subfield, or something 'big' such as the protests in Bogotá against mass killings by drug cartels. You may even have some general questions in mind such as identifying the aspects of the Bogotá protests that were more or less successful, or whether it constituted a social movement in the first place. In such cases, you need the **conceptualization** tools presented in this chapter to prevent you from relying on a particular lens simply out of habit. If your tried-and-true method is to view such a movement through the eyes of the participants or as a Marxist, considering an alternative approach may help you forge an exciting and less travelled intellectual pathway (Abbott, 2004).

Many budding researchers, however, are interested in many topics that may or may not be related, such as female body builders and new religious movements, or a broad area, such as children's after-school activities. Yet decisions (and sacrifices) have to be made in the interest of developing a coherent research design. Initially, pinning down a topic is useful for guiding researchers towards the literature and some

preliminary sources of data. As we discuss below, some initial ‘digging’ can provide you with much needed background and inspiration. This part of conceptualization is an important first, but definitely not last, step toward developing an informative and interesting research project. This groundwork not only saves time and cuts down on mistakes, it will also undoubtedly come in handy time and time again, whether writing your [literature review](#) or defending your project at a proposal defence or to a journal reviewer.

In [Table 2.1](#) we present a toolkit for generating ideas. You should not get too bogged down about which tool is better or whether you are executing any one of the options ‘perfectly’; instead, see these exercises as brainstorming tools. You may also find some tools more or less useful than others depending on your approach.

We present five key sources for inspiration that are divided into two groups: data and theory driven, and researcher driven.

Data and theory driven

Data-driven conceptualization includes both [secondary sources](#) and [primary sources](#). We discuss secondary sources first since they will likely be the most accessible option, particularly for more novice researchers. Secondary sources are generally one step removed from the original event or people and include published academic and professional articles, commonly referred to as ‘the literature’. Primary sources include materials that are produced by, for, or about the people, group, organization, or event under study by persons who have direct and intimate knowledge or experiences (e.g. diaries, speeches). We also discuss the possibility of conducting some preliminary data collection.

Table 2.1 What is my topic? Sources of inspiration

| | Type | Example |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|--|
| Data and theory driven | 1) Secondary sources | Journal articles |
| | | Academic or professional books |
| | | Research reports |
| | 2) Primary sources | Online materials (e.g. blogs) |
| | | Websites |
| | | Government documents or public records |
| | | Archival materials |
| | | Brochures, reports, posters |
| | | Diaries, letters |
| | | |

| | Type | Example |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| | | Media (online, newspapers, magazines and TV) |
| | | Pictures or videos |
| | | Furniture, statues, clothing |
| | | Music, poetry, art |
| | | Maps |
| | | Transcripts |
| | | Academic and professional articles and reports that are used as primary sources of data |
| | 3) Primary: Preliminary raw data that you collect or produce | Pilot project |
| Researcher driven | 4) Mapping exercises | Concept map |
| | | Literature map |
| | 5) Abbott's (2004) 'Lists' | Aristotle's four causes |

Secondary sources: the literature

The literature will be your first and arguably best friend in the development of a research project. The literature includes three main sources: a) academic journal articles; b) academic or professional books; and c) research reports. You will obviously need to use these sources to construct a literature review. However, in this section, we discuss how you can use the literature as a source of inspiration.

Academic journal articles

The first and most common source is published journal articles. These articles are peer reviewed and can be accessed through a variety of sources, including JSTOR and Scholars Portal. The term 'peer reviewed' means that the articles have been reviewed usually by two or three experts and have likely been screened by the editor of the journal. While journals vary in terms of the degree to which articles are scrutinized, and in many cases rejected, the process provides a measure of quality

control. If you are unsure where to start, ask experts in your field (e.g. your supervisor) or a librarian at your institution for the most appropriate sources. The journals supported by your discipline's professional association(s) are another great starting place. In sociology for example, the American Sociological Association, Canadian Sociological Association, and the European Sociological Association all host a variety of high-quality academic journals.

There are three main types of academic journal articles:

- *Research articles*: Research articles use primary (e.g. interviews conducted by the author) or secondary (e.g. archival materials) sources of data to advance a particular original idea, argument or theory.
- *Theoretical articles*: Rather than relying on primary or secondary data (though the author may refer to such data) theoretical articles attempt to advance or critique a particular theoretical concept or framework or make an original theoretical contribution to the literature.
- *State of the field or review articles*: This type of article reviews a large body of research and theoretical articles. Review articles articulate key arguments, sources of data, theories, and debates on a particular topic. They are a wonderful source, particularly for researchers who are newer to a particular area. Most disciplines also have journals that are specifically devoted to publishing review articles. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *Annual Review of Economics*, and *Annual Review of Political Science* are a few examples.

Quick tip: How to search for academic sources

Searching for academic sources on your topic – especially journal articles – is part art, part science. However, there are several concrete steps you can take. First, you need to decide which search engines to use. A popular search engine is Google Scholar, a freely accessible source. Being essentially a Web search engine, it seeks to reach the widest audience available but full text may be only accessible through a library portal. Web of Science was developed by Thomson Scientific and has been a dominant player in the field of academic reference largely due to the annual release of the journal impact factor, a tool for appraising the influence of specific publications. It is an excellent source for tracking citations but is not as powerful for discovering articles by topic. The Scopus database was developed by Elsevier and includes a broader array of journals than Web of Science, along with a faster citation analysis. Other search engines include JSTOR, which has a smaller selection of core academic journals all going back to the first volume; however, it lacks the most recent three to five years of most journals. Your library may also host Scholars Portal and publisher-specific journals sites (e.g. a link to all Sage journals). Nexis Uni (former Lexis Nexis Academic) provides access to news and reference information and has full text searching available.

Next, in order to 'strike gold' in finding good sources, you will need to experiment with different search terms and combinations. Some of these terms will be obvious (e.g. layperson terms), and others will be added once you become familiar with terms that are used in the literature. Here are some quick tips to help your search:

- *Define the topic and identify concepts*: The first step is to identify what you are looking for. A draft research question can help you to identify key concepts. Search for specific words in your question plus synonyms, varied spellings, and words related to your background reading. Here is a sample research question: 'How does organizational deviance contribute

to mass school shootings in North American public schools?’ Important terms include ‘school shootings’ and ‘organizational deviance’. Synonyms include ‘rampage shootings’, ‘school violence’, ‘Sandy Hook’ or ‘Columbine’ (two famous school shootings).

- **Combine terms:** After identifying key terms, use the connectors AND and OR to combine terms in different ways. The term AND retrieves records which contain *all* of the search terms. It is also used to find two or more concepts in the same source. In our example, we could search for school AND shootings. The below Venn diagram shows that the results would be those in the common area.

A and B



The term OR retrieves records which contain *any* of the search terms. You can use this to find synonyms, variant spellings, or related terms. In our example, we could search for school OR shootings OR deviance. In the Venn diagram, the search terms could appear anywhere.

A or B



- **Truncate or wildcard symbols:** Truncation symbols allow you to search for all variations of a word at once, such as singular or plural forms. You do this by searching for all words beginning with the letters before the symbol. * is the most common truncation symbol. For example, shoot* will retrieve shooting, shootings, shooter, shooters, etc.
- **Phrase searching:** Use quotation marks to search for a phrase rather than an individual word. For example, you could search for ‘school shootings’ or ‘organizational deviance’.

If you are not finding enough sources, consider broadening your search by searching for more general terms, using truncation to find all variations, and/or trying synonyms. If your search comes up with too many sources, limit your search by including another concept. For example, you might use quotation marks with AND to include more words and be more precise in your search: ‘school shooting*’ AND ‘deviance’. Once you are familiar with the literature, you may come across alternative terms related to your topic. You may also add in other terms that according to the literature are related to school shootings (e.g. bullying), but recognize that these searches will likely yield many articles that have nothing to do with your core topic.

Example: Search terms

Table 2.2

| Key | Combination | Key events, people or organizations |
|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| ‘School shootings’ | ‘School’ AND ‘shootings’ | ‘Sandy Hook’ |

| Key | Combination | Key events, people or organizations |
|-------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 'School shooters' | 'School' AND 'shooters' | 'Columbine' |
| 'School violence' | 'School' AND 'violence' | |

Academic or professional books

The literature also includes academic or professional books on your topic. Sources include, but are not limited to, academic presses.

There are four main types of books:

- *Academic or scholarly books*: Scholarly books include original research and 'state of the field' chapters that marshal a variety of data to frame a particular issue or make an original contribution. Most of these books are published by academic presses (e.g. New York University Press) or foundations that support scholarly work (e.g. Russell Sage Foundation).
- *Popular original works*: Popular original works target a wider audience but may still be authored by experts. More novice researchers should tread a bit more carefully here, since they will likely have fewer tools to evaluate the relative quality of the argument and data that the author used. However, there are many wonderful examples of popular books that are both high quality and accessible. Venkatesh's (2008) *Gang Leader for a Day* is a perfect example. His book is popular in its own right and is featured in the wildly successful *Freakonomics* (Levitt & Dubner, 2009). Yet, at the same time the book is grounded in years of rich field research.
- *Original or reprinted edited collections*: Edited collections can provide a different kind of breadth by marshalling chapters from a variety of authors and perspectives on a particular topic. Edited collections can include a series of original contributions such as previously unpublished data, concepts, frameworks, or theories. They can also include reprinted material either in its entirety (e.g. one chapter that has been reprinted from a previously published book or article) or a summary of an original contribution.
- *Encyclopedias*: Unlike a traditional encyclopedia, scholarly encyclopedias are typically produced for a particular discipline or sub-field (e.g. Health), or around a particular theme (e.g. Social Welfare). These sources will not provide you with a comprehensive examination of any one topic but will provide you with a summary of hundreds of key terms, concepts, theories, or methods, depending on the focus of the encyclopedia. Such sources may help you formulate a handful of working definitions that you can use when discussing your key terms or concepts. Most also include cross-references and suggestions for further reading. *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (Given,

2008), *The Encyclopedia of Social Networks* (Barnett, 2011), and *The Encyclopedia of Housing* (Carswell, 2012) are just a few examples.

Quick tip: So many books, so little time ...

Despite the potential benefits, if you are on a tight timeline (e.g. a proposal deadline) you may need to initially limit the number of books you read since one book may take as much time as reading five or six articles on your topic. We are certainly not trying to discourage you from reading books on your topic, particularly classic, well-cited, or award-winning books! We are just noting that if you have a tight timeline, decisions will have to be made. To help you make such decisions, there are several sources to help you generate a list of 'must read' books:

- *Book reviews*: Read book reviews published in academic journals. There are also academic journals specifically devoted to book reviews. *Contemporary Sociology* is just one example. You should never take any one review as the 'final word' unless of course the reviewer is someone you trust. However, a good book review will provide you with a basic summary of the book and constructive criticism that is grounded within the larger literature.
- *Well-cited books*: Read the handful of books that seem to be continuously cited by known experts on your topic, including books that are controversial or that have received a lot of media attention. Reviewing the books (and journal articles for that matter) that are cited in the academic literature is a good place to start.
- *Recognized books*: Read books on your topic that have been recognized in some special way (e.g. an award by your discipline's professional association). You should also consider books on your topic that have been featured at recent conferences (e.g. author meets critic).

Professional reports

Professional reports include published research, theory, review, and working papers. Most government agencies, think tanks, professional associations, advocacy groups, or arms-length research consortiums produce professional reports that are widely available to the public online. Examples of such government bodies or organizations include UNESCO, WHO, the US Census Bureau, and the Ontario Ministry of Education. All these agencies post online research articles, executive summaries, or press releases that are chock full of original and secondary data, policy recommendations, and literature reviews. They can also be studied in their own right (e.g. how ministries of education conceptualize student wellbeing).

STEP TWO: HOW TO USE THE LITERATURE TO CONCEPTUALIZE

Key takeaways



- An ongoing ‘small-c’ critical examination of the literature is essential
- Examine raw data produced by, for, or about the group, organization, or event of interest
- Consider how these data or presentation of the literature may be used as data in their own right
- Consider conducting a small pilot project, even at very early stages of the project
- Use brainstorming exercises at the early stages of conceptualization to articulate what is known about a topic, and to identify relationships, processes, concepts, or missing information

The next step in your journey of conceptualization is to critically examine the literature which, when used properly, can be a powerful conceptualization tool and can help you identify theories, terminologies or concepts, methods, or data (Maxwell, 2013).

In [Table 2.3](#) we present key questions to get you thinking about what is known in the literature (column one). Once you have identified the key questions, theories, and concepts that dominate the literature on your topic, you can start to identify what is not known, problematic, or missing (column two) in a manner that will not only aid in conceptualization but is critical for developing an informed literature review. In short, these are questions you will need to answer at some point along your journey. Addressing these questions early on has additional benefits, most notably when you are ready to start your literature review. As Maxwell (2013) cautions, a literature review is a ‘dangerously misleading term’ (p. 40). Literature reviews that simply summarize or provide an overview of the existing literature tend to be descriptive or merely parrot what others have already said (e.g. repeating the limitations of a particular theory or method). This approach also tends to be only superficially connected to your project and research questions. By asking and answering the questions in [Table 2.3](#), you will be in good shape to start to develop an original conceptual framework.

Define the topic and identify concepts: The first step is to identify what you are looking for.

Steps

1. Search the literature on your topic (see sources above).
2. First, identify key theories, terminologies, concepts, methods, data, and interpretations presented in the literature. Second, identify what is not known, missing, or problematic in the literature (see [Table 2.3](#)).
3. Verify that your rendering of the literature is correct. Speak to your supervisor and committee members. Return to your library search engines (e.g. JSTOR) and plug in key terms that relate to what you have identified as unknown, missing, or problematic just to be sure that you have not missed an important article or stream of the literature.
4. Discussed in detail below, start to narrow in on the one or two ‘holes’ that you have identified to construct your research problem and research questions.

Table 2.3 How to use the literature to conceptualize

| What is known? | What is not known, problematic, or missing? |
|----------------|---|
| | |

| What is known? | What is not known, problematic, or missing? |
|--|--|
| <p>What questions have been asked about my topic?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What questions have not been asked on my topic? • Is there a time or location dimension to these questions and, if so, what would happen if I altered it? • What would happen if I turned dominant questions around? (e.g. rather than ask why there are so many high school drop-outs, ask why there are not more) • What if I turned positive questions into negative questions (or negative into positive)? (e.g. so rather than asking how drop-outs and graduates are different, ask how they are similar) |
| <p>What major theories have been used to examine my topic?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do these theories adequately capture the phenomenon under study? • Are there other possible theories that should be considered? |
| <p>What major concepts have been used to examine my topic?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do these concepts adequately capture the phenomenon under study? • Are there other possible concepts that should be considered? |
| <p>How have concepts been defined?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there other possible definitions? • Are there problems with current definitions? |
| <p>How have they been measured?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there other possible ways that concepts could have been measured? • Are there problems with how concepts have been measured? |
| <p>What kinds of data have been used to examine my topic?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there other possible sources of data? • Are there problems with the data that have been used? |
| <p>What concepts, ideas, or relationships tend to be in the foreground and background?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should a particular concept be given more or less weight? • What would happen if I switched the foreground and background? |

| What is known? | What is not known, problematic, or missing? |
|---|--|
| What are the dominant interpretations or findings? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do the dominant interpretations make sense? • Is there a reasonable connection between the data and interpretations? |
| What relationships have been examined? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there other relationships that could be examined? • Are the relationships currently under study still the most important, or should we consider new ones? |
| What has been the context? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the context of my study the same? • Is the context of my study different? • How has the context changed? |
| What are the major debates on my topic? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have these debates limited the scholarship on my topic in a particular manner? • Does one side appear to have more credibility? • Do the debates focus on the data, theories, interpretations, or some combination of the three? |
| How have others justified their study or its contributions? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can I use their rationales (with or without some tweaking) to justify my study and its contributions? |
| What do others have to say? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do their findings confirm or disconfirm research from my discipline? • What can I learn or take away from their concepts, data, or interpretations? |
| What frameworks, theories, or data am I most comfortable using to study my topic? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What alternative frameworks, theories, or data are available on my topic? • How would critics of my approach, or scholars using alternative frameworks, theories, or data examine my topic? |

Some researchers may warn you about the dangers of 'ideological hegemony' generated from examining the existing literature too closely (Becker, 2007, p. 147). And it is true, if you stick only to 'what is known' you may limit your ability to see your topic in a new light. Importantly, if you cannot demonstrate how your study addresses an *unanswered* problem in the literature, then your study will be of little value to your target audience.

However, we argue that a comprehensive understanding and an ongoing critical examination of the existing literature will allow you to more confidently represent

'what is not known, problematic or missing' in a manner that will increase your chances of 'inspect[ing] competing ways of talking about the same subject matter' (Becker, 2007, p. 149). Equally important is that using the literature in the spirit of conceptualization does not marry a researcher to a particular approach since it is more a question of what or how you use the literature, rather than whether you should read the literature in the first place.

Quick tip: How to read and interpret a scholarly work

Reading a large number of scholarly works can be difficult and time-consuming. Here are some tips to help you read in a thoughtful and efficient manner. For journal articles, instead of reading straight through, consider focusing on the different sections and asking specific questions at each point.

- *Identify your research question.* Look for information in the article that is relevant to your research question.
- *Read the abstract first as it summarizes the article.* Consider what the article is about and how it relates to your question or area of research.
- *Read the introduction and discussion/conclusion.* Determine the main arguments/hypotheses of the article. Identify the gap—what do we already know about this topic and what is left to discover? Consider how this research is unique and whether it adds anything new related to your topic. What are the weaknesses in the article's argument? Are the conclusions valid?
- *Read about the methods/methodology.* How did the author(s) do the research? Are there elements of the methodology that are relevant for you to research?
- *Read the results and analysis.* Now dig into the details of the research. What did the researchers learn and how did they discover this? What evidence is offered for their findings, and does the analysis agree with the data presented?
- *Review the references.* The references list can provide additional sources of information on the topic.

Primary: using raw data

The use of primary sources of data is not limited to the 'data collection' phase of a project. There are two main sources of primary data that are worth considering for conceptualization purposes. The first source is raw data produced by, for, or about the group, organization, or event of interest. Data include online materials, including websites, archival materials such as diaries or pictures, online videos, media reports, and magazines. Beyond reviewing primary data for conceptualization purposes, you can also consider how these data may capture important dimensions of your topic and be used as data in their own right. Meyer et al. (2010), for example, mapped the growing presence of human rights issues in social science textbooks. Similarly, Wrigley (1989) conducted a content analysis of over 1,000 articles from popular literature targeted at parents to understand changing attitudes about children's development.

You may also want to consider using academic and professional reports as a primary source of data. Mizruchi and Fein (1999), for example, reviewed key journal articles to examine the social construction of knowledge. Similarly, Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan (2007) examined five decades of articles published in a highly influential

journal, *The Academy of Management Journal*, to develop a taxonomy of the theoretical contributions to the field.

The second source of primary sources of data are raw data that you collect or produce, sometimes referred to as a 'pilot project'. Some preliminary fieldwork, interviews or analysis of the materials is an excellent way to get your feet wet and to work out the direction and focus of your project. Pilot projects are not only incredibly important to work out key data collection instruments (e.g. an interview schedule) but can fundamentally shape the scope and direction of a project. You will need to consider this option with your institution's research ethics board in mind.

Researcher driven

Researcher-driven sources include a variety of brainstorming exercises that you develop to generate ideas. Below we present two such ideas, but there are certainly other strategies available.

Early mapping: concept and literature techniques

'Mapping' is routinely used in qualitative research, particularly at the beginning stages of data analysis. Mapping is a 'graphical tool for organizing and representing knowledge' (Wheeldon, 2010, p. 90). Such visual aids can serve as a powerful tool at many stages of a project by allowing (or forcing) researchers to classify and organize information in manageable chunks. Faced with mountains of data, including interview transcripts, field notes, documents, or pictures and videos, researchers use this technique to sketch out relationships, sense-making or organizational processes, and the linkage between data and concept or theoretical ideas. Importantly, mapping allows researchers to embed these understandings within a broader contextual framework. Mapping can also encourage researchers to take a 'reflexive approach to how we are classifying' (Hart, 1998, p. 143). Ideally, mapping requires researchers to think about their classification schemes, and the underlying logic that guides their decision-making.

For our purposes in this chapter, we articulate the benefits of what we refer to as 'early mapping' techniques for conceptualization. In particular, early mapping can also be used to develop a research project by allowing researchers to articulate what is known about the topic, and theorize possible or preliminary relationships, processes, or concepts (Daley, 2004; Novak & Cañas, 2006; Novak & Gowin, 1984). Below, we present two kinds of mapping techniques: concept mapping and literature mapping ([Table 2.4](#)).

Concept mapping

Concept mapping is a helpful tool to promote reflection on how to transform implicit associations into explicit linkages. Concept maps are developed with a good understanding of the context in which they will be used. Here we provide an introduction, but keep in mind that there are entire books written that detail various ways to construct a concept map (e.g. Kane & Trochim, 2007). We see creating a concept map as an exercise in getting the pieces of the puzzle down on paper, developing a good grasp on the key dimensions related to your project, and thinking about possible puzzles that still need to be answered ([Table 2.4](#)). You will likely need to rework your concept map several times as your ideas develop.

Table 2.4 General steps to concept mapping

| Steps | Example |
|------------------------------|---|
| 1 Start with a central theme | You are interested in 'school readiness', a |

| Steps | Example |
|---|---|
| <p>Write down all of the characteristics, people, organizations, and so forth associated with the central theme</p> | <p>term used to describe children’s literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional development just before they start school. The research that you have reviewed documents the antecedents of school readiness, and its consequences to children’s academic achievement</p> <p>You start to develop a list that you rework into several categories or chunks of information:</p> <p><i>Antecedents of school readiness:</i></p> <p>Family socioeconomic status – parent education; parent occupation</p> <p>Parent involvement/contact</p> <p>Parenting philosophy</p> <p>Social, family, or other support/networks</p> <p>Neighbourhood conditions (e.g. housing, crime rates)</p> <p>Child’s cognitive, physical, or mental health</p> <p>Parents’ cognitive, physical, or mental health</p> <p><i>Shorter-term outcomes:</i></p> <p>Transitions to schooling</p> <p>Pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills</p> <p>Social skills</p> <p>Ability to concentrate or follow direction, routines</p> <p><i>Shorter-term interventions:</i></p> <p>Targeted programmes (e.g. pre- and post-kindergarten school readiness, breakfast programmes)</p> <p>Social, financial, and education support for parents</p> <p><i>Longer-term outcomes:</i></p> <p>Grades</p> <p>Self-esteem</p> <p>School engagement</p> <p>Graduation or drop-out rates</p> <p>Post-secondary outcomes</p> |

| Steps | Example |
|---|---|
| | <p>Labour-market outcomes</p> <p>Physical or mental health</p> <p>Political/community engagement</p> |
| <p>2 Start off with several concepts, ideas, and so forth</p> | <p>Based on your literature review, start to think about all the characteristics, outcomes, or concepts/ideas that help explain 'school readiness' and its consequences</p> <p>Based on your literature review, start to think <i>across the</i> spectrum of school readiness. If school readiness is an outcome of family and neighbourhood characteristics and social support for example, what other outcomes (beside school readiness) are associated with these conditions (e.g. children's mental and physical health)?</p> |
| <p>3 Draw the connections among the elements</p> <p>Concept maps have multiple key concepts, each of which is associated with a variety of related ideas or themes that may or may not be directly connected to one another</p> | <p>Building out from school readiness, sketch out the various explanations and outcomes that are associated with it. Make connections between the various characteristics, outcomes, or other concepts/ideas to demonstrate how they relate to one another (e.g. how school readiness is related to not only poor kindergarten outcomes but also post-secondary chances)</p> <p>Start to build characteristics, ideas, people, or organizations around each concept. Then draw lines to show how each concept is related to one another, and how ideas, people, organizations, and so forth are related (or not) across concepts</p> <p>Consider whether using shapes to differentiate types of information or kinds of things represented on your concept map will help the conceptualization process (e.g. squares for people, ovals for organizations)</p> <p>Add layers to your concept map including words (e.g. more, less) or symbols about the strength or direction of relationships (e.g. arrows, + or - signs)</p> |

| Steps | Example |
|---|---|
| <p>4 Now that you have a visual representation of the major elements and relationships associated with your central concept, you can review your map: What is not known, problematic, or missing? Answering the 'What is not known, problematic, or missing?' question will help you not only to formulate a research project, but also to crystallize the research problem you hope to solve</p> | <p>Are school programmes aimed to address school readiness sufficiently developed? Have they been sufficiently evaluated, or promoted on the basis of limited support? Do the concepts and theories used to explain school readiness adequately capture the multi-dimensional nature of the problem? Or perhaps you find that the relationship between parent education and school readiness has been sufficiently researched, but few have looked at how fostering early home-school connections may ameliorate school readiness disparities</p> |

Concept maps are suitable for researchers who have a reasonable grasp of the literature or topic under study. They tend to be structured and multifaceted and based on an understanding of the context in which they will be used (Novak & Cañas, 2006). Concept mapping includes structuring statements, words, and people, groups, or organizations based on either what is known or theorized about the topic of interest. Concept maps also include words, symbols, and shapes to explain the nature or strength of relationships between two or more units. Rather than flowing from one concept or idea, concept maps represent multiple start points which may or may not be related to every other unit.

Concept maps have the following characteristics ([Figure 2.1](#)):

-
- A multi-hierarchical representation of information. Hierarchies may be based on relative importance, a process, or moving from the general to the specific.
 - Information may include not only key ideas, concepts, characteristics, and people, groups, or organizations, but also examples.
 - The use of boxes, circles, or other shapes to differentiate various kinds of information (e.g. circles to represent theories and boxes to represent concepts).
 - The use of cross-links which include simple lines, directional arrows or circles to articulate a relationship between the various characteristics, outcomes, and concepts/ideas or units.
 - The use of linking words (e.g. more, less), shapes (e.g. squares for countries, circles for economic policies) or symbols (e.g. %, +) to explain or elaborate on a particular relationship.
 - The structure of the concept map and the nature of the relationships are context dependent.

(SOURCE: Cañas et al., 2003)

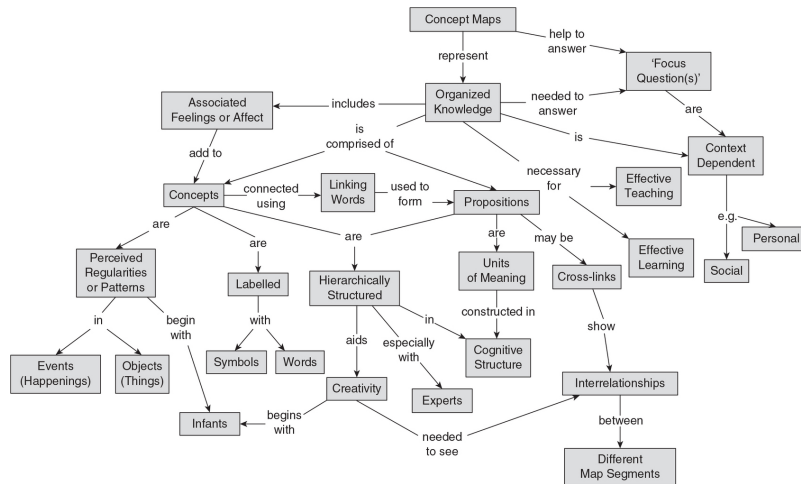


Figure 2.1 A concept map of concept maps

SOURCE: 'A Summary of the Literature Pertaining to the Use of Concept Mapping Techniques and Technologies for Education and Performance Support', 2003.
<http://www.ihmc.us/users/acanas/Publications/ConceptMapLitReview/IHMC%20Literature%20Review%20on%20Concept%20Mapping.pdf>

Literature mapping

Similar to concept mapping, **literature mapping** is intended to generate a visual representation. Rather than focusing on key concepts, the point is to map out the literature by theory, methods and data, time period, context, interpretation or emphases, geography, or other dimensions. The goal is to identify similarities, connections, intersections, differences, and even holes in the literature (Table 2.5). These maps can be immensely useful for situating your study within the literature as well as highlighting one or two representative articles, books, or reports (Creswell, 2018). Beyond conceptualization, including a literature map (either in the body or as an appendix) in a thesis, article, or book can be a very effective tool for all the reasons noted above.

Literature maps have the following characteristics:

- Organized around one central dimension of the literature, several dimensions of the literature or as a multi-hierarchical representation of the literature.
- Literature may be organized in a variety of ways, including by theory or time period.
- Literature may be represented in a manner similar to a concept map or as a chart.
- Literature maps in the spirit of concept maps can use boxes, circles, or other shapes to differentiate various kinds of information.
- Literature maps in the spirit of concept maps will use cross-links which include simple lines, directional arrows, or circles to articulate a relationship between the various characteristics, outcomes, and concepts/ideas or units.

In [Figure 2.2](#) we present an example of a literature map. The example is a thematic literature map and represents a handful of themes in the literature related to the

antecedents of school readiness. We could have just as easily organized it by how the literature has developed over time, or by theories, methods, or data.

For the purpose of this exercise, we have kept the content of these examples very simple, but literature maps can become quite rich and complex as they develop over time. Each one of our categories, for example, could be easily decomposed into themes in their own right. We also acknowledge that there are now software options for gathering metaknowledge – that is, knowledge about knowledge. The open-source package developed by Python, for example, is a powerful tool for generating literature maps and visualizations (see McLevey & McIlroy-Young, 2017). However, a detailed ‘how to’ introduction is beyond the scope of our book. Instead, we have provided our readers with a ‘low-tech’ option (see [Figure 2.2](#)). In [Chapter 8](#), a contribution from John McLevey provides an overview of using open-source software to do textual analysis. This approach might also be used to generate a literature map (see McLevey, 2021).

| Major Theme | Description | Representative Literature* |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| Family Conditions | Parental education Parental occupation Parental income Parental mental or physical health Social support | Smith and Jones (2011) Collins (2008) Farhaz, Davis and Moral (2012) Fabb, Cooke and Jacobs (2010) Marion and Saab (2007) |
| Children | Cognitive and language development Emotional and social development | Lambert, Holland and Davies (2009) Sampson and Robert (2013) |
| Pre-school Experiences | Construction of time Formal learning opportunities (e.g., preschool) Informal learning opportunities (e.g., literacy enhancing activities at home) | Phillips (2007) Brint, Sutor and Chris (2013) Milne and Later (2005) |
| Neighbourhood Conditions | Social support Availability of resources Transportation conditions Housing conditions Crime | Parison and Axinn (2005) Xie and Lyndon (2011) *Fictional names |

Figure 2.2 Thematic literature map: antecedents of school readiness

Table 2.5 General steps to a literature map

- 1 Start to categorize the literature you have found around some broad organizing logic (e.g. by theory, method, time period)
- 2 Label each box or row based on your organizing logic (e.g. years 1850–1900)
- 3 Specify major publications. You may want to add a column that provides some kind of description or detail
- 4 Consider adding additional layers or rows/columns to include ‘sub-sub-topics’
- 5 In the case of flow chart or ‘tree’-style literature maps, use lines to connect or signify a shortcoming, strength, or synergy between two or more groupings of the literature

Abbott’s lists

In *Methods of Discovery* (2004), Abbott outlines several heuristics or ways to find a researchable topic in the social sciences. One of his suggestions includes using topical lists. We borrow from one of Abbott’s lists, Aristotle’s four causes, though you may certainly think of others, including the very simple ‘5 W’ list – the who, what, why, where, and when – on a particular topic. As Abbott notes, the point of this kind of exercise is to make these lists useful, not to quibble over whether the concept or list is exactly as the original author intended.

Aristotle's four causes

Fundamentally, Aristotle's four causes are about answering 'Why?' questions. Let's turn to the Occupy Wall Street example. If you are interested in why the Occupy Wall Street movement failed to generate meaningful changes to the banking system, you could play around with how material, formal, or structural, effective or final causes contributed to the Occupy Wall Street movement ([Table 2.6](#)).

Table 2.6 Aristotle's four causes

| Definition | Example: Occupy Wall Street |
|---|--|
| <p><i>Material causes</i> refer to the social, physical, or material matter that contributed to the final outcome</p> <p>Aristotle's examples of material causes include how bronze (the material) is the 'cause' of a statue</p> | <p>Who are the supporters and critics of the Occupy Wall Street movement? What qualities or kinds of people make up each group? Does the Occupy movement attract a particular kind of person or persons?</p> |
| <p><i>Formal causes</i> are not about the kinds of people or substance of a particular thing, but rather its social structure or pattern</p> | <p>Does the Occupy Wall Street movement have a particular structural make-up? And was this structural make-up similar to or different from other kinds of social movements?</p> |
| <p><i>Effective causes</i> refer to the primary driver, reason, or source of a particular change</p> | <p>How do members describe the early development of the Occupy Wall Street movement?</p> |
| <p><i>Final causes</i> refer to the ultimate goals or purpose for a particular thing</p> | <p>According to members, what are the goals of the Occupy Wall Street movement?</p> |

Applied to your own topic of interest, Aristotle's four causes can help researchers generate interesting topics. Perhaps most importantly for seasoned researchers, it can help break out of old habits or ways of thinking – many of which you are probably not aware of. Using this kind of list may help you identify your comfort zone and push you to think of your topic in less conventional ways.

STEP THREE: TAKE A STEP BACK

Key takeaways



- Identify the intended audience and desired contribution

- Articulate the foundation of your research problem and address the inherent limitations of that approach
- Avoid falling into the 'scholarship of me' trap by getting too emotionally invested in the topic based on your personal experience or identity
- Communicate the wider significance of the topic. A personal problem is not the same as a research problem unless you are able to communicate its wider scholarly significance
- We outline four different ways to consider how to make contributions to the broader literature:
 - First, you might add a new dimension to existing research. In this case, make sure to demonstrate that it makes a meaningful extension to the literature
 - Second, you might take a comparative approach, which involves contrasting like, unlike, or deviant cases. Note that a comparative argument is not the same as a comparative research problem that is supported by a systematic problem formation, research design, and analysis that allows for comparison
 - Third, your research might examine a process or change. In this case, make sure to demonstrate that your argument makes a meaningful extension to the literature
 - Finally, your research might fill a conceptual, methodological, or theoretical 'gap' or shortcoming. Make sure to articulate any shortcomings in a manner that is fair and accurate

Up to this point, we have been discussing steps to conceptualize your project. Throughout the process of conceptualizing and conducting your research, it is important to take a step back to reflect on the importance and meaning of your project. Before identifying what a research problem is, it is instructive to identify what it is not. The 'problem' we are referring to here has nothing to do with the social justice dimension of your project. So simply stating that a financial crisis created a lot of heartache does not sufficiently justify your project. A research problem is also not the same as your research questions. Research questions are specific and focused inquiries that *derive* from the research problem, not the other way around.

Instead, the research problem articulates the gap in the literature or conceptual and analytical shortcoming that you plan on addressing in your project. Articulating the research problem will speak directly to how you will eventually craft your purpose statement since it similarly forces you to articulate why you want to do the study and your objectives (Locke et al., 2000). Take a look at most high-quality books and articles on your topic. Most, if not all, of them will begin with a summary of the literature, including articulating what is missing or deficient. These articles then discuss how their research makes up for one or more of these limitations. Why? Put simply, if previous research sufficiently addresses the questions or issues you are interested in, then why on earth do we need another study? Fortunately for you, this is rarely the case.

What is my intention?

To answer the 'What is my problem?' question, researchers must first answer the 'What is my intention?' question. The nature of the problem formulation will be very much shaped by the kind of contribution you hope to make, a particular approach to research (e.g. more inductive) and your intended audience. You have to seriously evaluate whether your intended audience is really interested in what you eventually

hope to ‘sell’. Are you hoping to contribute to the academic or professional literature? Evaluate a policy or programme? Contribute to social reform? And what does your intended audience already know or want to know (Booth et al., 2008)? Only you can answer these questions, but we have provided guidelines in [Table 2.7](#) to start formulating your **research intention**.

Steps to using the ‘What is my intention?’ table:

1. Identify your target audience. Your initial target audience will determine the range of early problem formation strategies.
2. Based on your review of relevant literature and other resources, identify a research problem built on what your specific audience already knows and wants to know.
3. Articulate your specific research intention in a way that aligns with your target audience and research problem formation. Ask yourself: Does my research problem formation and potential contribution make sense given my target audience?

Table 2.7 What is my intention?

| Possible audience(s) | Possible research problem formation | Possible contributions |
|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academics • Professionals | <p>Are interested in building ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theoretical frameworks • Concepts • Empirical data • Evaluation | <p>That contributes to ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scholarly or professional literature • Programme evaluation • Policy reform • Social reform • Providing new factual information • Solving a practical problem |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professionals • Policy makers • Group under study • Community group | <p>Are interested in building ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concepts • Empirical data • Evaluation | <p>That contributes to ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy reform • Social reform • Providing new factual information • Solving a practical problem |

| Possible audience(s) | Possible research problem formation | Possible contributions |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General public • Popular media | <p>Are interested in building ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concepts • Empirical data • Evaluation | <p>That contributes to ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy reform • Social reform • Providing new factual information • Solving practical problems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Popular discourse (e.g. entertainment) |

At the beginning stages of any project, it is hard to predict the potential impact of your work. If you are lucky, you may be pleasantly surprised when people beyond your initial target audience like your work, including researchers from other disciplines or the media. Additionally, as you become a more experienced researcher and writer, you will learn how to package your research in a variety of ways. Starting off with a clear target audience, at least in the interim, certainly does not limit a researcher from disseminating their findings more widely. However, if you are less experienced, articulating your intended audience and purpose will improve your chances of crafting a project that meets your more immediate research goals, and will inform how you write up or present your research. If your primary intention is to affect a policy, then writing up your findings in a manner that relies too heavily on specialized terminology or complicated theories from your discipline will be of little use.

Quick tip: Ask yourself, are all three in alignment?

Use [Table 2.6](#) to answer the following question by linking your audience, your initial problem formation, and your intended contribution:

My project targets _____ (e.g. academics) and builds _____ (e.g. X theory). It contributes to the _____ (e.g. literature) by _____ (e.g. demonstrating that the theory may not apply to rural settings as previously thought).

Are all three in alignment? If, for example, your intended audience is a community group, then focusing your problem formation on some esoteric theoretical flaw makes little sense. As you become more experienced you will be able to repackage your research to reach a variety of audiences, but you should initially have a very clear understanding of your main target. Recognize that each audience has a limited capacity (or desire) for certain kinds of problem formations and contributions.

What is my research problem?

Once you have identified your research intention and immediate target audience, the question of how you plan on connecting and contributing to that group looms large. We first discuss five common ways researchers can articulate their research problem. Strengthening your research problem rationale also forces you to orient your project and address gaps in the literature; it may also connect you to a potential research design. However, depending on the approach to qualitative research, the problem formation may be developed at different stages of the project. This 'take a step back' section emphasizes that a specific timeline cannot be imposed on when the research problem occurs. Instead, we stress the importance of evolving your research problem formation in a manner that speaks to your audience and to your approach.

1. The scholarship of me

Many of us are inspired by personal circumstances or experiences such as a family member's occupation, a difficult illness, or an event such as a divorce. We are also motivated by practical problems such as how we can prevent another Boston Marathon bombing (e.g. Booth et al., 2008). Yet a personal or practical problem is not the same as a researchable problem that will be of interest to your audience. *Instead, you must build on your inspiration and articulate the conceptual holes in the literature on that topic.* A question about why your parents divorced is completely uninteresting from a research standpoint. However, transforming that interest into a project that examines the antecedents of divorce has the potential to produce a stellar project. Inspired by her own break-up, Diane Vaughan (1986), for example, illustrated how the process of breaking up is a fairly standard and patterned process. She was able to transform the question of 'why did *my* relationship break down?' into a question about how relationships 'uncouple' *more generally* (see also Khan, 2012).

To summarize, a personal problem is not the same as a research problem unless you are able to communicate its wider scholarly significance beyond your personal interests or experiences. In short, you must find a way to transform a 'scholarship of me' project into 'scholarship' in its own right.

2. Add a new dimension

Most of us engage in what Kuhn (1996, p. 24) referred to as 'normal science', an addition or extension to the existing literature. Some projects make a contribution by adding a new case, group, or variable to an established body of research, including a previously ignored sub-population or dimension of the topic, an emergent or changing population or sub-population, a different time frame, or an event that may have affected the group or organization of interest. In some instances, the emergence of new data or information has called into question previous approaches to your topic. These types of studies are perfectly reasonable and can make a very valuable contribution to the literature either by reinforcing or extending previous research in the area.

Yet adding a new case does not automatically make for an interesting research problem. If previous research on your topic has been largely conducted in the United States, simply adding a Canadian case study is not a good enough problem rationale. You must first articulate why the new case is a meaningful extension to the literature, why the new case is a suitable addition, or why it makes for an interesting point of similarity or comparison.

To summarize, can you justify how your addition transforms our understanding of the topic through new data, conceptual framework, or methodology? Can you convince your audience that the addition makes a significant contribution to the literature or addresses some wider policy or public concern beyond fooling yourself that 'more' data must mean 'more' understanding?

3. Comparing like and unlike things

For the purpose of this chapter, we consider two dimensions of **comparative problem formation**: i) recognizing the comparative dimension; and ii) demonstrating that the comparison is appropriate (for a similar discussion of representation as it relates to case selection, see Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

Recognizing the (potential) comparative dimensions of your project

Comparative arguments are common in qualitative research; however, the formation of **comparative research problems** (and design and analysis) is under-utilized. Specifically, when you construct your research problem with an implicit assumption of 'similarity', 'difference', or 'uniqueness', you must give equal weight to the other thing or group that you are implicitly comparing it to. In some cases, the comparative frame will emerge organically; however, in many cases potential comparison groups can be anticipated well in advance, either because it makes practical sense or based on prior knowledge.

Willis's (1977) *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* is a famous example of a comparative argument. Willis followed a group of rowdy and defiant working-class boys in an industrial part of England for about three years. Willis's central argument was that the working-class students' ('the lads') resistance to school authority was more than teenage antics; it represented their insights into class reproduction. Their 'resistance' to school authority was an attempt to control their labour power, particularly given that working-class kids were destined, as the subtitle suggests, for working-class jobs. The lads' insights were held up against the radically different approach to that of the 'ear'oles' – the hardworking boys in the class who conformed to schooling authority.

His analysis suggests that most of his description of the 'ear'oles' came from the lads (rather than from a direct examination of the 'ear'oles' or their families). Most strikingly, had he by chance selected the 12 'ear'oles' who also hailed from similar working-class families rather than the 12 lads for his study he could have arguably made the opposite argument: that working-class kids have insights into the potential for human capital accumulation, meritocracy, and class mobility. In short, a comparative argument (or conclusion) is not the same as a comparative research problem that is supported by a systematic comparative problem formation, research design and analysis.

Demonstrating that the comparison is appropriate

When considering the comparative dimensions of your research problem, you must be able to articulate (and defend) the appropriateness of your choices. We discuss two dimensions of this approach:

- Internally driven comparison
- Method of agreement and difference

Internally driven comparison

Internally driven comparisons demand that you demonstrate that the two or more units of interest (e.g. communities, organizations) are similar or different on the *key attribute of interest* or that the case represents a deviation from the norm on *the key attribute of interest*. Hochschild's (2012) famous study is a classic example of the former approach. She compared and contrasted bill collectors and flight attendants; not the most obvious choices! However, both jobs involve what Hochschild coined 'emotion work', labour that demands the management of feelings. While flight attendants must smile and work hard to inflate passengers' egos, bill collectors are expected to be nasty and deflate their clients' egos. Thus, while the organization of

work is very different, in each setting workers must suppress what they really feel in order to elicit a particular response from their clientele.

Method of agreement and method of difference: outcome driven

Method of agreement and method of difference approaches are similar to internally driven comparisons but include examining several cases that have a particular outcome and working backwards (Mill, 1843). In the case of **method of agreement**, researchers isolate the conditions that may explain the generic conditions that led to that outcome in the first place. In the case of **method of difference**, researchers consider two cases that share many characteristics, but have had a different outcome (e.g. war versus peaceful negotiation). The missing antecedent is used to explain the divergent outcomes and, in some cases, make causal statements about the conditions that led to them (for discussions of this approach see, e.g. Goldthorpe, 1997; Mahoney, 2000).

Skocpol (1979), for example, famously used the method of agreement to argue that internal pressures and agrarian relations were sufficient causes of peasant revolts in China, France, and Russia. She then used the method of difference to argue that countries that did not have these conditions (e.g. England, Prussia) also did not have peasant revolutions (for a discussion see Emigh, 1997; see also Skocpol & Somers, 1980). The countries that she selected varied immensely (e.g. language, culture), but they shared a common outcome – peasant revolt or no peasant revolt – that made them a suitable starting point for comparison (see also Ragin, 1987).

In summary, we stress the importance of considering key sources of similarity or difference, or key sources of deviation in the process of research problem formation.

4. Examine a process or change

Questions that deal with what or how something occurred, how it was experienced, or how group members made sense of a particular event are routinely posed by qualitative researchers. These types of inquiry also span theoretical approaches – from grounded theory to more deductive process tracing (for a discussion see Bennett & Elman, 2006).

Like quantitative researchers, qualitative researchers can examine the process of a particular thing retrospectively; but unlike quantitative researchers, qualitative researchers can examine how something evolves or is experienced in real time. You may, for example, be interested in how patients experience a particular healthcare protocol or how school staff implement a new bullying prevention programme. But why should this be interesting to anyone? Similar to our discussion of adding a new case above, you must go beyond simply stating that you are going to show how something happened or how it works.

In summary, examining a process or change is only useful if you are able to clearly articulate how it makes a meaningful extension to the literature.

5. Fill a conceptual, methodological, or theoretical 'gap'

When articulating your research problem, we note the importance of outlining problems or omissions from the literature. However, *articulating a conceptual, methodological, or theoretical gap is not the same as throwing a metaphorical hand grenade and ducking for cover*. Less experienced researchers will often feel like they have to 'pick a team' and demolish the literature with a scathing review or an assertion that 'no one has looked at X problem' before. Such proclamations are often wrong, are less sophisticated, and quite frankly are usually not terribly interesting. This is not to say that this tactic is not used, and used quite effectively, but such arguments are usually advanced by someone after years of careful scholarship or *after* a major research discovery. As Firebaugh (2008) notes, 'the burden of proof

rests with you to identify some shortcoming or flaw that is serious enough to raise questions about the reliability of earlier results. Personal anecdotes are not enough' (p. 8). We wholeheartedly agree.

In summary, the relative weakness of the literature is more likely based on less-than-ideal data, substandard data analysis, a failure to capture a dimension of the problem at hand, or new evidence that casts some doubt on the original analysis. A less confrontational approach, such as 'the research on my topic has looked at X, but to date hasn't tended to look at Y dimension of the topic', is a much safer and likely more accurate rendition of the research problem at hand.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined concrete tools for conceptualization. To review, we first presented strategies for selecting a topic, including secondary and primary sources and various kinds of concept or literature mapping techniques. Next, we discussed how you can transform your topic into a research problem that is worthy of scholarly investigation. We articulated the importance of determining your audience and developing a clear understanding of the conceptual, theoretical, or empirical gaps in the literature. Anticipating and preparing for these questions will improve your research design by forcing you to think about potential weaknesses and conceptual holes that could possibly weaken your project or contaminate the data collection process.

Now that you have the tools you need to select and justify a topic, the [next chapter](#) details the mechanics of research design. The chapter is designed to provide you with the tools you need to transform your topic to a researchable research question and project. By the end of the [next chapter](#), you will understand how to craft a researchable question, and how to marry this question with the best method for answering it.

FURTHER SUGGESTED READING

Collins, C. S., & Stockton, C. M. (2018). The central role of theory in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918797475>

This article provides an argument for the importance of theory in shaping almost every aspect of a research project. At the same time, it cautions against an overreliance on theory in a way that would limit identification of emergent findings.

Glaser, B. G. (2002). Conceptualization: On theory and theorizing using grounded theory. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 1(2), 23–38.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690200100203>

Grounded theory can be useful as a developmental tool to help conceptualize and form emergent theories. This article provides a detailed overview of conceptual levels, descriptions, and flawed approaches.

SAGE CASE STUDIES

Jankowska, M. (2014). Concept mapping: A tool of multiple purposes in research. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. www.doi.org/10.4135/978144627305013514688

Wade, R. M. (2020). Conducting an integrative literature review and content analysis: Health issues pertaining to black young, gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. www.doi.org/10.4135/9781529714258

KEY TERMS

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| <u>Comparative Argument</u> | <u>Internally Driven Comparisons</u> | <u>Primary Sources</u> |
| <u>Comparative Problem Formation</u> | <u>Literature Mapping</u> | <u>Research Intention</u> |
| <u>Comparative Research Problem</u> | <u>Literature Review</u> | <u>Research Problem</u> |
| <u>Concept Mapping</u> | <u>Method of Agreement</u> | <u>Secondary Sources</u> |
| <u>Conceptualization</u> | <u>Method of Difference</u> | |

3 HOW TO DESIGN A QUALITATIVE PROJECT : SELECTING THE RIGHT TOOLS FOR THE JOB

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter you will have the tools to:

- Design a project in which there is coherence between both the 'ingredients' (research questions, methods, data, and sampling) *and* the objectives of your research
- Make an informed and defensible decision about the method(s) and sampling strategy that will best answer your research questions and represent the people, groups, organizations, and so forth fairly

Chapter summary

A good research design is one in which all the components work harmoniously together. We offer a step-by-step guide on how to design your project, including crafting researchable research questions and selecting methods and sampling strategies that are 'fair' and defensible. However, we want to emphasize that we are not offering a formula. As Graziella Moraes Silva, Michèle Lamont, and Josh Guetzkow (featured in this chapter) illustrate, qualitative research is not a linear process. You must design a study that allows for some flexibility as the project unfolds and as surprises emerge that demand adjustments along the way. Many of the guidelines in this chapter apply to all the specific methods discussed in this book. Rather than repeating them in each chapter, we suggest using them in concert with this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.
(Hurston, 1942, p. 143)

Zora Neale Hurston's eloquent turn of phrase captures the heart of conducting qualitative research. Researchers spend a lot of time developing research questions and methods that are not only aligned but allow them to 'learn something new' (rather than reinforce what they already believe) (Levi Martin, 2017, p. 34). How do researchers balance methodological rigour and intellectual curiosity? Regardless of the discipline or paradigmatic approach, qualitative researchers tend to share the same criteria for designing and evaluating qualitative research projects. According to a report prepared with the help of top cultural anthropology, law, political science, and sociology researchers for the National Science Foundation, researchers value qualitative projects that:

- Situate the research in appropriate literature; that is, the study should build upon existing knowledge
- Clearly articulate the connection between theory and data
- Describe and explain case selection: why particular sites, participants, events, or cases are chosen
- Pay attention to alternative explanations and *negative cases*
- Operationalize constructs and describe expected findings
- Provide clear and detailed descriptions of both data collection and anticipated data analysis techniques: specify what counts as data, and how the researcher will go about obtaining data and analysing it
- Describe the intellectual, social, and political significance of the research
- Discuss generalizability or significance beyond the specific cases selected
- Specify the limitations of the research and anticipate potential reviewer objections
- Discuss the preparation of the researcher for the proposed project in terms of:
 - Cultural fluency
 - Language skill
 - Appropriate methodological/technical training
 - Knowledge of particular research context

(Lamont and White, 2008)

Our proposed steps in this and other chapters are crafted with these recommendations in mind. Your earlier conceptualization work (see [Chapter 2](#)) should go a long way to helping you address some of the ingredients noted above, including situating your project within the existing literature and reflecting on the potential significance of your research. And your earlier review of the literature may also point to possible sites, participants, events, or cases, and the preparation and skillset required to answer certain kinds of questions about your topic. You are now ready to design your project!

In this chapter, we will walk you through the important steps that are involved in designing a research project, including developing research questions, selecting methods that are best suited for answering those questions, and developing a defensible sampling strategy.

1. *Step One: Develop Research Question(s)*: Craft research questions that speak to the research problem you hope to solve.
2. *Step Two: Connecting Research Question(s) to Methods*: Identify the most appropriate methods for answering your research questions.
3. *Step Three: Developing a Sampling Strategy*: Select a defensible sampling strategy and understand its strengths and weaknesses.

Many, if not most, of these guidelines apply to all the methods discussed in this textbook. Rather than repeating them throughout, readers should view this chapter (and [Chapter 4](#)) as providing the foundational information needed to conduct high-quality qualitative research. However, as any 'battle-worn' qualitative researcher will tell you, it is not a linear process. Moraes Silva, Lamont, and Guetzkow (featured in this chapter) reflect on their *Getting Respect* project to illustrate how even a well-laid

plan, led by an experienced research team, defies any 'clean' narrative. The challenge of selecting suitable groups for comparison, the realization that the approach and data collection tools needed to be customized to accommodate local differences (while still allowing for comparison), developing a manageable codebook and approach to coding, conducting and analysing 400 interviews across several locations, and crafting a cogent narrative required the research team to make adjustments along the way, and, in some cases, to return to the drawing board.

Their narrative also illustrates another foundational lesson we want to emphasize: the importance of research integrity. They started off with a general research question about why stigmatized groups respond differently to racism and discrimination. Had they had a 'canned' explanation, their pathway would have been a lot more straightforward. However, integrity in research design (and 'spirit') meant analysing and developing a sound rationale for every decision along the way.

Research Questions, Research Designs, and Explanations: Lessons from *Getting Respect*

Graziella Moraes Silva, Michèle Lamont, and Josh Guetzkow

Social scientists and humanists alike are fond to state that race is a social construction, but they often assume that racism is experienced similarly across different social contexts. With the goal of examining this topic empirically, the three of us jumped, with four other colleagues, into what turned out to be a ten-year adventure to produce an ambitious book titled *Getting Respect: Responding to Stigma and Discrimination in the United States, Brazil and Israel*, which was published in 2016 by Princeton University Press (Lamont et al., 2016). Based on over 400 in-depth interviews with working-class and middle-class African Americans, Black Brazilians, and Arab Palestinian, Ethiopian, and Mizrahi¹ citizens of Israel, this book seeks to systematically compare how each group experiences and responds to racism – conceptualized as experiences of assaults on worth and discrimination – and how these are shaped by the strength of their 'groupness', the availability of various types of cultural repertoires, and the broader socioeconomic and institutional structure of their society.

¹ Jews from North Africa and Arab countries.

Such a 'clean' description of our project is deceptive, as it suggests that developing our project and writing our book followed a straightforward course, defined by a clear path getting us from start to finish. The actual route had many detours that led us to tell a very different (and more interesting) story from the one we envisioned at the start. But that's how research usually works in practice: initial questions often evolve over time through the interplay between theory and evidence. This back and forth is what the sociologist Kristin Luker refers to as the 'salsa dancing' of the social sciences in her textbook that is widely used for teaching qualitative and mixed methods at the graduate and undergraduate levels (Luker, 2008).

The initial research question driving what became *Getting Respect* was a rather broad one: we were interested in understanding why members of stigmatized groups experience and respond to racism and discrimination in such different ways across different contexts. We started with a rather straightforward hypothesis: we proposed that the more salient the symbolic boundaries surrounding a particular group (or to put it differently, the more a group is stigmatized), the more strategies they mobilize to respond to it.

To assess this hypothesis, we proceeded by casting a wide net in order to identify cases with different types of racial boundaries that varied in their

degree of salience. We convened an initial exploratory meeting in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 2006, to which we invited scholars who are experts of various societies such as Ireland, Canada, France, Brazil, and Israel, with the goal of comparing a broad mixture of groups ranging from strong socioeconomic and symbolic boundaries (e.g. Palestinians in Israel) to groups with weak socioeconomic but strong symbolic boundaries (e.g. Quebecois in Canada).

Given individual proclivities and interests, the availability of funding, and logistics, the final research team was composed of three groups and focused on Brazil, the United States and Israel – with a mix of more senior and junior researchers in each case. This combination of country seemed optimal given the existence of a strong and well-developed literature comparing race relations in the United States and Brazil. Bringing in the Israeli case seemed like an original and promising contribution.

Even then, the decision of which Israeli group was best suited for a comparison with Blacks in Brazil and African Americans was far from straightforward. After careful consideration, we decided to include three groups from Israel: Ethiopians (who are phenotypically similar to the groups in the US and Brazil), Palestinian citizens of Israel (the primary victim of discrimination in Israel), and Mizrahim (who have been discriminated against but generally think of themselves as well integrated to Israeli society). Adding these three groups to the traditional comparison between Black Brazilians and African Americans allowed us to put traditional conceptions of race, largely based on phenotype, in dialogue with other forms of racialization based on ethnicity, national identity, and religion. We hypothesized that these various bases of discrimination affect the way racism is interpreted and resisted by stigmatized groups.

Exclusion through blackness – as in the case of African Americans, Black Brazilians, and Ethiopian citizens of Israel – has a long history and relies on a vast, largely global repertoire of interpretation and resistance. In contrast, exclusion through ethnic culture or identity may be described as more localized or naturalized through the often elusive goal of national integration, as illustrated by the case of Mizrahi Israelis. The case of Palestinian citizens of Israel is one in which ethno-racial boundaries are perceived as more rigid and hard to cross or question. The growing importance of nationality and religion coupled with a context of growing securitization of national borders and restriction of citizenship makes the Palestinian case particularly illustrative of new forms of exclusionary racialization.

Comparison was the driving force of our research endeavour all along. But while our initial goal was to compare how groups dealt with boundaries, we became increasingly aware that we could not simply compare groups without a better understanding of how groupness itself was experienced by our interviewees. This became increasingly clear in our discussions about how to approach our interviewees across the three countries: while in the US, sending letters inviting African American interviewees to describe experiences of racism and discrimination was a straightforward process, mentioning racism in the invitations to Black Brazilian and Mizrahim would have been a mistake, as members of these groups did not necessarily perceive themselves as victims of exclusion. So, as we discuss in the methodological appendix of our book, we adopted different strategies for reaching out to each group and increasingly became interested in how they perceived their own groupness. Thus, we tweaked our interview schedule accordingly to accommodate local differences while trying to maintain comparability and reliability across the three sites.

Conducting and coding so many interviews across three countries and three languages was a time-consuming and arduous process. In such a long-term collaboration, each team had to adapt to the constraints experienced by collaborators. Ten years is a long time, and during this period, several co-authors in turn completed dissertations, moved on to new jobs and new

countries, got married and had babies, while others retired. Sharing the happiness of these moments and accepting that each team member had different priorities over time was par for the course and certainly essential to the success of the project.

At a more practical level, our collaborative research was greatly facilitated by regular meetings on Skype – in addition to yearly face-to-face meetings. It was also aided by the possibility offered by the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.TI to coordinate interview coding across the three teams. However, agreeing on the selection of codes and their meaning became a huge endeavour and a challenging task. After a first round of coding by two coders from each site (which involved a fair amount of translating), we came up with a nearly unmanageable 100-page coding book! Negotiating the meaning associated with these codes required much back and forth – for instance, concerning the form that the responses ‘management of self’ or ‘conflict avoidance’ take New Yorkers, Rio de Janeiro, and Tel Aviv residents. Clarifying such points was crucial for achieving consistency in interpretation across disparate contexts. Eventually, we were able to shorten the codebook through collective decisions on mergers and recoding. We also developed a set of ‘meta-codes’ to capture common experiences across the three sites. This process of data reduction allowed the flexibility needed to compare experiences and responses that were more common in one site but not in others.

After the coding was completed, we faced the daunting task of describing a great many findings in a cogent fashion. This was, again, far from straightforward and involved considerable back and forth between the three teams and many more decisions about which codes to group together as we tried to develop tables that highlighted the main points of difference and similarity. At the same time, we did not want to lose sight of the nuances offered by our respondents who shared with us painful memories and proud moments. Finding a balance between essential quantitative summaries and making space for the voices of our respondents was a particularly challenging task.

Once we formed a clear picture of our main findings, we faced yet another challenge, that of providing an explanation for the patterns we identified across our three countries and five groups. This required revisiting our original research question. While our initial focus was to explain differences in experiences and responses to stigmatization and discrimination across groups, again, we now understood that ‘groupness’ itself played a crucial role in shaping their responses. This meant that we had to think hard about how to conceptualize groupness in a way that would encompass those dimensions that were most central to each case.

We came to conceptualize groupness as a multidimensional combination of social and symbolic boundaries that resulted from group contact (manifested in spatial and institutional boundaries and segregation), widely shared scripts and representations about groups (symbolic boundaries), and intra- and inter-personal identity (us/them dynamics as experienced in relationships). We argued that our five groups experienced different types of groupness – some being more strongly grouped (as is the case for Palestinian citizens of Israel and African Americans) and others being more loosely tied to one another (in particular, Black Brazilians for whom class identity is often as or more salient than racial identity, and Mizrahim for whom ethnic identity may be less salient than religious and national identity). Each of the three substantive country-specific chapters not only provided a description of our findings, but also described how groupness expressed itself for each group, and how it contributed to the patterns we identified.

Finally, through an inductive and systematic comparison of narratives of groupness, stigmatization, and discrimination experiences (which included both quantification and more content based analysis), we identified how these boundaries were shaped in turn by historical, socioeconomic, and institutional

structures, and national and transnational cultural repertoires (such as national myths and empowering ideologies) in each country (as developed in [Chapter 1](#)). These three concepts (groupness; historical, socioeconomic and institutional structures; and cultural repertoires) became the cornerstones of our explanation for the variations we observed. This explanatory framework emerged inductively and quite late in the game, as we were grappling with making sense of our findings. Without our initial, rather broad question and research hypothesis as entry points in this story (that those who experience stronger boundaries have more responses), we never would have been able to develop such a specific and multi-level explanation that could integrate and make collective sense of our findings across three countries and five groups. Getting there was enormously challenging and required constant back and forth between the three teams (across continents and time zones!) to make sure that the explanation was truly adequate for making sense of the specifics of each case.

And then came the process of writing the book, which had to be accomplished with 14 hands by a group composed of a majority of non-native English speakers! We debated whether to put more emphasis on the systematic empirical differences revealed in the tables or to adopt a more essayistic approach in describing trends and variations in each country. This corresponded to slight differences in intellectual culture between more scientific (largely US) and more postmodern (mostly non-US) intellectual cultures, epistemologies, and ways of approaching identity.

As the process of finishing the book neared to a close, we were lucky to be able to hire an editor to help us homogenize our writing styles and aim for a more unified voice. This process raised the bar, but also demanded that we pay close attention to the language used and the meaning of concepts, which often differed across national contexts and intellectual traditions. To give only one example, various exchanges led us to understand that the concept of dignity was interpreted quite differently in the Israeli context, against a background of intense debates about human rights, than in the American context, where sociologists have written on dignity without direct engagement with the broad philosophical tradition on the topic.

Now that the book has been out for four years, we remain proud of the original theoretical and empirical contributions that *Getting Respect* represents. We look back at this collective adventure with much satisfaction, not only for the substantive work we produced together, but also for the friendships and mutual respect that grew from the collaboration, and for how we all learned together. We certainly should have done more to raise public and scholarly awareness of the book, but we all had to move to other projects. Nevertheless, as *Getting Respect* is gaining recognition in the literature on comparative racism and becoming more widely cited, we remain confident that in the long term it will make a real impact on how sociologists and other social scientists think about and account for social processes of exclusion and about the panoply of responses to stigmatization and discrimination. The topic of racism remains more salient than ever as populism and xenophobia gain popularity across continents. Our hope remains that all our painstaking efforts will help academics and the public meet the enormous challenges ahead through a better and more detailed understanding of the varieties of experiences of stigma and discrimination.

Questions for reflection

1. What are the key 'take away' lessons?
2. What are some examples that illustrate the 'back and forth' ('salsa dancing') nature of research design and practice?
3. What are some ways the *Getting Respect* team built 'integrity' into their research project?

References

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STEP ONE: DEVELOP RESEARCH QUESTION(S)

If a writer asks no specific *question* worth asking, he can offer no specific *answer* worth supporting it. (Booth et al., 2008, p. 41)

Key takeaways



- Good research questions are clearly worded, focus the research project, and are written in the spirit of learning something new (rather than reinforcing what you believe)
- Pose only one or two master research questions and up to three or four sub-questions that are intimately tied to your master question(s). Your questions must be *researchable*

In this section, we examine the steps for crafting research questions in qualitative research. We link these questions to several qualitative approaches. We then offer guidelines for evaluating the merits of your research question.

Crafting qualitative research questions

What are you asking? How are you asking it? What data will you need to provide a good answer? (Richards, 2009, p. 14).

The quote above summarizes the key questions all researchers should ask themselves when they are developing research questions. The first question points to reflecting on what you really want to learn through the process of research. The second question asks you to consider the variety of ways you could frame a question about your topic and the theoretical, methodological, and data collection consequences of that framing. Do you want to learn, for example, about 'who' was involved, or do you care more about 'how' something unfolded? How you frame your question will direct the nature of your inquiry. Relatedly, the third question considers the type of data you will need to answer your research questions, and whether you have the type of data and skillset that will allow you to meaningfully answer them. Once you have determined your research questions and the data you will gather, it is important to 'take a step back' to ensure your questions and design allow for methodological and ethical rigour, which we discuss in [Chapter 4](#).

Framing qualitative questions

You should have a question that doesn't have an answer built in. (Levi Martin, 2017, p. 34)

Qualitative researchers typically develop questions that allow for a more open intellectual inquiry (Creswell, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). Social science research questions should be designed to accommodate unconventional findings. 'Surprises' can come in many forms, including inconvenient findings, weaker or stronger findings than you would have otherwise expected, and non-findings (Firebaugh, 2008). It also includes considering 'alternative explanations and negative cases' (Lamont & White, 2008, p. 4). You may also generate findings that challenge your personal experiences, beliefs, or morals. You may be convinced, for example, that children of divorce do not fare worse than children who grow up in intact families. You may also have the benefit of drawing on more recent quantitative research that seems to suggest that your beliefs have some empirical merit. When you are setting up your project, however, you should frame your research questions in a manner that allows for a variety of outcomes, including the possibility that your assumptions are wrong or context dependent. You may find that factors such as the reason for the break-up (e.g. an affair versus 'growing apart') and the degree of financial stability shape how the children in your sample manage their parents' break-up. However, these insights are only possible if you approach your project in the spirit of open intellectual inquiry.

This approach, however, does not mean 'anything goes'. Good research questions orientate your research project: they influence decisions about the scope of the project, the research design (e.g. comparative), and the range of suitable methods that can potentially answer your research questions.

Key ingredients: Good research questions have the following five qualities:

Good research questions are clear: Craft research questions that are clearly worded and jargon-free. Plainly worded questions will help you specify a more focused plan of action; it will prevent you from 'hiding' behind esoteric terminology. Terms like 'hegemony' or 'isomorphism', for example, may help you summarize your data, but they are not the stuff good questions are made of. If you want to know about how one group dominates another or why organizations look similar, then go ahead and ask! Fancy terminology will also not be very interesting to people outside of your narrow specialization.

Good research questions are focused but open-ended: Good research questions are focused but still invite the possibility of many possible answers. Is it too narrow or complicated? A narrow question that examines the perceptions of texting while dining out with friends may generate too few types of responses to generate a meaningful analysis (Creswell, 2018). Similarly, a complicated question suffers from the opposite problem and muddies the project by confusing your audience (and often the researcher) about the central goals of the project.

Qualitative researchers usually have to strike a balance between crafting a research question that situates the project while at the same time allowing for more open inquiry. Open questions do not impose a particular set of assumptions on the topic, including its nature (e.g. good or evil), conditions (e.g. happy or sad), or its relative quality (e.g. better or worse). As Khan and Fisher (2013) note, questions should also not be phrased as a 'show and tell' (p. 4). Let's consider the following example:

EXAMPLE: 'How do cohabiting couples cope with the stigma associated with living together?'

The question assumes that cohabiting couples experience stigma and have (or require) coping strategies. The question also assumes that cohabiting couples, and the challenges they face, are different from married people who live together. Although you may find some or all of it to be true after you collect your data, your

question should not prematurely impose assumptions about the people, groups, or organizations under study. A better question would still allow you to explore these possibilities (e.g. stigma), while still remaining open to a variety of experiences, meanings, or outcomes for participants. From a research design perspective, an even better approach would include married and non-married couples in your sample to allow you to explore not only how non-married couples may be different from married couples, but also how they may be the same. You may find that rather than marriage status, some of your participants (cohabitating and married) cite financial trouble or choosing to not have children as the most significant sources of stigma among their friends and family.

You have to be careful about the historical, contextual, geographical, or other dimensions of past research and the very real danger of limiting the scope of inquiry. If researchers in the area of the family had rested on the coat-tails of past research, they may have failed to see declining stigma associated with cohabitation or that cohabitating and married couples experience many of the same challenges (Sassler & Lichter, 2020).

Becker's (1953) study on marijuana smoking is a classic example. Rather than assuming that some people are predisposed to marijuana use based on some collection of demographic characteristics (the focus of much of the research at the time), Becker found that whether an individual uses marijuana or derives enjoyment from it is largely a function of learning to smoke it in a manner that produces a pleasurable effect. Becker was able to show that motivation to use and ability to get high on marijuana are acquired through a process of social interaction with other users. Approaching his project in the spirit of open intellectual inquiry led to this original insight.

Good research questions take into account the unit of analysis and unit of observation: The unit of analysis and unit of observation can be the same, but they do not need to be. The unit of analysis involves selecting what you plan on studying. Are you interested in individuals, groups, a particular institution like the family, one or more organizations, a city, or something else? If you are interested in studying why people join new cults, then the unit of analysis is 'individuals' since you want to find out how people rationalize their actions. If, on the other hand, you are interested in examining how cults recruit new members, then the unit of analysis is the 'group' since you are interested in the strategies employed by collectives we refer to as religious movements.

The unit of observation is the 'object' you plan to observe and collect data on in your attempt to learn about your unit of analysis. In the case of examining why people join cults, current and former cult members is an appropriate 'object' to gather information from through methods such as interviews. If instead you plan on examining records such as diaries and books authored by current and former cult members that include information about why they joined a cult, the unit of observation would be documents and archival records.

You need to think about the implications of your choices. In the case of cults, there are potentially dozens of possible ways to study it. You could look at cult leaders, current and former cult members, the family of cult members, media representations of cults, other organizations that may become involved (e.g. social services), and so forth. Thus, you need to recognize that although gathering information about current and former members is a perfectly reasonable way to approach a study about cults, it will only provide a slice of the overall story.

Good research questions are real questions: As Khan and Fisher (2013) point out, a 'research question must really be a question':

For example, 'I want to show that people from different cultures have different ideas of 'the family' is not a question ... Your task is to think about how you could be wrong. Is it possible that different cultures don't have different ideas of the family? If your answer is no, then you've set up a research project based not upon a question, but upon an answer you already have in your mind. This example points to an even greater difficulty: if you say, 'I want to show ...', you are starting off with the wrong

attitude ... Your aim ought not to be having a point you want to show. Instead, it should be to have a question you want to answer. Staying with our example, you might instead start with, 'How do different cultures conceptualize "the family"?' Now, that's a researchable question (p. 4).

How do you craft a 'real' question that is researchable? A real question investigates the 'who, what, where, how, when or why' (Levi Martin, 2017, p. 17). In general, 'who' questions examine people, groups, or organizations that are involved, 'what' questions are about describing something, 'how' questions are about understanding processes, and 'when' and 'why' questions are about identifying the chains of events or mechanisms that contributed to a particular outcome (Levi Martin, 2017). This approach (also referred to as 'process', 'realist', and 'generative' theory) values asking research questions that orient the project towards identifying the unique situations, historical events, sequences, and even values, intentions, and meaning-making that led to a particular outcome or condition (Maxwell, 2012, p. 656; see also the discussion of method of agreement and method of difference in [Chapter 2](#)). Grounded in thick description and an in-depth examination of the social mechanisms that are related to a particular outcome, these types of questions can point to mapping particular sequencing of events to explain how and even why something occurred according to how our participants come to understand, act, and interact, and the reasons participants provide for how or why something happened (Maxwell, 2012; see also Anderson & Scott, 2012; Maxwell, 2004a).

As Salmon (1989) explains, this approach considers how 'explanatory knowledge opens up black boxes of nature to reveal their inner workings. It exhibits the ways in which the things we want to explain come about' (p. 182). This approach is not only very much in line with qualitative ontologies and epistemologies (Maxwell, 2012), but is something that qualitative methods are uniquely positioned to do; qualitative methods 'with its close-up look, can identify mechanisms, going beyond sheer associations. It is unrelentingly local and deals well with the complex network of events and processes in a situation' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 147; see also Becker, 2008).

Let's apply this reasoning to an example. Quantitative research clearly shows that social class influences academic achievement. While this research can show how dimensions of social class such as parent education and income predict various education outcomes (or the 'who' and 'what' part of the answer), qualitative researchers are in a position to examine how social class influences the manner in which students and their families experience and navigate education institutions. A five-year ethnographic and interview study conducted by Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton (2013), for example, was able to open up the 'black box' of higher education in the United States by tracing the organizational processes that intensify or mitigate social class differences. Armstrong and Hamilton were uniquely positioned to not only examine the intersection of social class and academic achievement at the micro-level, but also how organizational processes shape the academic and career trajectories of students. Their insights shed light on the ways in which the academic and social life on campus tends to provide advantages for the most affluent students.

Good research questions are researchable: Researchable questions are 'empirically resolvable'; they require research, rather than personal opinion or reflection (Poling, 2008/2009). What kind of 'questions' are not researchable? Normative questions that ask 'what should be' are not researchable. A question such as whether it is good or bad to allow terminally ill patients to end their life is perfectly reasonable within a discipline such as philosophy that ponders what is desirable or optimal. However, we expect social scientists to ask questions that can be answered through the collection and analysis of one or more sources of data. So, rather than questioning whether euthanasia is good or bad, qualitative researchers might instead ask questions about the process by which patients with a terminal illness make decisions about assisted suicide or 'right to die' as a social movement. Questions that are framed to promote a position, 'show and tell', or do advocacy work about a particular cause, are also not researchable. If you have a cause that you want to promote, then go for it. However, do not pretend that what you are actually doing is 'research'. You are not.

Number of questions

The **master question** orients the project in a manner that is consistent with the research problem you have identified and captures the overarching goals of the study. Like others (Creswell, 2018; Miles & Huberman, 1994), we recommend articulating only one or two 'master' questions to guide your inquiry.

Your master question(s) may evolve or change completely as your thinking about the project evolves. As Creswell (2007) argues, 'Our questions change during the process of research to reflect an increased understanding of the problem' (p. 43). One of Janice Aurini's projects, for example, initially focused on how parents constructed their children's after-school time. After an initial round of interviews, her main research questions shifted as new issues bubbled to the surface. While she still asked parents about the rhythms of family life, she started to probe deeper into the connection between childrearing decisions and rationales and future educational and labour market contests (e.g. Aurini, Missaghian, & Pizarro Milian, 2020).

Optional: up to three or four sub-questions per master question

Each master question may be followed up with up to three or four **sub-questions** that are *intimately* tied to it and the subsequent data collection strategy. Sub-questions are meant to flag specific dimensions of the master question; they are not the place where you articulate every single question you ever had about the project. When developing sub-questions, you must continually integrate them: Do they meaningfully extend the original master question? Or do they potentially take the project into a different direction?

Others (e.g. Creswell, 2018; Miles & Huberman, 1994) allow for more sub-questions; however, we suggest no more than three or four to enhance the likelihood that the project stays focused and on-track. Experienced (and well-funded) researchers are positioned to add more sub-questions in line with more generous recommendations. The feasibility section below will help you make decisions about the breadth and depth of your intellectual inquiry.

(Some) Theoretical Approaches

Research paradigms are a set of assumptions, ways of understanding a researcher's place, and ways of understanding social reality and knowledge. Paradigms can vary by 'ontology' – assumptions about the nature of reality and what can be known – and 'epistemology' – assumptions about how reality can be known. Within these broad approaches, there are subsets that speak to a particular theoretical orientation. Without getting into the weeds of long-standing debates, more contemporary researchers reject rigid 'silos' that used to divide these approaches. These researchers 'use concepts and tools from various paradigmatic approaches depending on the specific goal of a research project ... and blur paradigmatic edges' (Tracey, 2013, p. 47).

- **Post-positivist:** This approach assumes that there are aspects of social reality that are knowable and 'out there' (ontology) for researchers to 'discover' and communicate accurately (epistemology). This approach recognizes that there are biases that influence our research and stress the importance of minimizing them by building in checks and balances throughout the research process (e.g. triangulation).
- **Interpretative approaches:** This approach assumes that social reality is constructed (ontology) and that knowledge is subjective and value-laden (epistemology). It privileges the world view from the participants' point of view.

- **Phenomenology:** An approach based on the idea that different people experience the world in different ways. This approach focuses on people's subjective experiences and interpretations.
- **Symbolic interactionism:** A social situation has meaning only in the way people define and interpret happenings and events. People interact on the basis of shared meanings and understandings. This approach focuses on how people react and interact in social situations and how such actions are mediated by symbols (e.g. language) and signs (e.g. gestures).
- **Ethnomethodology:** An approach to the study of social life that focuses on the discovery of implicit, usually unspoken assumptions and agreements.
- **Ethnography:** A study of the 'world view' of different groups, offering detailed thick description.
- **Institutional ethnography:** A research technique in which the personal experiences of individuals are used to reveal power relationships and other characteristics of the institutions within which they operate.
- **Naturalism:** An approach to field research based on the assumption that an objective social reality exists and can be observed and reported accurately.
- **Grounded theory:** The creation of theory through a complex iterative process of coding and categorization data, memoing, and illustrating and summarizing data.
- **Critical approaches:** This approach assumes that reality is shaped by a variety of social, political, and cultural forces that are 'baked into' social structures and taken for granted as real (epistemology). Accordingly, the nature of reality is always constructed through power relationships and will inevitably shape our inquiry (ontology).

STEP TWO: CONNECTING RESEARCH QUESTION(S) TO METHODS

Key takeaways



- A coherent research design requires connecting research questions to methods, and ensuring that the different methods fit together

The methods you use to collect your data are not necessarily a 'logical deduction' from your research questions (Maxwell, 2013). Often there are several methods and ways to structure your project that could potentially answer your research questions or suggest types of data you could gather and approaches to sampling. Below we outline considerations for each of these decisions.

Types of data

In the following chapters, we give you detailed information about how to gather different types of qualitative data. Here we offer a list of generic research questions under 'Types of Research Questions'. These questions are *not* meant to be exhaustive, but rather to point you in the direction of the types of research questions each type of method can answer. You can customize these generic questions to suit your own topic and to reflect on the methods you are considering. Ask yourself: Is this 'really' what I want to learn about my topic? Or do I need to reframe my question and consider another method that is better suited for tackling the research puzzle I identified earlier (see [Chapter 2](#))?

In-depth interviews

Types of research questions:

- How do people feel about, perceive, experience, define, explain, or describe 'X'? What reasons do they give? What are their justifications, rationales, or considerations?
- What are people's life histories and stories?
- What is the context? How do participants situate 'X' or their responses?

Research questions that seek to understand people's feelings, perceptions, and experiences are a good match for this method (see [Chapter 5](#)). In-depth interviews allow you to explore a wide range of activities, 'from illegal border crossing to becoming a paid assassin' (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 3). In-depth interviews allow researchers to gain an understanding of the perspectives of individuals contextualized within their own history and experiences. This method also facilitates the comprehensive exploration of multifaceted issues, allowing you to connect these issues to personal circumstances (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). This method frequently takes the form of semi-structured interviews: the researcher directs the content to be discussed while allowing participants to shift the conversation in new but related directions. The goal is to identify themes and higher-order patterns – relationships among themes – and to explain and theorize them.

Example

Elliot Weininger and Annette Lareau (2014) conducted 87 in-depth interviews with parents of young children from a large Northeastern city and its surrounding suburbs in the US. Their research question asked about the decision-making processes of families from different backgrounds in choosing neighbourhoods in which to live. Interviews allowed Weininger and Lareau to uncover the importance of networks in this decision-making process.

If your research questions, however, are about what people do or how they interact, interviews are not the best method. As Jerolmack and Khan (2014) argue, 'what people say is often a poor predictor of what they do' and that 'self-reports of attitudes and behaviours are of limited value in explaining what people actually do because they are overly individualistic and abstracted from lived experience' (p. 178). If you want to learn about how people behave, a better method is to directly observe people.

Focus groups

Types of research questions:

- How do people feel about, perceive, experience, define, explain, or describe 'X'? What reasons do they give? What are their justifications, rationales, or considerations?
- How do people react or respond to the feelings, perceptions, experiences, definitions, or descriptions of others?
- What are the key areas of agreement, disagreement, or variation? What reasons do they give? What are their justifications, rationales, or considerations?
- What is the context? How do participants situate 'X' or their responses? Focus group research has become more common as a social scientific methodology in recent decades. It involves a small group of people, often with common experiences or interests (see Morgan's *common ground* discussion in [Chapter 6](#)), who participate in discussions about a topic, guided by a moderator. Group discussion relies on interactions and conversations between participants, distinguishing it from individual in-depth interviews that focus solely on individual meanings and perspectives. This method can be useful in settings and situations where a 'one-shot collection' is necessary or the topic is contentious (Berg & Lune, 2012). Group discussion allows participants to refine their thoughts, and it provides data that is created through conversations with others (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Focus groups are especially well suited to attitudinal research where the group can discuss or debate different perspectives, providing a forum where these differences can be explicitly addressed. This contextual backdrop facilitates reflection and allows participants to better articulate their reasoning and beliefs. Interactional group discussions can spur creative thinking and facilitate the identification of solutions.

Similar to the critique above (see the 'Interviews' section), focus groups cannot tell you what people or groups of people actually do (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014). You also need to be aware that in a group situation, individuals may not want to share deeply personal experiences, something that is personally embarrassing, or something that could get them into personal or professional 'trouble'. Depending on the dynamics of the group, some participants may be scared or nervous to go against the group or admit something that is controversial. In these instances, one-on-one interviews or follow-up discussions with individuals may be required.

Example

Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp (2003) set out to study how drag-queen performances in Key West, Florida, are political in their ability to contest conventional thinking about gender and sexuality. To answer this question, one important component was to understand how audience members understood the drag-queen performances. They conducted 12 focus groups with 40 audience members who had attended the show. Half were women and half men, and 70 per cent identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. These discussions allowed them to assess how audience members viewed the performances as a challenge to conventional thinking.

Field research

Types of research questions:

- What do people do?

- How do people behave or respond to 'X'?
- How do people interact?
- How does 'X' work, evolve, or progress? What are the chains of interactions?
- How are people's behaviours, reactions, responses, or interactions the same, different, or varied?
- What is the context?

Field research is the methodology of choice for projects in which the research question focuses on processes, events, and relationships (see [Chapter 7](#)). It requires immersion in and systematic observation of the social life of a group or culture for a prolonged period of time, and writing extensive notes based on these observations and experiences (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Observation enables researchers to gain knowledge of perspectives, behaviours and cultural diversity, meaning-making systems, and changes to a social world or changes over time. Field research can range from full participatory approaches, where the researcher becomes an accepted member of the community, to non-participatory approaches, where the researcher remains an outsider who observes. Field research can also include formal interviews or informal conversations, allowing researchers in real time to talk to participants about their perceptions, experiences, and definitions of the situation.

Like any research method, field research is not without its challenges. The hours required to gain a truly 'insider perspective' can be emotionally taxing and can take the researcher away from their 'real' life – including friends and loved ones – for long stretches of time. Researchers may also find themselves in dangerous or uncomfortable situations. Collecting very detailed data can, by necessity, also narrow the focus of inquiry. Getting up close and personal can mean that researchers have to make difficult choices; not only are there only so many hours in a day but the researcher can only be in one place at a time.

Example

Melanie Heath (2012) conducted research on the social consequences of marriage promotion policies in the United States. The idea of promoting marriage as a solution to intergenerational poverty among poor, single mothers has been highly contested in the United States, but at the time of her research there had been no in-depth research on what was happening on the ground. Heath conducted extensive field research for 11 months to discover many unintended consequences, including the fact that the services were not targeting poor women, and that when they did reach the target population these efforts often had a negative impact.

Unobtrusive methods

Types of research questions:

- What is left behind, altered, or used? How is 'X' left, altered, or used?
- How often is 'X' present? What is the frequency of 'X'?
- Where and when is 'X' present or absent? More frequent or less frequent?
- How is 'X' portrayed? What are the major themes?

- What is the context?

We discuss unobtrusive methods in much more detail in [Chapter 8](#), but for now we will provide a brief overview. Unobtrusive methods allow you to answer research questions that address how groups or societies log or record information concerning social behaviour. The potential sources of 'data' are endless! Data can include print and non-print materials including archival documents, such as historical pamphlets, diaries, letters, newspapers, government documents, and census data, among others (Baker, 2008). Researchers might analyse photographs, paintings, graffiti, and sheet music. Textbooks are another data source. Audiotapes, films, television, and videos can also provide interesting data for understanding cultural patterns and trends. Non-print data includes various forms of technology-generated communications, such as tweets, chat rooms, listservs, and blogs. The research literature can also be a treasure trove of data (e.g. JSTOR) to understand intellectual networks, trends in research, and so forth. Fortunately, programmes like Python are available now to gather and analyse thousands and even millions of online sources and develop semi-automated reviews and syntheses (e.g. McLevey, 2021).

Like other methods, unobtrusive data has limitations. Data left behind can be incomplete (e.g. archival), and relies on the researcher to 'fill in the blanks' and make assumptions about the meaning or significance of what is left behind. The research is also reliant upon the people who created the unobtrusive data including their range of knowledge, understanding of the broader context, and personal belief systems. At the same time, you also need to be careful about assuming the motives of the people behind the data. Bobby Hoffman, an educational psychologist, for example, finds that 'interpretation of motives is distorted for many reasons', including the fact that 'the same behaviours may represent entirely different motives' and that emotions can lead to the 'false interpretations of motives' (Hoffman, 2015, paras 8, 19). As we discuss in this chapter, web and digital data sources of unobtrusive data have given rise to new types of questions related to research ethics including 'participant knowledge and consent, data privacy, security, confidentiality ... intellectual property issues' (Buchanan & Zimmer, 2018, para. 2).

Example

Laurel Westbrook and Kristen Schilt (2014) set out to study how social and cultural beliefs determine gender in various social spaces and to develop the idea of 'gender determination', using reactions to transgender rights legislation (p. 38). To analyse these social behaviours, they determined that a content analysis of media articles would contribute to the literature by theorizing gender determination 'beyond face-to-face interactions through an analysis of policy and law debates and imagined interactions, situations that often display a call for explicit criteria for deciding who counts as a man or as a woman' (p. 38).

What is the structure of my research design?

In addition to your research questions and methods, you need to consider the structure of the research project. Are your research questions best answered by a [case study](#)? A [comparative research](#) design? A [longitudinal research](#) approach? Mixed methods? While we describe them separately, they are not mutually exclusive. A case study of a hospital, for example, may be comparative (e.g. nurses versus doctors) and draw on qualitative (e.g. interviews) and quantitative (administrative) data.

Case study

Types of research questions:

- How or why does 'X' happen?
- How does 'X' work, evolve, or progress? What are the chains of interactions?
- What are the main features or characteristics of 'X'?
- How do people feel about, perceive, experience, define, explain, or describe 'X'? What reasons do they give? What are their justifications, rationales, or considerations?
- How do various sources (e.g. documents, videos) portray or describe 'X'? What are the similarities, differences, or variations?
- What is the context of 'X'?

A **case study** examines one (or a few) instance of a current phenomenon and studies it in depth. The questions posed above will be layered with additional research questions depending on the type of data collection outlined earlier (e.g. interviews, field research). As Robert Yin (2018), the author of one of the most influential books on the topic observes, 'the more that your questions seek to *explain* some contemporary circumstance (e.g. 'how' or 'why' some social phenomenon works), the more that case study research will be relevant' (p. 4). While there is much disagreement about exactly what constitutes a case study, we offer the definition of Jane Ritchie and Jane Lewis (2003), who argue that the primary defining features are:

multiplicity of perspectives which are rooted in a specific context (or in a number of specific contexts if the study involves more than one case). Those multiple perspectives may come from multiple data collection methods, but they may also derive from multiple accounts – collected using a single method from people with different perspectives on what is being observed. (p. 52)

Case studies are structured around context rather than individuals, as would be the focus of an in-depth interview project. You might design a case study based on a process (e.g. cyberbullying, with the case involving perpetrators, victims, and unobtrusive data left behind), or an organization context (e.g. the child sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic church, with the case involving the Vatican based on official statements, bishops, priests, victims, police documentation, and media reports). You can liken this approach to a detective gathering multiple sources of data in the process of conducting an investigation. This may include gathering 'statements' from participants in the form of interviews, conducting several observations, and reviewing unobtrusive data (e.g. documents, websites, blogs) to gain a holistic account of the case.

One of the main strengths of the case study approach is its ability to capture multiple perspectives and data in order to build a more in-depth understanding of a phenomenon or phenomena. The definition of case study overlaps with ethnography, field research, and participant observation. Karen O'Reilly (2008) argues that the key difference is methodology: the defining feature of ethnography or field research is its incorporation of participant or non-participant observation (among other methods, such as in-depth interviews), whereas a case study can include a mixed-methods approach which can also involve quantitative and statistical elements (see below for our discussion of mixed methods).

Quick tip: Considerations for designing a case study (Yin, 2018)

- Define the case(s) to be studied.
- Develop theory, propositions, and related issues to guide the anticipated case study and to generalize its findings.
- Identify the case study design (single or multiple, holistic or embedded cases).
- Test the design against four criteria for maintaining the quality of a case study.¹

¹ These four criteria are: (a) construct validity, (b) internal validity, (c) external validity, and (d) reliability).

In designing a case study project, the first important step is to determine the social context(s) of your research to help select your case or cases. There may be differences in the populations you will study in each case, and you will need to choose how consistent the selection of groups of people and/or organizations will be. Too many cases can lead to a very large sample size. You must ask yourself: How feasible is a project with multiple cases or that includes multiple populations? Can you complete the project in a timely manner? Do you have the funding to be successful? To achieve breadth, what compromises will you need to make?

Example

Suzanne Staggenborg (2001) studied the relationship between culture and politics in the women's movement. Her research design offered a case study of feminist action in Bloomington, Indiana, from the 1960s to the 1990s. She outlined how her choice of site influenced her findings concerning the processes in which women's movements evolve and endure. In particular, the local movement in Bloomington encompassed a 'political field' (Ray, 1999, p. 8), shaped by Indiana University, a university town of about 90,000 residents. Staggenborg noted that, while Indiana is a conservative state, the presence of the university in Bloomington provided a liberalizing effect on local movements. Thus, Bloomington as a case would shed light on the advantages and disadvantages for mobilizing that would affect the possible kinds of activism. She concluded, 'The site is a good place to examine the effects of culture-building on the larger women's movement' (2001, p. 511).

Comparative research

Types of research questions:

- How are 'X' and 'Y' similar or different?
- What explains similarities and differences?
- Why did 'X' occur in 'Y' but not 'Z'? (e.g. why did a protest happen in Paris but not Berlin?)
- Why did 'X' occur in 'Y' *and* 'Z'? (e.g. why did the protest happen in Paris *and* Berlin?)

Comparison is central to empirical social science and involves evaluating the associations and differences between phenomena. The questions posed above will be layered with additional research questions depending on the type of data collection outlined earlier (e.g. interviews, field research). The advantage of designing a comparative study is summed up by Melinda Mills (2008): 'Comparisons not only uncover differences between social entities but also reveal unique aspects of a particular entity that would be virtually impossible to detect otherwise' (p. 101).

Most qualitative research incorporates some form of comparative research. For example, comparisons are often made in ethnographic studies of core categories or themes. **Comparative research** is frequently built into the research design, such as case study comparisons, comparative political research, historical comparative research, and comparisons based on a content analysis (unobtrusive measures). Comparisons may also emerge inductively between groups during the analytical process.

When you make assumptions about differences between categories, you are also engaging in the logic of comparison. An examination of how the social media contributes to girls' anti-social behaviour, for example, assumes that social media influences girls differently than boys. Your research design should acknowledge the comparative dimension of your research inquiry. This acknowledgement may include building in a sub-sample of boys so you can tease out which dimensions are unique to girls, and which aspects may be a generic aspect of anti-social behaviour that cuts across gender.

Quick tip: Considerations for designing comparative research (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003)

A comparative research design is the right match if your goal is to:

- Isolate the presence or absence of an entity among different cases.
- Identify whether and how phenomena vary between groups.
- Compare social processes across times and places.
- Explain how the presence or social consequences of an entity vary between groups.
- Compare the variations and interactions of phenomena in different social contexts.

Deciding on the cases or sample is an important component of comparative research (Ebbinghaus, 2005). Generally speaking, the selection of cases should be theory driven (e.g. theorizing multiculturalism through a comparative study of policies in Canada, Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom). Charles Ragin (2006) notes that many social scientists choose their populations for comparative research based on taken-for-granted categories. These 'given' populations, such as research comparing registered voters in New York and Los Angeles, are beneficial when conducting descriptive research, but he calls for giving greater attention to theoretically driven understandings of populations. Constructing understandings of populations can offer a more nuanced and innovative research design and theoretical articulation to advance meaningful categories.

The comparative method can be an important tool that enables qualitative researchers to make causal inferences. Comparison can allow you to test the 'counterfactual' of what would have happened if the presence of the presumed cause were absent (Maxwell, 2004b). This approach is also important in comparative

historical research, a method that analyses historical events to build explanations beyond a particular time and place, either through direct comparison to other historical/recent events, or by building theory. This method focuses on historical sequences and their causes across a set of similar cases.

Although comparative research offers many benefits to a research design, it also presents challenges. For example, deciding on the scale of your project presents a conundrum. Choosing a small sample size can, on the one hand, allow for descriptive depth, but, on the other, can mean too many comparative factors that get in the way of identifying competing explanations. A larger sample size (e.g. countries, cases) that only allows for more general comparative characteristics risks superficial findings (Mills, 2008). Again, designing your research is a continuous process that must be negotiated throughout the data collection and analysis phases. You must remain flexible to change your design if your sample proves to be too small or too large (see below for a detailed discussion of choosing your sample).

No matter which method or combination of methods you decide on for your project, you will want to consider carefully how comparative research might strengthen your research design. Comparison provides an entry point to numerous topics that allow you to incorporate multiple types of qualitative methods.

Example

Michèle Lamont (1992) set out to study how middle-class men in France and the United States differentiate between people who they believe have greater or lesser worth. She employed the comparative method to uncover differences within the national samples on the basis of region (New York and Indianapolis in the United States, and Paris and Clermont-Ferrand in France), occupation (profit and public sectors), and mobility (first- and third-generation upper middle class). Her comparative model allowed her to illuminate national differences. It also provided evidence of similar patterns in the two countries based on the increasing importance of socioeconomic boundaries.

Single episode or longitudinal research?

Types of research questions: single episode:

- What is happening?
- How do people or groups feel about, perceive, experience, define, explain, or describe 'X'?
- How do people recall 'X'?

Types of research questions: longitudinal:

- How does 'X' happen or 'work'? What is the process?
- How do people transition into 'X'?
- How does 'X' change over time?
- How do people feel about, perceive, experience, define, explain, or describe 'X' over time, at different times, or at different parts of a process (e.g. before and after a change in leadership)?

Another factor to consider in designing your project is whether you can answer your research question by capturing a single point in time or whether you need to capture changes over time or a sequence of events. One solution for research that will be collected in a single episode is to rely on retrospective accounts. Retrospective interviews offer participants the opportunity to tell their stories about some event from beginning to end and can help identify processes and sequencing. In cases in which it is impossible to view an event or process (e.g. a school shooting), you can layer retrospective accounts with other types of data (e.g. surveillance videos, police reports) to gain a more fulsome picture.

There are shortcomings, however, to this strategy. The quality of the data may be compromised by 'problems with recall, distortion and post-event rationalisation' (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 53). If the evolution of events is a central component of your research, a 'snap shot' may not be sufficient. Longitudinal studies, on the other hand, build in more than one episode of data collection. Longitudinal designs are prevalent in quantitative research but are becoming more common among qualitative research as investigators acknowledge the importance of understanding changes in people's lives or witnessing the evolution of a process in real, or somewhat real, time.

Panel studies are built on the idea of interviewing the same participants more than once to shed light on how people experience events, changes, or transitions over time (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). A qualitative panel design allows you 'to describe the different types of changes that take place or the different outcomes that result, to account for them by showing how they arise, and to explain how and why there are differences between sample members' (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 54). This approach also allows you to develop a deeper [rapport](#) with your participants, dig deeper into themes that emerged during an earlier interaction, and find out how decisions or events unfold.

Rod Missaghian's (2020) PhD research is a good example of this approach. Missaghian interviewed the same students three times to find out about the factors that shaped their post-secondary decisions. First, he interviewed them at the 'search' phase during the fall term, when they were applying for college and university. He was able to find out how they were making decisions about post-secondary education, including their sources of information and the degree to which their proposed choices aligned with their career aspirations. He then interviewed them at the 'choice' phase, in the spring, when they were making decisions about where to attend after they had received offers (or rejections). Finally, he interviewed them the following fall about the consequences of their decisions and how they were experiencing the transition from high school to post-secondary. His longitudinal study allowed him to examine the evolution of their thinking, which networks or contacts mattered at different stages, how and why they developed the way they did, and the consequences of their choices.

Qualitative longitudinal research has many benefits, including creating a more nuanced understanding of change and greater narrative depth over time. There are also challenges. This approach demands a greater time commitment from participants. Researchers also have to grapple with attrition if some people refuse to participate in subsequent rounds of data collection, move far away, die, or cannot be found. This approach also places greater demands on the researcher; just following up and keeping track of participants can be very time consuming. Moreover, even a relatively small sample will, by virtue of this approach, multiply. Twenty interviews, for example, will grow to 40 (interview 2), and then 60 (interview 3) as subsequent rounds of data collection are completed. Still, the potential of this method to obtain rich, dynamic, and contextualized accounts of people's experiences over time cannot be discounted.

Example

Virginia Morrow and Gina Crivello (2015) worked with a team of researchers who gathered data on 'Young Lives', a longitudinal study investigating childhood poverty in Ethiopia, Peru, India, and Vietnam over 15 years. The

goal was to uncover the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and the role of policies in improving children's life chances. Data were gathered quantitatively and qualitatively from two cohorts of children in each country. The qualitative component has, to date, four waves and involves 200 children, their caregivers and other key figures. These researchers consider factors influencing households moving into and out of poverty, and the consequences for children. Data collected allowed the researchers to map out aspects of children's lives in ways not possible in cross-sectional research, including how the dynamics of poverty influence children's lives over time.

Quick tip: Considerations for longitudinal research (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003)

A good longitudinal design will consider the following:

- *Number of interventions and timing.* These are guided by your research questions and objective.
- *Initial sample size.* For panel studies, you will need to address the possibility of attrition.
- *The right methods for a longitudinal design.* In-depth interviews with their individual focus are better suited to panel studies. Focus groups are better attuned to gathering contextual and group information.
- *Selecting the follow-up sample.* You will need to decide whether to include the entire first-stage sample in subsequent interventions. You will also need to decide whether to use a [purposive sample](#) (see the section on 'Sampling') to study particular issues or groups of people.
- *Analysis of all stages of data collection.* Planning ahead how you will integrate later stages of data to facilitate comparisons and analyse evolutions.

Using multiple methods

Qualitative researchers frequently collect data using multiple methods. The term 'mixed methods' can refer to the incorporation of qualitative and quantitative approaches in a single study or mixing different qualitative methods (e.g. interviews and field methods). We highlight three purposes for mixing methods and discuss the challenges of a mixed methods study. A sample of 'types of questions' is not provided in this section since there are dozens of possible combinations!

First, at the most basic level, more than one method may be required to answer the research questions. A study may include a first question that is best answered using a survey, a second question that is best answered using interviews, a third question that is best answered using observations, and so forth. A study about the integration of classroom robotics, for example, included an online survey of teachers about how they used robotics and whether they had adequate training and support, interviews with teachers about their perceptions, and classroom observations that focused on examining how children and teachers engaged robotics in a classroom setting (Aurini et al., 2017).

Second, [triangulation](#) – the incorporation of multi-methods to reduce deficiencies of a one-method approach – can be a strategy to strengthen your research design. This

approach also allows for a deeper understanding of the issues you are studying. You might combine different sources of data (e.g. official documents, interview data, field notes), and different methods of collecting data (e.g. formal and informal interviews, participant observation, anonymous questionnaires). In this sense, triangulation involves cross-checking the consistency of data across settings and types of data to gain a holistic account of the topic under investigation (for a discussion of using triangulation to improve validity, see [Chapter 4](#)).

Third, you might choose to incorporate **multiple methods** to broaden the range of data you collect. For example, observation is often combined with interviews to shine light on how events or behaviours naturally occur and how they are constructed through individual understandings of behaviour. Thus, while interviews or focus groups provide an efficient way to learn about people's perspectives, conducting observations will allow you to actually see if whether what people say is what they actually do (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014)!

Fourth, even if your participants provide you with a fair and accurate description, observing it 'in action' will help you gain a deeper understanding of how something works. Janice Aurini's dissertation work on the private tutoring industry, for example, combined interviews and participant observation. While interviews with tutoring business owners allowed her to find out about the nature of the industry, working as a tutor at a major franchise gave her insight into the inner workings of the business. Rather than relying solely on owners' and tutors' description of the day-to-day rhythms of a franchise, she was able to experience it first-hand. She attended training sessions, interacted with students and parents, and observed the daily challenges franchisees and tutors experienced (Aurini, 2012). This type of insider knowledge would have been difficult to capture from interviews alone. Employing a multiple-methods approach can also help uncover tacit meanings and elicit data that respondents might be reluctant to divulge in a more structured interview setting.

Most topics can be transformed into a mixed-methods (qualitative and quantitative) or multiple method (e.g. more than one qualitative method) project. We outline a few approaches to highlight how your research questions could be constructed in a manner based on the three primary models for designing a mixed methods project (Creswell, 2018):

- *Convergent parallel mixed methods*: This approach merges qualitative and quantitative data to provide a more comprehensive explanation of a phenomenon. This design generally means collecting the two forms of data simultaneously and integrating it into the interpretation of the results. It is suitable when you have questions that deal with both 'quality' (qualitative methods) and 'quantity' (quantitative methods). Research on educational policy versus practice is one example. For many years, researchers and policymakers have touted the benefits of greater parental involvement, despite mixed or inconclusive evidence. A mixed-methods project on summer learning found similar results. While the quantitative data showed that parent involvement did not translate into better academic outcomes for children, the qualitative data helped illustrate why involved parents are not always successful helping their children succeed in school (e.g. Aurini & Hillier, 2018; Hillier, Milne, & Aurini, 2019).
- *Explanatory sequential mixed methods*: Beginning with quantitative research on a topic, analysing it, and using it to enhance your qualitative research represents a sequential approach that strengthens or elaborates on the quantitative findings. Your quantitative research, for example, may examine perceptions of crime and perceived risk of criminal victimization using a national survey. Your descriptive research question might be: 'What are residents' perceptions of violent crime?' You may find that most people believe that violent crime is on the rise, despite steady declines. Your qualitative study may tackle participants' subjective understandings of increasing violent crime in the absence of crime statistics. Questions may include not only 'What are participants' perceptions of violent crime?' but also 'How do participants rationalize or understand their perceptions?'

- *Exploratory sequential mixed methods*: This approach begins with qualitative data collection and uses these data to construct the quantitative component. The qualitative data may help you build an instrument to better test a hypothesis using quantitative methods. Or you may be able to identify important variables or questions to include in survey research.

Example

Simon Roberts et al. (2004) conducted research to understand how employers and service providers responded to provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act in the United Kingdom. They used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods model, first conducting 2,000 telephone survey interviews, and using these interviews to perform case studies with 38 employers and service providers. They noted that the quantitative component led them to focus qualitative interviews on the workplace rather than the overall organization, allowing them to talk to line managers who could share with them actual practices beyond scripted responses of top management.

STEP THREE: DEVELOPING A SAMPLING STRATEGY

Key takeaways



- A defensible sample is 'fair' (Levi Martin, 2017) and demonstrates a commitment to open intellectual inquiry
- High-quality projects can demonstrate that the researcher has made informed sampling decisions that are fundamentally tied to a project's objectives and research questions

Developing a defensible sampling strategy is an essential feature of your research design, whether your research is qualitative, quantitative, or a mix of the two. You must be able to justify why 'particular sites, participants, events, or cases are chosen' (Lamont & White, 2008, p. 4). At the end of the day, your goal is to really say something about the people, groups, events, organizations, and so forth of interest based on a relatively small slice of available data.

In most cases, qualitative research relies on nonprobability purposeful sampling techniques for selecting a study population; this means purposely selecting a population to reflect particular features of a group(s), organization(s), event(s), or activity(ies). Unlike quantitative methods, sampling in qualitative research does not seek statistical representativeness. What is critical is to 'search for a fair site, not a "representative" one' (Levi Martin, 2017, p. 36). By way of contrast, an example of an 'unfair' site (or individuals, groups, organizations, etc.) occurs when researchers generate a sample that will tell them exactly what they want to hear. Talking to a handful of friends or likeminded individuals who confirm what you already believe or 'know' is not in the spirit of open intellectual inquiry or the advancement of knowledge; it is not research.

And as Moraes Silva, Lamont, and Guetzhof (featured in this chapter) illustrate, it is not always simple to identify the 'best' potential participants. Although pinpointing some groups was fairly straightforward, the research team struggled to determine which Israeli group was most suitable to compare with their samples in Brazil and the United States. The team came to realize that making comparisons also required gaining a better understanding of how 'groupness' was experienced by their interviewees in different contexts. These realizations led the team to develop different strategies along the way.

Below, we outline convenience and purposeful sampling approaches (see [Table 3.1](#)). We encourage you to reflect on the applications and rationales and weigh the pros and cons of selecting one approach over another. Have you selected the optimal sampling strategy for solving your research 'puzzle'? Can you justify and defend your strategy?

In [Chapter 4](#), we discuss the term 'saturation' and provide clear sample size guidelines. Once you have determined the sampling strategy that will generate a 'fair' sample ([Chapter 3](#)), you should turn to [Chapter 4](#).

Convenience sampling

Applications and rationales:

- Used at the beginning stages of the research process (e.g. pilot project) to generate very preliminary information about your topic and to test out your data collection instruments (e.g. interview schedule)
- A 'low cost' (e.g. preparation), but also a 'low rewards' approach

A [convenience sample](#) selects research participants based on their ease of availability; it lacks any clear sampling strategy. The selection process relies on including those folks who are the most eager and able to participate in the study. A small convenience sample may be useful to test the appropriateness of a research design or interview questions before delving into a more intensive and larger project. *We do not recommend this type of sample except for very preliminary research.*

Annie Simpson's MA research, for example, focused on a specialized court that accommodates the needs of people with mental health issues within the criminal justice system. Her initial convenience sample consisted of a family member who was a judge in this type of court, followed by some preliminary observations of the mental health court in session. However, her sampling and data collection did not stop there. Drawing on these initial insights, she developed a purposeful sampling strategy to target a wider range of key actors within the mental health court system. It is also worth emphasizing that Simpson's initial convenience sample, which mainly included a relative, is not common or of the dime a dozen variety. Mental health judges are highly specialized and arguably difficult to access without some type of personal or professional connection. In 2015, there were around 20 mental health courts in all of Ontario. If you are studying non-rare or non-hidden groups or sites such as high school students, middle-class folks, fast-food workers, and so forth, you have no defensible reason beyond gaining some preliminary knowledge or testing out some of your data collection instruments (e.g. interview schedule). This approach, while easy, does not meet the basic principle of selecting a 'fair' site, people, organizations or so forth (Levi Martin, 2017, p. 36).

Purposive sampling

Some characterize [purposive sampling](#) as more or less synonymous with qualitative research. Purposive sampling includes making a number of strategic choices about where, how, and with whom you will conduct your research. The diversity of objectives and research questions entails multiple possibilities for

purposive sampling. Michael Patton (2015, pp. 266–272), for example, provides an overview of 40 purposive sampling options to aid in the selection of information-rich cases. Below we review the approaches we believe to be the most common in qualitative research design.

Snowball sample

Applications and rationales:

- To use the social networks of participants to generate a sample or build on an existing sample of participants using adaptive, chain-referral, and targeted sampling methods
- When it is necessary to access populations that are ‘hidden’
- When the sample requires insider knowledge to locate appropriate people and when aspects of the sample (e.g. social networks) cannot be known or anticipated in advance
- When participants provide access to difficult to contact participants or research sites

Snowball sampling is a common strategy in qualitative methods. It often relies on asking people who you have already interviewed to name others who fit the selection criteria. As a rule of thumb, we recommend that you only draw on two to three people from any one source.

This strategy can be helpful when your research involves populations that are dispersed, hard to reach, or ‘hidden’. Hidden populations ‘refer to a sub-set of the population whose membership is not readily distinguished or specified based on existing knowledge or sampling capabilities’ (Petersen & Valdez, 2005, p. 153). Such populations tend to have ‘low social visibility’ (Petersen & Valdez, 2005, p. 153), unless they enter a formal institutional setting such as a hospital, jail, or drug treatment programme (Watters & Biernacki, 1989, p. 417). A strength of this sampling technique is its ability to build a sample of ‘natural interactional units’ of people who relate to one another on a regular basis (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 417).

Researchers also routinely use this strategy to take advantage of new or unanticipated leads as they arise during the process of collecting data. Robert Jackall (2010), the author of one of the most influential books on corporate managers, describes the importance of ‘personal vouching’ for accessing the corporations and generating leads (p. 14):

Thirty-six corporations on both coasts refused permission for the study during a search for access ... This was an instructive experience in itself. About half of these refusals came after extended and complicated negotiations with various levels of management, indeed all the way to the top in some firms ... In the end, I gained access to several corporations through fortuitous circumstances and for reasons independent of any intrinsic merit that my proposed study of managerial ethics might have had ... As I crisscrossed managerial circles in different corporations, becoming known in some segments of the corporate world and running into managers that I had met in the course of my search, often in odd places, my personal contacts increased as managers referred me to each other. In the process, I became acutely aware of the importance that managers place on ‘being known’ to one another and on having someone who is known vouch for one’s probity. Institutional affiliations performed this role in two cases. Essentially through old school ties, I gained limited access to a small chemical company and to a large defense contractor. My access to these

companies was, however, restricted to interviews with top management, some observation, and use of a few internal company documents, all data that I have treated as preliminary despite some valuable insights. Eventually more personal referrals were crucial keys to access. Through a total chance meeting with a scholar who is also interested in social aspects of the business world, I was introduced to an executive, an expert in public relations, who befriended me ... this man encouraged me to reconstruct my own self-presentation in order to make managers feel comfortable with the proposed project ... When, after several rewritings, the proposal satisfied him, he approached a well-placed executive in a large textile firm that I have given the pseudonym of the Weft Corporation and vouched for me. At that point, the proposal itself became meaningless since, to my knowledge, no one except the two executives who arranged access ever saw it. The personal vouching, however, was crucial. (pp. 14–15)

There are three general approaches and rationales for generating a snowball sample. These approaches are not mutually exclusive and may be used in combination with other approaches:

Adaptive sampling: Patton (2015) makes a distinction between convenience and opportunistic sampling, the latter focusing on the need for a researcher to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities as they arise during the course of fieldwork. This approach can be very important in fieldwork where unexpected events are likely to unfold. While conventional sampling draws on information known prior to starting data collection, adaptive sampling evolves as observations and insights made during the process of research generates new leads or information. This approach is particularly well suited for topics that require insider knowledge to locate appropriate people and when aspects of the sample cannot be known or anticipated in advance.

A researcher may, for example, be interested in teen vaping. Since people do not wear a sign on their forehead identifying themselves as a vaper, and the fact that this practice may be actively hidden by teenagers, a researcher may decide to start off with a simple random sample of high school students who will be interviewed about vaping. Then, based on the initial interviews, students are asked to refer friends or other students they know who also routinely vape. While the initial sampling design started off with a random sample, likely including vapers and non-vapers, participants are added based on information provided by participants about vaping among their social connections. This approach is perhaps more well known among deviance and health scholars who have used it to study everything from opiate drug use (e.g. Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981), to prostitution (e.g. McNamara, 1994), to gangs (e.g. Petersen and Valdez, 2005), to the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases (e.g. Baily & Arunger, 1995); however, this approach is suitable to study a wide range of other topics.

Chain-referral sampling: This sampling method generates or extends a sample through referrals made by knowledgeable informants or insiders, including current or past participants. This approach is particularly well suited to study sensitive or private topics (e.g. sexual behaviour) but also to find difficult to access populations in which the researcher may need a referral from an insider. Quantitative researchers have also adopted a version of this approach – respondent driven sampling or RDS. While it has been used in the areas of health, crime, and deviance (e.g. Dhawan, 2020), it has also been used to generate samples of other groups including recently arrived immigrants (Frere-Smith, Luthra, & Platt, 2014), transgender populations (Arayasirkul, Cai, & Wilson, 2015), and jazz musicians (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004; see also Heckathorn, 1997). In the context of qualitative research, the process of recruitment generally follows two steps:

1. Starting referral chains: Starting referral chains may be challenging if the population of interest has low social visibility. In RDS, these individuals are sometimes referred to as 'seeds'. These 'seeds should be diverse and well-networked, but they do not need to be chosen randomly' (Columbia Mailman School of Public Health, n.d., para. 2).

2. Interviews and recruitment: After 'seeds' finish their research participation, the referral chains are followed up on and continue until the sample size is reached.

Researchers can also add this approach to extend their current sampling framework. In the context of a focus group or interview study, for example, a researcher may ask participants to recommend other suitable candidates. A rule of thumb is that only two or three new recruits should come from any one seed.

Targeted sampling: Targeted sampling, like adaptive sampling, is an 'ongoing and iterative process in which data are constantly analysed and used to adjust the recruitment and sample techniques' (Watters & Biernacki, 1989, p. 421). The process of recruitment generally follows these steps:

1. Initial mapping: Researchers conduct an initial geographic map based on existing data, direct observations, and conversations with knowledgeable actors. In their study of intravenous drug users, for example, Watters and Biernacki (1989) gathered a variety of data to determine which neighbourhoods had the most drug use and related activity.

We directly observed various city neighbourhoods for easily identifiable signs of drug transactions (e.g. observable 'copping' areas where drug transactions could be witnessed); had conversations with knowledgeable informants (drug treatment staff, police, and residential hotel desk clerks and managers about the locations of drug user activity); and reviewed police arrest and emergency room admission data ... all publicly funded drug treatment admission and discharges ... and treatment program clients were sorted into reported census tract of residence ... Through this cross-method triangulation we were able to construct a map of the city depicting the communities within census tracts that were the principle sites for the sale and intravenous use of drugs. (pp. 421–422)

2. Ethnographic mapping: Sometimes additional steps are needed to identify the social context (e.g. where and how drug users shared needles), relationships, 'interaction styles, and social organization of groups of potential participants' (Watters & Biernacki, 1989, p. 422). Mapping may be required to identify the various groups, sub-groups, and non-overlapping social networks within a geographic location. As Watters and Biernacki (1989) explain, 'members of one drug preference profile may not routinely interact with members of other groups with different drug, sexual, and cultural preferences' (p. 422).

In such cases, ethnographic maps 'of the area under investigation are essential to a clear understanding of the economic and social life of a people', such as 'small-scale sketch maps of the whole area and plans (large-scale maps) of small areas' (A Committee of the Royal Anthropological Institute, 1951, p. 47). This can be accomplished using relatively low-tech methods (e.g. pen and paper), by carefully documenting the location, people, places, and spaces in a manner that reasonably captures the scale and distance between these units. Imagine creating an aerial shot of your location. The amount of space something occupies and the distance between 'units' (e.g. parks, churches) should be fairly accurate and proportionate. As the Urban Ethnography Lab (2008) explains:

Mapping can be used as a research tool to make social and spatial practices and the interactions in space visual and tangible. By visualizing spatial practice and interpreting a map, researchers can experience data that they were not even aware of. Additionally, we generally understand mapping as a process during fieldwork and urban research to discover, structure and highlight the spatial and social interactions and point out the blind spots, all of which one might not be able to capture by writing field notes, doing participatory observation or qualitative interviews. The map is one piece of data used to make the invisible (or the obvious) visible. With this kind of

urban ethnographic data, one can return, reflect, and enhance awareness of a context for agreements, conflicts, negotiations, misunderstandings, power relations and accountabilities in the field of urban research. (para. 1)

Nowadays, researchers also have the benefit of using tools like Google Earth and Geographic Information System Mapping Technology to generate aerial and street level snapshots of the places they are interested in as a starting point to further map out the social organization, networks, behaviours, and interactions of people in those spaces. Health researchers, for example, can use these tools to identify populations at risk of certain diseases. These visual representations can also be used to help potential participants or knowledgeable informants identify important places and spaces or, in later phases the research, as an elicitation tool (Wise, 2015).



Figure 3.1 Google Earth image of a Toronto, Canada, neighbourhood

Developing and revising the sampling strategy: Once the location and mapping of various groups, sub-groups, and social networks are identified, researchers need to articulate recruitment targets that reflect the central aims of their research. These targets may need to be revised as new information or other contingencies emerge. Watters and Biernacki (1989), for example, had difficulty recruiting women. They had learned from their ethnographic mapping efforts that this challenge stemmed from a number of factors, including the time required to participate in the study. Women drug users who were involved in prostitution could not afford to miss half a day of work to participate in the study. To improve women's participation, they adopted a 'ladies first' policy to fast track data collection, thus allowing these women to return to work sooner (Watters & Biernacki, 1989, p. 423). Thus, their sampling strategy was adapted to reflect the realities of data collection.

Snowball samples also have limitations. It can be challenging, for example, to find the right respondent(s) to create referral chains of participants who complement your research objectives, particularly if the sample is relatively hidden and has 'low visibility' (Biernacki & Watters, 1981, p. 144). You might also compromise the heterogeneity of the sample if all new participants are generated through existing ones, resulting in a sample that is too homogeneous (e.g. drawing primarily on a handful of referral chains or seeds). You may also risk oversampling one or more type of respondent (e.g. too many drug counsellors and not enough drug users).

These challenges can be mitigated through ongoing analysis and reflection of your sample, including identifying the characteristics of your current sample and referral

chains and making adjustments. As Biernacki and Watter's (1981) note: 'the researcher must continually ask: How many more cases should be collected and in what direction should the referral chains be guided?' (p. 156). Imposing quotas, for example, limits certain kinds of participants or sites to ensure your sample reflects the population of interest.

Maximum variation and homogeneous sampling

Applications and rationales:

Maximum variation:

- To capture a wide range of attitudes, perspectives, and experiences
- To gain a more holistic and multifaceted understanding
- When it is necessary or beneficial to make comparisons
- To test theories or propositions (e.g. method of agreement, triangulation)

Homogeneous:

- To gain an in-depth understanding of one dimension of a phenomena or subgroup (Patton, 2002, p. 235)
- To examine both similarities and variations within a homogeneous sample

Maximum variation sampling seeks to capture important variations, with the goal of identifying patterns that cut across the sample. When dealing with small sample sizes, too much heterogeneity can present problems when individual cases differ substantially from each other. Sampling based on maximum variation transforms this perceived limitation into a strength by identifying core experiences and central patterns in heterogeneous populations, contexts, and so forth.

In contrast, **homogeneous samples** are sometimes deliberately chosen to give a detailed account of a particular phenomenon. A homogeneous sample might be limited to a subculture or a group that presents many of the same characteristics. The advantage of this approach is to facilitate in-depth investigation of social processes in a specific social context. Elijah Anderson's *Code of the Street* (1999), for example, was able to generate a rich ethnographic account of street violence in a disadvantaged community. He conducted fieldwork to uncover the emergence of a subculture regulated by 'the code of the street', that combines elements of respect, loyalty, and honour.

Typical case, confirming, disconfirming, and extreme or deviant sampling

Applications and rationales:

Typical case:

- To generate a sample of 'average' people, groups, institutions, or cases of a particular phenomenon
- To 'describe and illustrate what is typical to those unfamiliar with the setting – not to make generalized statements about the experiences of all participants'

(Patton, 2002, p. 236)

- To create a sample that is 'illustrative not definitive' (Patton, 2002, p. 236)

Confirming:

- To generate a sample of people, groups, institutions, or cases that align with 'already emergent patterns' (Patton, 2002, p. 239)
- Used as a standalone or complementary sampling strategy to 'confirm and elaborate' the findings or theories, and add 'richness and depth, and credibility' (Patton, 2002, p. 236)

Disconfirming:

- To generate a sample of rival interpretations, instances, or examples to extend, challenge, or modify existing theories or conventional wisdom
- To illustrate variations, nuances, or the contextually dependent nature of a particular phenomenon

Extreme or deviant:

- To generate outliers, exceptions to the rule, or outstanding examples (e.g. Olympians)
- To examine similarities or common patterns
- To examine differences or alternative patterns
- Used as a standalone or complimentary sampling strategy to 'confirm and elaborate' the findings, adding 'richness and depth, and credibility' (Patton, 2002, p. 236)

Another strategy for sampling is to select a case or cases that you identify as 'average'. In other words, cases might be of interest simply because they are ordinary. Howard Becker (1970) wanted to understand how medical students were socialized into their profession. He conducted his research at the University of Kansas Medical School because the school was seen as typical of the medical school experience (Palys, 2008). This strategy demands some prior knowledge of the population or phenomenon to identify what is the 'norm' or average.

Another strategy is to seek cases that might confirm or disconfirm a theory or a finding that you have identified through exploratory research or your literature review. Seeking to disconfirm a theory may be a way to strengthen your argument or support a competing theory. Ted Palys (2008) sums up this general principle as, 'If you think your results are not generalizable or the existence of a particular kind of case will undermine all that you "know" to be true about a phenomenon, then look for that kind of case' (p. 698).

Extreme sampling examines cases because they are extraordinary or special in some way. Studying extremes can illuminate what is considered normal. Ethnomethodologists, for example, often choose deviant sampling to expose implicit assumptions and norms (Palys, 2008). Exceptional examples can also help us understand more generic social processes. Dan F. Chambliss's (1989) work on Olympic swimmers shed light on the 'mundanity of excellence' (p. 70). Rather than raw natural talent or possessing some special gift, excellence is the by-product of

engaging in qualitatively different behaviours that anyone can do. In the case of elite swimmers this includes making small changes to an arm movement or flip, competing at a regional rather than local meets, training at near-competition levels of intensity, eating properly, and getting enough sleep. Talent is often 'discovered' long after it becomes obvious through various triumphs. His study of an extraordinary case shed light on our general notions of 'excellence' and 'talent', two concepts that are often elusive and difficult to pin down.

Purposeful random sampling

Applications and rationales:

- To increase credibility and trustworthiness
- To generate a sample size that is more manageable

A **purposeful random sample** can be a strategy to increase the credibility of your methods. In situations in which a research project has hundreds or even thousands of materials or people for consideration, this approach is also a credible way to generate a sample size that is more manageable. Patton (2015) describes a collaborative research project where the research team felt they could only manage 10 to 15 in-depth clinical case histories at each site. Yet each site served 200 to 300 families. The research team decided to enhance the credibility of these narratives by systematically determining what would be included in the case histories, and then setting up a procedure to randomly select clients. These stories, though not generalizable, were randomly selected before knowing the outcomes of who experienced success or failure in the programme.

Stratified purposeful sampling

Applications and rationales:

- To ensure each subgroup (strata) of a given population is fairly represented within the sample
- To capture variations by comparing and contrasting 'samples within samples' in which each 'bundle' is fairly homogeneous (Patton, 2002, p. 240)

A **stratified purposeful sampling** strategy incorporates a hybrid tactic to bridge homogeneity and heterogeneity (i.e. maximum variation and homogeneous sampling strategies). The objective is to select groups that offer variety in regard to a particular phenomenon but each of which is fairly homogeneous, allowing the comparison of subgroups. For example, if you are conducting a case study of a bustling downtown law firm, the number of support staff, junior associates, partners, and so forth who participate should be roughly proportionate to the realities of the law firm. Interviewing mainly first year associates is fine if this is the focus of your study but will not reflect the diversity of perspectives and experiences of working for a law firm more generally.

Criterion sampling

Applications and rationales:

- To clearly specify a selection criteria and logic for sampling

- To develop a more focused and targeted sample that captures the predetermined characteristics of methodological, policy, and/or theoretical importance

This sampling strategy seeks to incorporate cases or individuals who meet a predetermined criterion of importance, such as a shared characteristic or experience. In general, employing this technique requires carefully designating inclusion and exclusion criteria. For example, married men who have been clients of sex workers might be the basis from which you build your sample. Implicit to this sampling strategy is the idea that the criterion is contrasted to cases that vary on a key variable of interest. Thus, unmarried men who have been clients of sex workers or married men who are not clients of sex workers may be a good comparison case depending on the research questions.

Theory-guided (emergent) sampling

Applications and rationales:

- To clearly specify 'cases that represent important theoretical constructs about the phenomenon of interest' (Suri, 2011, p. 7)

A more deductive or theory-testing approach to research design includes individuals, time periods, groups, cases, and so forth specifically on the basis of their potential contribution to theory. The sample becomes 'representative of the phenomenon of interest' (Patton, 1990, p. 177). Grounded theory, for example, is a systematic method of conducting inductive qualitative inquiry aimed towards theory construction. Theoretical sampling 'is rooted in data collected, the questions that data have given rise to, and the dimensions and contexts that the researcher has pursued to gain a fuller understanding of the process under study' (Conlon et al., 2020, p. 955). Conlon et al. (2020) summarize how researchers accomplish theoretical sampling:

First, theoretical sampling can involve sampling for additional participants with a particular set of theoretical considerations in mind. Second, theoretical sampling can be progressed through a variety of means and techniques in the actual data collection process. Most commonly, this happens through interviewing, for instance, steering questions in the direction of emergent theorizing ... the focus of data collection, including the questions asked, can change in the theoretical sampling process. Third, theoretical sampling can sometimes be done within the data in isolation from the process of data collection, that is, when the dataset is approached as secondary data ... (p. 949)

A theoretical sample moves between sample selection, fieldwork, and analysis: a preliminary sample is selected, fieldwork carried out and data analysed; this process is repeated to refine emergent categories or theories until no new insights are generated.

Table 3.1 Summary of Sampling Strategies

| | Research Objectives and Justifications |
|--------------------|---|
| Convenience | Selecting a sample based on the ease of access. While it is suitable to generate initial insights or to refine data collection instruments (e.g. interview schedule), it is not recommended as a standalone approach. |

| | Research Objectives and Justifications |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Snowball – General | Use the networks and contacts of participants to generate a sample that is hidden or has low visibility, requires insider knowledge, or is difficult to access. |
| Snowball – Adaptive | Sampling evolves based on observations and insights made during the process of data collection as new information or leads emerge, or when aspects of the sample cannot be known or anticipated in advance. |
| Snowball-Chain Referral | To generate or extend a sample through referrals made by knowledgeable informants or insiders. This approach is suitable to study topics that are sensitive or personal, or that target hidden or low visibility participants. |
| Snowball – Targeted | To identify potential participants based on existing data, direct observations, conversations with knowledgeable actors, and the documentation of the people, places, spaces, and interactions. This approach can be used to identify target-rich locations (that is where you will find people who have the characteristics you are most interested in), or to generate a sample of hidden or low visibility participants. |
| <u>Maximum Variation</u> | To examine a wide spectrum of a phenomenon in order to gain a more holistic and multifaceted understanding. This approach is also suitable for making comparisons within the sample and/or to examine similarities that cut across the phenomenon under investigation. |
| <u>Homogeneous</u> | This approach is used to gain a detailed and in-depth account based on a sample of individuals, groups, institutions, and so forth that are similar or that share key characteristics of interest. |
| <u>Typical</u> | This approach is used to illustrate or describe what is an average, typical, or routine instance of the phenomenon under investigation. |
| Confirming | This approach is used to generate a sample that aligns with 'already emergent patterns' in order to 'confirm or elaborate' findings or theories (Patton, 2002: 236). |
| <u>Disconfirming</u> | A sample of rival instances or evidence can be used to extend, challenge, or modify existing theories or conventional wisdom. Disconfirming samples can also serve to illustrate similarities, variations, and patterns that cut across the phenomenon under investigation. |

| | Research Objectives and Justifications |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| <u>Extreme or Deviant</u> | A sample of extraordinary instances can highlight not only what is unusual, but also what is typical. |
| <u>Purposeful Random</u> | A random sample from available options (e.g. list of clients) to improve the credibility of a study and generate a sample size that is more manageable. |
| <u>Stratified Purposeful</u> | A sample that is stratified or nested by selecting 'units or cases that vary according to a key dimension' (e.g. level of education) (RWJF, n/d). The purpose of this approach is to allow for comparisons between fairly homogeneous subgroups and ensure that the study represents that population of interest. |
| <u>Criterion</u> | To developed a more focused and targeted sample that captures the predetermined characteristic of methodological, policy, and/or theoretical importance. |
| Theory Guided | A sample that represents or allows the researcher to develop a theoretical construct. |
| Emergent Sampling | Generate and adapt a sample as new theoretical insights emerge and as part of the process of theory refinement. |

CONCLUSION

To design a qualitative study, you cannot simply apply a set of rules or a logical structure and implement them in a linear fashion. Throughout the research process, you will need to design and redesign your strategies. You must continually move between the different components of the design to assess their implications. You must continually consider how your design influences and is influenced by the social context in which you are conducting your research. Remaining flexible to change is key. Be willing to move back and forth between your research questions, sampling, data collection and analysis. And most importantly privilege integrity in design and 'spirit'. In [Chapter 4](#) we show you how to purposefully build these principles into your research design.

FURTHER SUGGESTED READING

Brownhill, S., Ungarova, T., & Bipazhanova, A. (2017). 'Jumping the first hurdle': Framing action research questions using the *ice cream cone model*. *Methodological Innovations*, 10(3). <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/10.1177/2059799117741407>

The authors review several principles and models of developing sound research questions. They propose the 'ice cream cone model' in which the researcher funnels down to a research question after determining the focus, purpose, context, and participants.

Tracey, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight 'big-tent' criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>

Qualitative researchers are a cantankerous bunch – fighting amongst ourselves about everything from sample size to data analysis. In this article, Tracey cuts through these disagreements and offers eight practical markers for evaluating quality including selecting a worthy topic and developing an ethically sound project.

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research: Design and methods* (6th edn). Sage.

Case Study Research is one of the most cited books in the social sciences. Yin provides clear guidelines that take researchers through the process of identifying and distinguishing case study research from other types of inquiry, the core principles researchers should follow when collecting evidence, and writing up case study research.

SAGE CASE STUDIES

Baca, E., & Lopez, J. (2017). The nitty-gritty: Doing case study research on school improvement programs. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. www.doi.org/10.4135/9781526419705

Johnson, W. H. (2019). When being a jack-of-all trades helps: Using mixed methods to explore the full phenomenon. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. <https://dx-doi-org.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/10.4135/9781526465788>

Pérez-Granados, D. R., & Huffam, L. C. (2018). The challenges of mixed-methods research design: Evaluating literacy interventions for young children in low-income, Latino families. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. <https://dx-doi-org.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/10.4135/9781526428691>

Strong, J. (2020). Reflections on using a scoping trip as part of a PhD research project in sexual and reproductive health, Ghana. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. <https://dx-doi-org.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/10.4135/9781529710724>

Swan, H. (2017). Sampling and recruitment strategies for conducting qualitative interviews with vulnerable populations. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. www.doi.org/10.4135/9781526405319

KEY TERMS

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| Case Study | Institutional Ethnography | Research Paradigm |
| Comparative Research | Longitudinal Research | Research Questions |
| Convenience Sample | Master Question | Snowball Sample |
| Criterion Sample | Maximum Variation Sample | Snowball Sample |
| Disconfirming Sample | Multiple Methods | Sub-questions |
| Ethnography | Naturalism | Theory-Guided Sample |
| | | |

| | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|
| <u>Ethnomethodology.</u> | <u>Negative Cases</u> | <u>Typical Case Sample</u> |
| <u>Extreme Sample</u> | <u>Phenomenology.</u> | |
| <u>Grounded Theory</u> | <u>Purposeful Random Sample</u> | |
| <u>Homogeneous Sample</u> | <u>Purposive Sample</u> | |

4 TAKING A STEP BACK: HOW TO BUILD METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL INTEGRITY INTO YOUR RESEARCH

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter you will have the tools to:

- Build in checks and balances to improve the rigour and integrity of your research
- Make an informed and defensible decision about sample size
- Understand what saturation means in the context of qualitative research and how to saturate your claims with a sufficient amount of evidence
- Assess the ethical soundness of your project and minimize harm or risk

Chapter summary

[Chapters 2](#) and [3](#) have outlined the foundational steps for conceptualizing and designing a research project with methodological rigour, including how to craft a research puzzle that is solidly grounded in the literature, how to pose a 'real' research question, and how to design a defensible sample. This chapter builds on these foundations and asks you to take a step back to consider specific strategies for building in rigour and integrity into your research. These strategies include evaluating the feasibility of your study, making an informed and defensible decision about your sample size, and protecting your participants from harm. Many of the guidelines in this chapter apply to all the specific methods discussed in this book. Rather than repeating them in each chapter, we suggest using them in concert with this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Morse et al. (2002) argue that 'without rigor, research is worthless, becomes fiction, and loses its utility' (p. 14). How is rigour achieved in qualitative research? High-quality and ethically sound research does not happen by accident. It is purposefully built into the research design. You will make mistakes along the way. But you will not *fail* if integrity guides your project – from the development of researchable research questions, to selecting a 'fair' sample, to using the most appropriate methods to answer your question, to approaching data collection and analysis openly and honestly.

This chapter builds on [Chapter 3](#) and takes you through the steps of incorporating checks and balances into your research design. In practice, building in checks and balances should be conducted throughout the research process, rather than waiting until the end (Morse et al., 2002). We have already described some of the steps for improving the methodological and ethical rigour of your project, including formulating a research puzzle that is solidly grounded in the literature, posing a 'real' research

question, and developing a defensible sample. There are additional steps you can take to improve the likelihood that your account fairly captures the people, groups, organizations, and so forth that are under investigation. These steps include designing your project in a manner that forces you to honestly confront what the data actually tells you (rather than what you want to hear).

1. *Step One: Feasibility and Fit:* Make sure you have the resources to complete the project and that the components of your design work harmoniously together.
2. *Step Two: Trustworthiness:* Build in a variety of validation strategies to improve the credibility of your study and its conclusions.
3. *Step Three: Sample Size and Saturation:* Identify the sample size that you will need to fully saturate your claims with evidence *and* examine the full range of findings that emerge.
4. *Step Four: Ethical Considerations:* All research demands reflecting on the ethical dimensions of your data collection and analysis and building in safeguards to ensure you do no harm.

Not all strategies will work for all projects and any selection must be carefully weighed against a variety of factors, including the nature of the research, goals, and potential harms or risks. As Emerson LaCroix (featured in this chapter) reminds us, some strategies come at a cost. This chapter will provide you with the tools you need to make informed decisions.

STEP ONE: FEASIBILITY AND FIT

Key takeaways



- Make sure you have the resources that are required to successfully execute your project
- Examine whether the research components connect in a clear and logical manner

Feasibility

Feasibility, as it relates to research, is the extent to which those who implement a research study or an intervention can practically do so within an identified authentic setting. (Gagnon & Barber, 2018, p. 668)

Ongoing reflection of the **feasibility** of your study includes thinking about timelines, the resources that will be required, and any design or access issues that may emerge. You must be realistic as to whether you have the money, time, skills, or credentials to carry out your project to the end. A study on the Spanish Revolution that requires you to travel to Spain and dig through mountains of archival material makes little sense if you do not have the resources to spend an extended period living in Spain, nor the language proficiency to read and interpret documents (for a discussion see Firebaugh, 2008).

Equally important for qualitative researchers is whether your population or organization of interest is willing to participate in your study. It makes no sense to build an entire project around a particular group if that group flat-out denies you

access to its members or other materials that you need to answer your research question. A preliminary literature review and pilot project (sometimes referred to as a feasibility study) will go a long way in helping you determine whether the study is doable given the scope, access, and resources required to execute the project (see [Chapter 2](#)). Here is a checklist you can ask yourself when evaluating the feasibility of your study. These questions are not only critical for determining the viability of any project, but versions of them are standard fare at most proposal or thesis defences ([Table 4.1](#)).

Table 4.1 Checklist for evaluating the feasibility and fit of your study

| |
|---|
| 1. Is my question an actual question? Can I answer my question? Are there aspects of my question that are virtually impossible to answer? |
| 2. Does my question make sense? Is my question too narrow or complicated? |
| 3. Is my question 'empirically resolvable' (Poling, 2008/2009)? |
| 4. Has my question already been asked before, and if so, what will I add to the literature? |
| 5. Will my research questions, methods, and sampling accommodate many possible answers and even inconvenient surprises? |
| 6. Are there appropriate data available? And will I have access to those data? |
| 7. Do I have the resources (e.g. time, money, skills) to gather the data I need in order to answer my research questions? |
| 8. Is my research design ethical? |
| 9. Do established people in the field think my research is interesting? |
| 10. Can I map out the components of my project in a clear and concise manner? Do they logically fit together? |
| 11. What are the potential criticisms or potential flaws (e.g. focusing too much on consumers and not enough on sellers)? |

Fit: modelling your research design

A good research design is able to identify the key components of the project in a concise and clear manner. Maxwell (2013) suggests creating an interactive model to help you think about the ways that your research components connect.

In [Figure 4.1](#), we offer an example of a conceptual map from the dissertation research of Jessica Braimoh based on these principles. For her PhD dissertation, Braimoh (2015) was interested in examining how geography shapes the organization

of social services for at risk youth. She conducted a case study of a single youth organization that works across rural and urban settings. The diagram that Braimoh created puts the research questions at the centre. She has one central question: 'What is the relationship between geography and the standardized provision of social services to marginalized youth?', and three sub-questions. She uses arrows to show that these questions are the 'hub' that connects all the other components in the design. The upper part of the diagram concerns the conceptual components. Her research questions are clearly and directly connected to her research problem (how geography affects a 'one-stop shop' model of social services), conceptual model (neighbourhood effects, social capital, etc.), and her analytical framework (comparative). The lower portions are the operational half of the design, specifying how she will collect data and ensure the validity of her results. The broken lines represent the fact that the research design will need to evolve over time. The research questions will remain the hub, and as these are modified, so too will the other components.

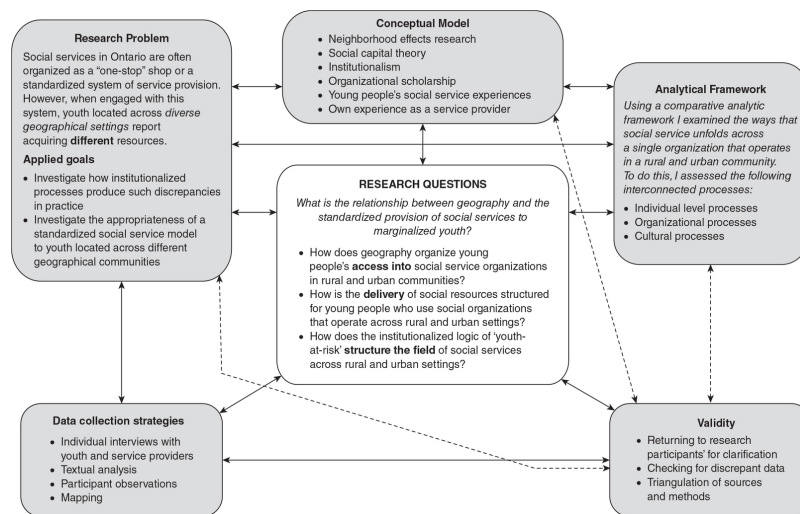


Figure 4.1 A design map of Jessica Braimoh's dissertation research

STEP TWO: TRUSTWORTHINESS

Key takeaways



- Build in verification strategies throughout the research process to improve the methodological rigour of your study
- Two ways among others to test the credibility of your conclusions are length of time conducting research and using triangulation

Qualitative research has been accused of lacking methodological rigour, transparency, and justification. Researchers often use the term **validity** to refer to the appropriateness of the research design, tools, and data that are used to answer particular research questions. This includes selecting the most appropriate methods for answering your research question(s), using a sampling method that generates a fair sample, gathering data that supports your inquiry, and collecting data within an

appropriate context. **Reliability**, on the other hand, is used to refer to the replicability of the processes and results. In the context of qualitative research, reliability is generally tied to the consistency of the processes and findings.

Without getting into the weeds of longstanding debates in the field, many qualitative researchers have substituted reliability and validity with 'trustworthiness' (e.g. see Morse et al., 2002). **Trustworthiness** has four key dimensions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985):

Credibility and authenticity: This dimension of trustworthiness includes establishing credibility and authenticity – or confidence in the truthfulness and representation of the data that is collected and presented. Establishing credibility requires making a concerted effort to establish an accurate representation of the data. Authenticity is related to credibility and includes ensuring that the conduct of your research genuinely reflects your participants' lived experiences and speaks to the wider social implications of your project. Credibility and authenticity also consider potential **validity threats**, or the ways that you might be wrong. These threats include alternative explanations or other ways of understanding your data that are not accounted for: 'for example, that the people you interviewed are not presenting their actual views, or that you have ignored the data that don't fit your interpretation, or that there is a different theoretical way of making sense of your data' (Maxwell, 2013, p. 123).

Transferability: Transferability is another way to describe generalizability. Internal generalizability refers to the representativeness of the data and conclusions for the phenomena or people you are studying. Being able to generalize internally is intimately tied to your sampling strategy. If you are conducting participant observation, you cannot observe all the factors of the setting, and it is thus important to account for the kinds of diversity that can exist in a particular location or social context. What have you missed, and how does this affect your overall findings? In analysing your data, you should pay attention to data that do not fit prior expectations, and make sure to retain the important differences you have built into your design. For example, are you imposing an artificial coherence on the data?

External generalizability is established by showing how the research speaks to other contexts, situations, times and/or populations. It seeks to make theoretical extensions, rather than statistical representativeness (Maxwell, 2013). Lincoln and Guba (1985) put the onus on the author to provide enough detail to allow others to apply the data to other contexts. They note that it is 'not the naturalist's task to provide an index of transferability, it is his or her responsibility to provide the data base that makes transferability judgements possible on the part of potential appliers' (1985, p. 316).

Dependability: This dimension is established by showing that the findings could be replicated if the study was conducted using the same data, context, and data analysis. If another researcher collected and analysed the same data, would they at least understand how your interpretation was formed, even if they would have interpreted the data a bit differently (e.g. interpreting the glass as 'half-full' versus 'half-empty')? If another set of researchers coded the data, would they have assigned the data in similar ways?

Confirmability: This dimension is established when the research demonstrates that the findings of the study are shaped by the respondents or other sources of data (e.g. documents). Confirmability also speaks to **researcher bias** – the tendency that researchers have to collect, interpret, or present data that support their own prejudgements, theories, or goals. Biases can seep into any stage of the research process, including during research design, sample selection, data collection, analysis, or writing. Rather than seeking to eliminate bias – it is not possible to jettison your own perspectives, experiences, or beliefs – dealing with research bias means understanding how your viewpoints can influence qualitative research. Identifying possible impacts of your predispositions on your research project will allow you to build in checks and balances to keep yourself honest and fair.

Notions of trustworthiness are laudable – but how do researchers actually accomplish these aims? As Wolcott (1990) correctly observed, 'I apparently "have" or "get" or "satisfy" or "establish" it' (p. 121), without having any firm guidelines. Strategies to improve the trustworthiness differ between quantitative and qualitative methods. Qualitative researchers do not have statistical means to 'control for' probable threats to methodological rigour and trustworthiness. However, you can build in additional safeguards to further improve the methodological rigour of your study. These 'mechanisms are woven into every step of the inquiry to construct a solid product' (Morse et al., 2002, p. 17).

Reactivity

The presence of a researcher can also compromise the trustworthiness of findings that are generated through qualitative research methods. **Reactivity**, or observer effects, occur when the process of conducting research alters the behaviour of the participants. There are several types of reactivity. One is the Hawthorne effect, which links changes in behaviour to study participation. Experiments conducted by Elton Mayo at a plant in Hawthorne, Illinois, during the 1920s and 1930s found that productivity increased when changes in working conditions were introduced (e.g. better lighting). Mayo hypothesized that workers were responding to the attention they were receiving as research participants rather than to better working conditions. Another type of reactivity is the novelty effect, which occurs when individuals modify their behaviour after the introduction of something new, such as the presence of the researcher. Reactivity may also result when participants act in a certain way to please the researcher. Characteristics of the observer, such as race, gender, or age, can result in reactivity, especially when there are substantial differences between the investigator and the participant(s) (McKechnie, 2008). The goal is not to remove the influence of the researcher on the research process (an impossible objective), but to ensure that reactivity is identified and channelled in a positive way.

Trustworthiness in practice

Methodological approaches cannot guarantee trustworthy findings, but a good research design can help bolster the credibility of your conclusions. Maxwell (2013) argues that it is important to 'test' the validity of your conclusions rather than to verify them. Testing involves searching for evidence that calls into question your findings. We provide a number of strategies below for improving the trustworthiness of your findings, but keep in mind that not all strategies work for all studies. And importantly, they do not necessarily guarantee rigour. As Morse and her colleagues (2002) point out, 'while strategies of trustworthiness may be useful in attempting to *evaluate* rigor, they do not in themselves *ensure* rigor' (p. 17). A researcher can spend a lot of time in the field and do an audit trail (we explain the audit trail more, below) – but if the study or audit trail is of poor quality, then neither strategy will bolster confidence in the findings (Morse et al., 2002). Similarly, a study based on a poorly conceived research question, research design, or faulty sampling strategy will not be 'saved' or shown to be trustworthy even if a researcher engages in prolonged time in the field. And member checking will do little to ensure the trustworthiness of your study if you asked leading questions in the first place.

Intensive, long-term involvement

Immersing oneself over a long period of time does not just apply to field research. It is about gaining a fulsome understanding of the social world – whether it be a group, community, organization, or an online environment – under investigation. Long-term involvement is about providing a broad picture of the circumstances and contradictions that take place in social life; it allows you to gather a diversity of data, to check and confirm your observations and understandings, and to test alternative theories or propositions. It can also afford qualitative researchers an opportunity to follow people, a group, institutions, or organizations to understand a process, transition, experience, or change over time. This approach can help researchers gain

a better understanding of the journey and gain an appreciation of how this is understood at different points in the process and by different individuals involved.

Audit trails

An audit trail refers to the careful and transparent documentation of all components of the study. Think of it like preparing your taxes and keeping all of your receipts, details of your employment, and other documentation just in case you are audited! Maintaining good records about how an investigation was conducted – keeping observation notes, interview notes, records of times and places you visited the field or people, and memos or notes about your interpretations – are all part of the audit trail. Halpern (1983), summarized by Lincoln and Guba (1985, pp. 319–310), suggests keeping the following information:

Raw data: Raw data includes documents, field notes, pictures, audio files, and responses to open ended or demographic surveys.

Data reduction and data analysis: This includes summaries of condensed notes about data, quantitative summaries of the data, and any theoretical ideas that emerged. It also includes descriptions, summaries of events, and concerns or hunches that you may have had along the way.

Data reconstruction and synthesis: This includes major categories or themes that emerged, your interpretations, and any final reports or publications. It also includes the hierarchical structure of these categories and evidence (e.g. interview data, documents) that support the organization of data (see [Chapter 9](#)).

Process notes: This includes notes about the methodological procedures, rationales, and decisions that were made. This can also include personal notes and reflections. The researcher must clearly detail the path of research including steps taken to manage and analyse the data.

Instrument development: This includes any preliminary data collection (e.g. pilot study), preliminary interview schedules or observation templates, and so forth.

Today, CAQDAS – or computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software – options make creating an audit trail fairly easy. You can store not just your data but notes that you made along the way about your decisions, reflections, and theories or concepts that you considered. As you start to engage in data analysis, you can include notes about what the nodes mean, how you are defining certain concepts, and why they are important.

Member checking

‘You slurred us, Annette; you made us look like poor white trash’ (participant response to how his family was portrayed in *Unequal Childhoods*). (Lareau, 2011, p. 312)

Obtaining feedback from respondents is a strategy to test your interpretations against those of your respondents. You might solicit this feedback throughout the research process or wait until you have written up your results. Judith Stacey (1990), for example, elicited feedback from informants from two of the families she studied at the end of her research. She included these responses in an appendix to reflect on differences between her views and those of her respondents. In the end, this information offered *evidence* of the validity of her conclusions.

While some argue that member checking is an integral part of establishing trustworthiness, others are more sceptical. First, 'who should decide the focus of what the researcher writes?' particularly given that 'study participants are likely to want certain issues developed and recast to reflect their own views' (Lareau, 2011, p. 328). While member checking seems like a good idea, there are few guidelines to manage disagreements between a participant and a researcher. It is important to note that not all participants will review the data they provided, or how they are portrayed or interpreted in your research, favourably (see Lareau, 2011). And as Lareau observed, many approaches to qualitative research are not about uncritically 'telling' participants' stories, but rather drawing on these data to analyse a particular dimension of social life.

Julie Carlson (2010) describes member checking 'traps' and how they can threaten the 'researcher/participant relationship and possibly the stability of the study' (p. 1102). Several issues arose after she shared the interview transcript with participants. She describes hitting it off with one of her participants, Abigail. After the interview was completed, they continued to talk for an hour over tea and cookies. Abigail shared pictures and personal memorabilia relevant to her study. Carlson describes leaving that day 'with smiles and laughter'. All in all, a successful interview. She notes that 'in my desire to conduct good research' she transcribed every word, 'ummm', and 'false start'. When Abigail had an opportunity to read over the transcript, she was mortified. She apologized for 'making a mess' of Carlson's research and eventually asked to withdraw from the study. Barry, an academic with a long career editing other people's work, took it upon himself to edit his own transcript and make additional notes and suggestions. Cal, on the other hand, was embarrassed by the amount of time he spent talking about himself, rather than the topic that he was being asked about.

To avoid these self-laid traps, Carlson makes several suggestions including recognizing how feelings of self-doubt can bubble to the surface when participants are confronted with a visual, auditory, or textual representation of themselves. She stresses the importance of providing clear instructions about the purpose of member checking (which is not an opportunity to completely re-write the transcript as in Barry's case). Providing participants with examples of how the data will be used and what a published qualitative study 'looks like' may also ease difficulties down the road. As Lareau (2011) commented, participants did not understand that she was not there to 'tell their story', but to offer an analysis of family life. Lareau (2011) similarly wished she had adopted another strategy with her participants. Rather than promising them a copy of the book, she noted that a shorter summary that highlighted the main findings would have been less painful for her participants. Carlson and Lareau agree that one must consider carefully how to present research to participants to ensure the quality of the data and the comfort of the participants.

Emerson LaCroix describes similar self-laid traps to those that Carlson experienced. After providing participants with the quotes that LaCroix wanted to use in his thesis, one key participant dropped out and another asked to 're-do' the interview. Reflecting on his experience, LaCroix notes that member checking meant 'relinquishing a significant degree of control over my research study'.

Reflections on Member Checking in Qualitative Research

Emerson LaCroix

My master's dissertation studied the institutionalization of experiential education (EE) in higher education. With limited empirical research on the topic, I employed a case-study method to analyse the adoption of EE at one research-intensive university. Part of the study included interviewing those involved in developing an experiential education programme. In the course of obtaining institutional ethics clearance, I was required to engage in a process of member checking. Participants were provided with quotations from their transcript that I wanted to use in my analysis. It is here that my project fell into many of the traps associated with member checking.

Upon receiving their quotes, one key informant withdrew entirely from the study and declined requests for a second interview or the option to submit written responses in lieu of transcribed audio. Another participant requested to be re-interviewed to frame their responses more judiciously within their professional purview at the institution. This participant stated that they felt they were speaking too casually about something that was outside of their professional domain. Another participant carefully edited, rewrote, or deleted their quotes, and requested to see how they would be framed within the context of my research findings chapter before they would approve their inclusion.

These encounters presented significant barriers to analysing and presenting the interview data. As a junior researcher, I had not originally added a member-checking component to my research. I intended to offer a rigorous pre-interview consent process and pause throughout the interview process to ensure participants were fully informed about how their data would be used, and that consent remained ongoing. Adding member checking to my study put me in a tough spot as a student researcher who was balancing ethics approval, a thesis timeline, and the power relations with my participants. I did not have time to recruit more participants for my research. The revision process required editing out certain participant contributions, and reinterpreting data without the 'raw' and original edge to it. From an analysis perspective, the loss of a participant, and the reframing of other original data meant that I knew there were other perspectives which could contribute to my study, but was not able to include those contributions in my analysis.

Member checking ultimately meant relinquishing a significant degree of control over my research study in order to mitigate the risk of further participant withdrawal. While there is discussion in qualitative methods literature both advocating and challenging member checking, based on my experience I would encourage other junior researchers to consider the ethical implications of including this procedure in their research, and the implications for power dynamics within their projects.

Questions for reflection

1. How did member checking put LaCroix in a 'tough spot'?
2. Are there ways to approach member checking in a manner that avoids some of the challenges discussed by LaCroix and others in this chapter?

The second consideration with member checking is the potential impact on the participant. Like Carlson's (2010) and Lareau's (2011) participants, people may be embarrassed or distressed by the data or interpretation that is generated by their involvement. As Lareau (2011) explains, participants 'seem frequently to feel angry and betrayed when they read the results' (p. 313). Feelings of embarrassment and uncertainty can also arise when participants see or hear themselves on tape, video, or a transcript. Lareau (2011) provides a refreshing honest description about following up with the 12 families from *Unequal Childhoods*. While several families were generally 'ok' with how they were portrayed, others were hurt and angry, and some asked to cease contact. Lareau (2011), describes how her participants were surprised to see their non-verbal and verbal communications described so vividly in the book. Reading the first edition, Ms. Allister remarked 'You wrote down my words with the kids?' (p. 325).

In some cases, member checking may cause harm. Hallett (2012), for example, worried about how his detailed description of a homeless participant's living conditions and her 'painful stories ... of intense abuse and neglect' (p. 35) could impact her. He questioned 'what value would she gain from reviewing an emotional interview ... and re-living traumatic experiences?' (p. 35). He decided to privilege her emotional wellbeing over using member checking to establish 'trustworthiness.'

Triangulation

Triangulation decreases the chance of researcher biases that can emerge by relying only on one specific method. Norman Denzin (1989b) theorized four basic types of triangulation that can strengthen the validity of your findings.

The first is triangulation of methods of data collection, which means combining methods such as interviewing, surveys and observation across various times and places to offer multiple perspectives and to gain a more holistic understanding. For example, conducting interviews and observations in tandem over time can help to 'rule out spurious associations and premature theories' (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126), and see if what people say is actually what they do. It may also give you a deeper understanding of how what people describe actually 'works'.

The second is investigator and analyst triangulation, which can strengthen the trustworthiness of findings by including more than one investigator in the collection and analysis of data. Multiple investigators can offer insights and can shed light on assumptions that may be missed if there were only one person collecting and analysing data. Having more than one person analyse the data can also provide an opportunity to examine the consistency of interpretations, themes, and supporting evidence.

A third possibility is triangulating data sources. Drawing on evidence from a variety of data sources can also increase the credibility of research findings. Evidence gathered from interviews, participant observation, archival and historical documents, and public records will yield different kinds of evidence and elucidate different understandings of the phenomena under study. In addition to reviewing diaries and published 'stories' from people in a community, for example, gathering official records, newspaper articles, and analysing government statistics may give a researcher a more fulsome understanding.

Finally, theory triangulation approaches research findings from different theoretical lenses to guard against wearing ideological blinders that favour only one theoretical approach. This approach might also yield new insights into aspects of the research problem. If you were using resource dependency theory, for example, how would your data look through a new institutional or rational choice lens?

Numbers

Maxwell (2013) notes that many of the conclusions that result from qualitative research have 'an implicit quantitative component' (p. 128); qualitative researchers routinely use terms like 'many', 'often', 'most', and so forth to summarize and describe their data. Claims concerning how common a theme or behaviour is require some quantitative support or 'quasi-statistics' (Becker, 1970, pp. 81–82). Incorporating an appropriate use of numbers to assess the amount of evidence you have is a good way to increase the credibility of your conclusions. Quantifying qualitative research allows 'analysts to discern and to show regularities or peculiarities in qualitative data they might not otherwise see ... or to determine that a pattern or idiosyncrasy they thought was there is not' (Sandelowski et al., 2009, p. 210). It can also identify '*diversity* of actions and perceptions in the settings and populations you study' (Maxwell, 2013, p. 129). Importantly, it can provide qualitative researchers with evidence that their interpretations are saturated with data and not merely the by-product of cherry-picking quotes.

Comparison

We have discussed the importance of comparison in linking your methodology to your research questions. Comparisons are also an important way to address validity threats. Comparative research can address an important weakness in qualitative research – its 'inability to explicitly address the 'counterfactual' of what would have

happened *without* the presence of the presumed cause' (Maxwell, 2013, p. 129). Comparisons help to draw out regularities and differences, specifying underlying social mechanisms that generate these.

However, as Moraes Silver, Lamont, and Guetzhof (see [Chapter 3](#)) illustrate, comparisons are not always clear cut. Groups, places, institutions, or things that on the surface seem the 'same' often differ along several dimensions. Researchers must be able to demonstrate that there is a clear logic underpinning the comparison group(s), while recognizing a central flaw: it is unlikely that comparison cases will be different (or similar) in a manner that allows us to rule out alternative explanations.

STEP THREE: SAMPLE SIZE AND SATURATION

Key takeaways



- A sample size must be sufficiently large enough to *saturate* each category that emerges with a substantial amount of evidence
- The loftier the goals of the study (e.g. claims about 'society') the larger the required sample size

Sample size

This is a plea to increase sample size to increase certainty, and when writing, to produce rich description and use the best representative quotations. (Morse, 2010, p. 3)

Morse's quote mirrors our advice in this chapter and others in this book. Qualitative research, however, has been fairly wishy-washy on sample size (Vasileiou et al., 2018). We will provide some general guidelines. They will not be perfect, and we recognize that we could debate the 'right' number until the cows come home. For a methods textbook, we do not see these kinds of debates as very useful since at the end of the day they still leave novice researchers paralyzed. A lack of clear direction also opens the door to sub-standard work by researchers who disingenuously use terms like '[saturation](#)' to mask over a superficial examination, a faulty sampling strategy, or problematic research questions.

Saturation

Before delving into specific numbers, we will start with a discussion of information redundancy or 'saturation' – a term that is routinely invoked in the context of qualitative research to justify the termination of data collection or a particular sample size. While saturation 'has emerged as the "gold standard" in qualitative inquiry' and assumed to 'guarantee' a high level of rigour, it is ambiguous and poorly understood (Vasileiou et al., 2018, p. 148). In qualitative research, saturation is often claimed without specifying how it was determined or offering 'practical guidelines for estimating sample size' (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006, p. 60). As Charmaz (2008) states:

Often, researchers invoke the criterion of saturation to justify small samples – very small samples with thin data. Such justifications diminish the credibility of grounded theory ... Claims of saturation often reflect rationalization more than reason, and these claims raise questions. What stands as a category? Is it conceptual? Is it useful? Developed by whose criteria? All these questions add up to the big question: What stands as adequate research? (p. 230)

Saturation does *not* simply mean that the researcher has 'heard it all' (Morse, 2015, p. 587). Instead, it is the point at which you 'saturate *characteristics within categories* that emerge as significant in the process of analysis' (Morse, 2015, p. 587). Thus, in your analysis each category must be supported with a substantial amount of evidence – not just a handful of interview quotes.

First, the researcher must demonstrate that the data is comprehensive: 'all aspects of the phenomenon must be explored' (Morse, 2015, p. 587). Accordingly, there must be sufficient data within 'each category to identify the characteristics of concepts, and to develop theory' (Morse 2015, p. 588). Indeed, Glaser and Strauss's (1967) 'definition was specifically intended for the practice of building and testing theoretical models using qualitative data and refers to the point at which the theoretical model being developed stabilizes' (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020, p. 2). This means not only paying attention to the findings that tend to be more common, but also the 'data at the tails of the curve' (Morse, 2015, p. 588):

The *amount of data* is not necessarily the same as the number of participants. If using semi-structured interviews, a more limited and restricted description of the experience is obtained from each participant, than we would obtain when using open-ended interviews. A greater number of interviews are required to reach saturation. When information is collected, it accrues in various amounts, with the common information building in the shape of a curve ... the data at the tails of the curve are equally important and must be deliberately collected until adequate. This we call theoretical sampling. The risk is that the data in the center of the curve will overwhelm the less common data, and we will ignore the equally significant data at the tails. (Morse, 2015, p. 588)

Gathering sufficient data to flesh out the tails will also allow you to explore and account for potentially **discrepant evidence**: findings that have emerged that may complicate your interpretation.

Second, to make claims about saturation, the research must demonstrate replication, when 'data from several participants have essential characteristics in common' (Morse, 2015, p. 588). The sample size must be large enough to be able to document replication, while identifying 'holes' and unanswered questions that can be addressed in subsequent rounds of data collection. Researchers who reach saturation can also demonstrate a degree of mastery over their data (they know their data inside and out) and can apply 'comprehensive descriptions for each concept and pertinent examples' to their theories and concepts (Morse, 2015, p. 588).

Another way to think about saturation is to consider the 'information power' of your sample. The 'larger information power the sample holds, the lower n is needed, and vice versa' (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2015, p. 1754).

- The sample size will vary depending on the goals of the study. The broader (or loftier) the goals of the study, the more data are required. Thus, a study that is attempting to broadly explain the decline of religiosity will require a much larger sample than a study that examines how a specific group participates in religious ceremonies during Covid-19 self-isolation.

- The number of participants needed will depend on the sample specificity – a 'less extensive sample is needed with participants holding characteristics that are highly specific for the study aim compared with a sample containing participants of sparse specificity' (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2015, p. 1755). A sample of loan sharks who all engage in a highly specific activity can be much smaller than a study that looks at the dating behaviours of university students – a group that is very numerically large, diverse, not hard to identify or access, and who engage in an activity that is hardly unique.
- The information power is related to the presence or absence of established theories. A study that has little or no established theories to work from may require a larger sample to build new theoretical knowledge.
- Information power also depends on the quality and strength of the communication between the researcher and their participants, including the 'skills of the interviewer, the articulateness of the participant, and the chemistry between them' (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2015, p. 1756).
- Finally, the information power depends on the 'strategy chosen for analysis ... An exploratory cross-case analysis requires more participants... compared with a project heading for in-depth analysis of narratives' from a few people (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2015, p. 1756).

A Few Additional Caveats

Informational redundancy and information power depend on the quality of the sample. If you relied on a convenience sample, then you will reach saturation pretty darn quickly. Since a large body of social network research demonstrates that 'birds of a feather stick together', you should not be surprised that the people in an inner circle are similar along several important dimensions (e.g. attitudes, political beliefs) and likely will only serve to reinforce what you already believe to be true. Since you selected a poor sampling strategy, you are on thin ice to make claims about information redundancy!

The ability to claim saturation and information power will also be compromised when researchers select cases based on meeting some criteria and then use those cases as evidence for that criteria. The problem of sampling on the dependent variable occurs when researchers restrict 'one's set of observations to cases in which some phenomenon of interest has been observed and excluding from the set cases in which the phenomenon was not observed' (Kahan, 2013, para. 3; see also Greenberg, n.d.).

Informational redundancy and power are also compromised when researchers 'cherry-pick' a 'style of data analysis used when a researcher has inadequate data', yet 'forges ahead nonetheless, completing the analysis' with the juiciest and 'sometimes only' quotations (Morse, 2015, p. 3). Morse (2015) notes that we can identify cherry-picking when a study has too few participants (or other types of data) and the analysis appears too 'neat and tidy' (p. 3). Even a fairly homogeneous sample should demonstrate some variation and range of perspectives. Think of this as the 'Minion principle' (yes, we are referring to the fictional yellow characters); while they are all part of the same group and share many characteristics, their personalities and quirks vary. Your sample size must be large enough to capture these variations.

Quick Tip: Initial analysis and stopping guidelines

To help 'bracket' your project, specify an '*initial analysis sample* (e.g. 10 interviews) which will be used for the first round of analysis' and a '*stopping criterion*' that will determine whether subsequent rounds of data collection are necessary (Vasileious et al., 2018, p. 3; see also Francis et al., 2010). Conservative estimates by Hagaman and Wutich (2017), Francis et al. (2010) and Coenen et al. (2012) recommend (re)assessing every two to three data

collection 'events' (e.g. every two to three interviews). This requires the researcher to *engage in ongoing data analysis throughout the data collection process, documenting the emergence of new information and insights as well as whether evidence and examples are sufficiently saturating existing codes*. This approach refers to the 'run length' described by Guest, Namey, and Chen (2020).

Practical sample size guidelines

So how many is 'enough'? If your sample is too small, it may not leave you with enough data to say anything meaningful. A too small sample will also lack enough diversity to study within-group differences; even if your sample is homogeneous, there should still be some variability since people are never carbon copies of one another in terms of how they think, feel, and act (Minion principle). We can almost guarantee that while limiting data collection may seem easier, you will likely find yourself struggling to make something out of your data. Think of yourself as a chef trying to make a meal that has layers of complex flavours, scents, and textures. Sure, you can make something edible with a few ingredients, but you will be more successful if you have access to a well-stocked fridge and pantry.

While some will nitpick over relatively small differences (e.g. 18 versus 22 interviews), at the time of analysis and write-up you will be hard pressed to find a qualitative researcher who 'regretted' having the insights of a few additional interviews, focus groups, hours in the field, and so forth. Good researchers want to find out as much as they can about the topic under study. Quantitative researchers routinely over-sample numerically small units or sub-populations to ensure adequate sample size. A larger sample size will also allow you to look for disconfirming evidence and explore the 'tails' (Morse, 2015).

Our strategy is to give clear guidelines for some of the most common qualitative methods, with the understanding that following the saturation and information power guidelines will mean that adjustments will be made along the way (e.g. conducting another round of interviews). Your data analysis will tell you when your sample size is sufficient as 'data within a category' builds and overlaps, and your 'understanding of the phenomenon becomes stronger, more evident, more consistent, and more cohesive' (Morse, 2015, p. 587).

There are also practical reasons for developing a sample size and rationale. A lack of guidelines may also discourage excellent researchers from considering qualitative research. The ambiguity and lack of specificity will deter researchers who desire more 'structured guidelines for rigor' and a clear plan of action (Marshall et al., 2013, p. 12). Researchers also need to know how many interviews, focus groups, hours in the field, how many documents, and so forth to budget for (e.g. time, financial costs) (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). As Patton (2002) emphasizes:

At the beginning, for planning and budgetary purposes, one specifies a minimum expected sample size and builds rationale for that minimum, as well as criteria that would alert the research to inadequacies in the original sampling approach and/or size. In the end, sample size adequacy, like all aspects of research, is subject to peer review, consensual validation, and judgment. (p. 246)

Having supervised (and conducted) qualitative studies at the graduate level, our guidelines are also mindful of what is 'doable' within the context of a graduate degree or research with little to no funding or other resources.

Interview study

In an interview study in which a researcher interviews participants one time for approximately 60 to 90 minutes, estimates to reach saturation range from 20 to 50 interviews. Sample sizes may be on the lower end (e.g. 20–25) if your sample is relatively homogeneous and the study aims narrow. A study of female sex workers, for example, found that 70 per cent of all themes were identified in the first six interviews and 92 per cent were identified by the 12th interview (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Heterogeneous samples and research that has more expansive goals requires a larger sample (e.g. 30–50) to 'reach data saturation for metathemes that cut across all sites' (Hagaman & Wutich, 2017, p. 24). And once you think you have reached saturation, you should 'conduct several additional interviews to test whether existing themes and categories are sufficient' (Marshall et al., 2013, p. 15 describing Thomson's 2004 review).

If you follow these guidelines, you will be on solid ground with reviewers (e.g. journal reviewers; external committee members). Your sample size will also align with the advice given by some of the most cited people in the field. Morse (1994b) recommends a sample size of approximately 35 participants for grounded theory, ethnographies, and ethnoscience studies. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) recommend 30 to 50 interviews, and Creswell (2007) recommends 20 to 30 interviews.

Longitudinal studies

We will return to Morse's (2015) quote when she notes that the 'amount of data is not necessarily the same as the number of participants' (p. 588). The more data you collect on any one participant, the fewer participants are needed. If you are conducting a panel interview study, your sample size will likely be smaller than a traditional interview study. This guideline stems from the fact that each person will be interviewed or observed more than one time. For example, if you start off with 25 participants (Interview 1), interviewing each person three times means that the number will rise to 50 (Interview 2) and 75 (Interview 3), assuming that you do not have any attrition.

Realistically, however, your initial sample should account for the likelihood of people dropping out or missing one or more phases of data collection. Estimates of attrition vary widely and depend on a number of factors including the population of interest (e.g. transient drug users versus nurses) and the time that has elapsed between data collection points. In the case of a population that is reasonably visible and non-transient and when there are relatively short intervals between data collection, a 'better safe than sorry' sample size is 20 to 25 participants in a two-phase interview study and 25 to 30 participants in a three-phase interview study. These estimates will increase if your sample is heterogeneous in order to sufficiently saturate characteristics within each category. Morse (2000b) similarly recommends 20 to 30 interviews with studies that plan to interview each person two or three times.

A few caveats are in order. A study that focuses on hidden populations and/or has long intervals between data collection should start with more participants to reflect the likelihood that follow-up contact will be more difficult. Farrall and his colleagues, for example, had an initial sample of 199 probationers who were interviewed between 1997 and 1998. Subsequent rounds of interviews commenced all the way up to 2013. The research team had to employ a variety of strategies to contact their original sample (e.g. social media), some of whom no longer recalled participating all those years earlier! Even though this is a large and well-resourced study, they were still only able to re-interview 104 participants. Some participants died, were untraceable, or refused to participate (e.g. Farrall et al., 2016).

An additional consideration is that not all participants who initially met the aims of the research will do so in subsequent rounds of data collection. Rod Missaghian's 16-month study on post-secondary decision-making, for example, initially started with 30 high school students at the 'search' phase of looking into college and university options in the fall of their senior year. His sample dropped to 27 during the 'choice' phase that spring, when students had received offers and were making decisions about their institutions and programs. By the third round, when students had entered post-secondary, his sample shrank to 12. Not only did Missaghian lose participants

through attrition, not all his initial sample aligned with the goals of the third phase of research. However, by starting with 30 participants, he ended up with complete data (36 interviews) with 12 participants and was still able to use earlier rounds of data collection to inform his analysis and write-up of the 'search' and 'choice' phases (78 interviews total).

As with other recommendations provided in this chapter, sample size adjustments will be made based on the information redundancy and power guidelines. More or less participants may be required depending on the goals and scope of the study, your research questions, the quality of your communication with participants and so forth (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2015; Morse, 2010).

Extreme and hidden populations

Studies that draw on **extreme samples** – hidden or rare populations like elite politicians, rock stars, astronauts and so forth – have defensibly small sample sizes; because extreme cases are extraordinary, they are by definition rare. Vanessa Iafolla (2015), for example, entered the world of loan sharking. Her sample size of seven is justifiable because of the hidden nature of the activities and the challenges associated with gaining the trust of participants. To Greenberg's (n.d.) point, the key to these extremely small samples is to be mindful of the limits of what you can explain. Iafolla does not use her data to make claims about some generic social process (e.g. how gender is enacted in 'society') but rather to document the way loan sharks hide in plain sight, use social and personal networks to amass money for loans to clients, and ensure that the loans are repaid.

Focus groups

Data-driven approaches to focus group sample size have found that three to eight focus groups are needed to reach saturation (e.g. Coenen et al., 2012). In their examination of a relatively homogeneous sample, Guest, Namey, & McKenna (2017) found that two to three focus groups produced 80 per cent of the themes and three to six to produce 90 per cent of the themes. They note that several factors will influence the number of focus groups that are required. A focus group that is more structured and homogeneous will require fewer focus groups (three to six range) than a focus group that poses more open-ended questions and includes a more diverse sample of participants (four to eight range). Like Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora (2015), they also emphasize the relationship between sample size and the complexity of the topic and goals of the study. More focus groups are required when the topic is complex and abstract and when the goals of the study are loftier.

Field research

If we *can't* say that it's impossible to understand forms of musical improvisation on a Greek island without also understanding the structure of their cheese making, courtship rituals, or knife fights, then we might as well throw in the towel and become sociologists. (Graeber, 2017, p. xxiv)

The quote above illustrates the high methodological standards required to conduct field research (and the enduring presence of quick and dirty 'Blitzkrieg ethnographies'; see Rist, 1980). You should not approach field research (or any other type of research for that matter) like it is a 'drive-thru McDonald's', moving through the setting and selecting 'ingredients' that you think are important (Nyland, 2008, pp. 16–17). As Nyland (2008) points out, 'airplane ethnography' (quick, fly by data collection) approaches undermine the core benefits of this method.

So how long should you stay in the field? In anthropology, a traditional ethnographic study demands a minimum of 12 months of field research. Bob Jeffrey and Geoff Troman (2004) cite Peter Woods:

Social life is ongoing, developing, fluctuating, becoming. It never arrives or ends. Some forms of behaviour may be fairly stable, others variable, others emergent. Some forms of interaction proceed in stages or phases. This again emphasizes the need for long and sustained researcher immersion in the field in order to cover whole processes and produce 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) that will encompass this richness. Processes, for example, of cultural induction, labelling, identify formation, differentiation and polarisation, curriculum modification, friendship formation – all require lengthy involvement in the research field, otherwise only part of the process will be sampled, leading to misleading analyses. (pp. 536–537)

The length of time that is required led Walford (2002) to observe that ethno-graphies are particularly well suited to students since they are likely more able to immerse themselves in the field, such as when Melanie Heath (2012) moved from California to Oklahoma as a graduate student for a year to conduct an ethnography on marriage promotion politics. However, many students are not able to leave their life behind for a year or two! Moreover, some sites or studies do not lend themselves to the type of full-time immersion we associate with classic ethnographic studies (e.g. classroom ethnographies).

We offer two alternative approaches. One approach is a 'selective intermittent time mode' in which 'the length of time spent doing the research is longer, for example from three months to two years, but with a flexible approach to the frequency of the visits' (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004, p. 540). Janice Aurini's (2012) year-long ethnography of a learning centre franchise, for example, was based on her weekly scheduled work shifts (e.g. tutoring students, required training sessions) and time spent before and after her shifts talking to staff, parents, and students. Spending time outside her tutoring shifts would not have been welcome, nor would it have been possible given her other obligations (e.g. taking required graduate courses). She supplemented this datum by conducting 50 interviews with tutoring and learning centre owners, along with other data collected through library sources.

Another approach is the 'recurrent time mode' in which the researcher observes 'the same temporal phases, e.g. beginnings and ends of terms' or 'regular, predetermined' days and times (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004, p. 542). This approach allows the researchers to observe and have conversations with the same people at the sites. As Jeffrey and Troman (2004) notes '[R]ecurring conversations have a past, present and future: "How has your perspective changed since we last spoke?" ... The recurrent mode is an opportunity to study a whole cycle such as a school year or term ...' (p. 542). This approach also allows the researcher to follow a process over time and map out its development and to observe changes about 'an institution, group or set of individuals' (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004, p. 543). Observation time periods are purposefully and thoughtfully selected and continue until the researcher has a thorough and in-depth understanding.

Unobtrusive data

If your project involves a limited number of materials, you may be able to include everything (e.g. diaries and letters from a given geographic region and time period). In other cases, you may have thousands or even millions of materials to work with. There are, for example, 'more than 3.8 million records indexed in ProQuest Dissertation and Theses, more than 23 million in PubMed, more than 60 million in Scopus, and the number of cited references indexed in the Web of Science surpassed 1 billion' (McLevey and McIlroy-Young, 2017, p. 177). Additionally, there are 'online repositories, social media, blogs, surveys, and administrative data from institutions, granting agencies, and governments' (McLevey and McIlroy-Young,

2017; see also McLevey, 2021). While there are several software options for constructing datasets (e.g. constructing topic maps, time series datasets, co-authorship networks), answering qualitative research questions using these sources often demands smaller sample sizes to gain greater depth and understanding.

In most instances, the two approaches to sampling are random and purposeful. A random sampling approach selects a 'substantial but manageable proportion of the total (e.g. 25 per cent) at random, so you can generalize to the full set of documents' or other materials (Morgan, 2015, para. 1). A purposeful sampling strategy selects materials based on some set of predetermined criteria. Since the potential range of sources varies so widely – from a scrap of paper, to a picture, to a manuscript and so forth – it is impossible to provide a 'number' that will suit most research projects. The saturation, information power, or data-driven guidelines noted by others in this chapter should guide your sample size (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora 2015; Morse, 2010, 2015).

A data-driven approach to sample size

Several researchers have developed calculations to develop a more systematic and data-driven approach to determining saturation. A review of each of these approaches is beyond the scope of this chapter (for a summary table see Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020, p. 4). Instead, we selected Guest, Namey, and Chen (2020) to provide you with a straightforward approach to establishing code saturation. They use three components to determine saturation: base size, run length, and new information threshold. The base size refers to the 'the minimum number of data collection events (i.e. interviews)' that you should 'review/analyze to calculate the amount of information already gained' (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020, p. 6). The run length refers to a set of 'consecutive events or observations' in which you access your data for new information (e.g. every four interviews). The new information threshold is the 'level of paucity of new information' that will be accepted as the point of saturation in which each category has sufficient examples and evidence and in which the 'tails' (less common findings) have been thoroughly fleshed out through subsequent rounds of data collection (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020, p. 6; see also Morse, 2015).

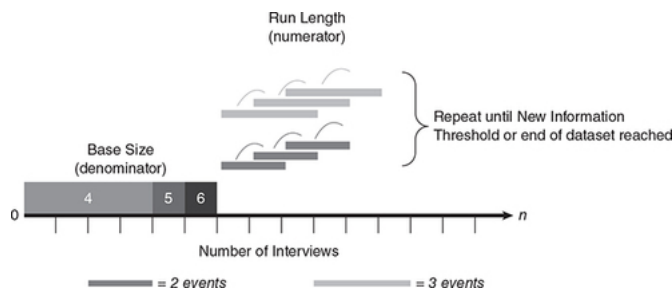


Figure 4.2 A Simple Method to Assess and Report Thematic Saturation in Qualitative Research

SOURCE: Guest G, Namey E, Chen M (2020)

STEP FOUR: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Key takeaways



- Privileging human dignity includes treating participants with respect, ensuring their informed and ongoing consent, and treating people equitably
- Conducting ethical research also includes building in integrity and rigour into your research design, analysis, and write-up

Ethical issues have particular importance in qualitative research due to the fact that many methods involve in-depth study, direct contact with participants, and anticipated events. Ethics in qualitative research addresses the respect to person, welfare, and fairness (e.g. Government of Canada, 2018). These principles include treating participants with respect and consideration, ensuring their informed and ongoing consent, providing enough information for individuals to weigh the risks associated with their participation, minimizing (potential) harms, and treating people equitably (e.g. ensuring no population is denied access to participation or results that could be beneficial).

Although research ethics is often taught as a separate unit (and included in books like ours as a standalone topic) – it runs throughout the research process. At the end of the day, it is about telling the truth – not just to your participants but also to your audience. Thus, it also includes designing an empirically sound study (e.g. developing a ‘fair’ sample), analysing the data fairly (e.g. not cherry-picking) and honestly (e.g. reporting inconvenient findings), and recognizing and reporting the study’s strengths and limitations.

If you are working within the government or post-secondary sector, your institution will likely have a research ethics board. In many instances, you will be required to submit a formal ethics application, specifying how you will adhere to their guidelines (e.g. how you will gain informed consent). This application will also include your recruitment, sampling, and data collection instruments (e.g. interview schedule). You may also be required to do more formal training. In Canada, for example, researchers take ‘TCPS 2’ training (<https://ethics.gc.ca/eng/documents/tcps2-2018-en-interactive-final.pdf>). However, there are basic principles that cut across country-specific requirements.

Quick Tip: Consult with your research ethics board

A good rule of thumb is meet with a member of your research ethics board before formally submitting your application; you will be able to go over your application, talk about what you hope to accomplish, and clear up any issues that may not be evident to a non-research-ethics expert.

Informed consent

Researchers must obtain **informed consent** from participants including providing them with information about the study’s purpose, funding, the research team, how data will be used, and what will be required of them. Informed consent also means specifying that participation is voluntary, and how participants will be identified in reports from the study. It also requires providing an honest assessment of potential benefits and risks. Informed consent does not end with a signed consent form. Participants should have the right to withdraw their participation during or after they are technically ‘done’ participating, including removing them from your data set and not using their data in any future publications or presentations.

Research that requires deception (covert research), in which the identity of the researcher or the real intention of the research is not known, must be based on sound reasoning. It is not always possible to make yourself known (e.g. observing an internet chat room). In some studies, revealing your identity may seriously

compromise the study, particularly if it is very likely that people will radically alter their behaviour or attitudes. In his research on deviant peer modelling, Owen Gallupe used deception to examine whether stealing gift cards increased when a confederate stole the gift card or not. He also examined whether participants were more likely to steal when the confederate offered a verbal cue ('This really sucks ... I say we just grab one') or when more than one confederate modelled the deviant behaviour. This study deceived participants in two ways. First, the participants were misled about the purpose of the study. They were told that their task was to unscramble as many words as possible in a 10-minute period to see whether people perform better when they can see their reward in front of them (in this case a gift card that could be earned by unscrambling all 30 words). Second, they were unaware that one of the so-called participants in their group was a 'confederate' – a graduate student who was 'in' on the real purpose of the experiment (Gallupe et al., 2016).

Ethical dilemmas associated with online and social media data

How is informed consent obtained online? Generally, issues arise because qualitative researchers work with participants face-to-face, over long periods of time, and possibly in intimate circumstances. However, access to online and social media data, including webpages, Facebook, blogs, Twitter, and community and organization websites, present ethical dilemmas about informed consent and anonymity. Qualitative researchers debate whether traditional ethical standards can be applied, including questioning whether researchers should access data without receiving consent (even if it is publicly available), how confidentiality or anonymity can be achieved, and how to handle distress in an online or digital environment (Sugiura, Wiles, & Pope, 2017). Critics also point out that researchers and their subjects 'may not fully understand the terms and conditions of those venues or tools' (Buchanan & Zimmer, 2018, para. 3), particularly if they were created for another, non-research purpose (e.g. LinkedIn profile that was used to develop work contacts).

Anonymity and confidentiality

How you deal with anonymity and confidentiality needs to be carefully planned and communicated to participants. Anonymity refers to the protection of identity for those taking part in the study. This means that there is no way for anyone, including the researcher, to identify the participant(s). To ensure anonymity, the study must be designed in a way to ensure that no potentially identifiable information is included at any stage of the project, including email addresses or phone numbers that can be traced back, addresses, photographs, or information about their affiliations (e.g. workplace name).

Most qualitative researchers, however, engage in research that requires confidentiality. Confidentiality refers to ensuring that the attribution of comments in your reports or presentations do not identify participants. Only researchers directly involved in the study should be able to identify the participants or link the information they share to the participant, group, organization, and so forth. Confidentiality is strengthened with the proper management of data (e.g. password protected computer), removing names or other details from materials such as transcripts and field notes that identify participants, and ensuring that pseudonyms are used when referring to participants. Details about specific locations or organizations are also often changed in qualitative research. A study that examines a particular car manufacturing plant in Berlin, for example, may be transformed in published work as a car manufacturing plant in Europe, along with removing or changing names, specific titles, and other 'tells'.

When participation is arranged by or through a third party – such as an employer – confidentiality and anonymity may be compromised. In this case, you will need to inform participants that you cannot absolutely guarantee anonymity or confidentiality.

Protecting participants from harm

Research can offer many benefits including the advancement of knowledge or improving a policy. However, most research offers no direct benefits to participants, and may in fact place them at risk. To gain a more in-depth understanding – including participants' feelings, experiences, and rationales – qualitative research will be more personal and, at times, invasive than other methods. You will need to give participants enough information so that they have a clear understanding of any potential risks or harms before they take part in the study. Research that deals with sensitive or painful topics may cause anxiety and distress. Researchers also must be aware of power imbalances that may exist between researchers and their participants, and the potential to exploit participants who feel pressured to participate. Relatedly, researchers must be aware of the opportunity costs associated with participating in research. Participating in some types of research is inconvenient, time consuming, and personally or financially costly (e.g. travel). Minimizing harm includes:

- Obtaining informed consent, including specifying potential harms or risks
- Protecting participants' anonymity or confidentiality
- Giving participants the right to withdraw
- In some cases, providing participants with information and/or access to resources (e.g. counselling)
- In some cases, pre-screening participants to gauge their potential anxiety or distress (e.g. see Draucker, Martsof, & Poole, 2009)
- In some cases, creating a protocol to identify anxiety or distress during data collection phases (e.g. crying, shaking), 'check-ins' (e.g. 'We are going to stop the interview now. How are you feeling?'), and determining whether continuation of data collection is appropriate (e.g. 'I just want to remind you that you can withdraw from this study at any time. Do you feel comfortable continuing?'). If appropriate, this protocol may also include following up with participants and offering resources (e.g. counselling; Haigh & Witham, 2015)
- Using deceptive practices *only* when it is integral to the research design. Debriefing participants about the intentions of the study they just participated in and explaining why deception was necessary
- In some cases, compensating participants for opportunity costs (e.g. paying for parking) or finding ways to minimizing them (e.g. offering to conduct the interview online). Compensation may also include a small token of appreciation (e.g. \$20 gift card)
- Reporting the findings from the study truthfully, including avoiding 'cherry-picking' and misrepresenting findings or participants to fit a particular narrative or theory. 'Show and tell' type of research can also fall into several ethical traps since the intention is *not* open inquiry about a topic but to give weight to an agenda that the participant may not be fully aware (see discussions of 'confirmation bias'). Ask yourself: If your participants knew in advance they were being literally set up to 'prove' some highly undesirable trait or behaviour, would they have agreed to participate? Of course not. You are soliciting consent under a dishonest premise.

Protecting researchers from harm

Conducting qualitative research can also place you at risk, and arrangements should be made at the beginning of the study to minimize these. You should consider the kinds of risks that may arise in public places, such as in neighbourhoods where you may not be welcome, and in private, such as conducting interviews in participants'

homes. Safeguards like getting a phone number that cannot be traced back to your home, letting others know your whereabouts, checking in with a friend or family member immediately before and after engaging with a participant or site, not getting into participants' cars, having reliable transportation options in case you must leave quickly, and meeting in public spaces like parks or coffee shops are some of the ways you can minimize potential harm. If you are an outsider, it may be necessary to first secure a respected insider to 'vouch' for you.

In some cases, researchers may feel compelled to engage in risky or illegal activities to gain access and trust with their participants. Researchers may also find themselves in a position of witnessing or being pressured to engage in unlawful activities (e.g. see Pearson, 2009). Some academics argue that researchers must always 'draw a line' between him/herself and the 'criminal':

... in doing field research on criminals you damned well better not pretend to be 'one of them', because they will test this claim out and one of two things will happen: either you will (...) get suck[ed] into 'participant' observation of the sort you would rather not undertake, or you will be exposed, with still greater negative consequences. (Polsky, 1969, p. 124)

Other researchers argue that engaging in activities that break or skirt the law are not only justifiable but also not necessarily unethical in otherwise inaccessible research contexts. Frederica Bono (2020) argued that participating in illegal activities was necessary to not only gain access and trust but also to gain a more accurate account of the daily lives of participants. These considerations, however, must take into account your legal obligations and the rules and guidelines provided by your institution and research ethics board.

CONCLUSION

This chapter extends [Chapter 3](#) and shows you how to build methodological and ethical integrity into your project. We emphasized that these principles do not happen by accident; they are thoughtfully and purposefully addressed throughout the research process. We reviewed not only how to build trustworthiness and transparency into your research design, but also the sample size and time in the field that are required to meaningfully capture 'what is going on'.

[Chapters 2, 3, and 4](#) have taken you through the critical steps that are needed to conceptualize and design your project. The next four chapters will walk you through four different methods and sources of data, including interviews, focus groups, field research, and unobtrusive methods. We encourage you to return to [Chapters 3 and 4](#) along the way; they provide foundational information and lessons that should be returned to throughout the research process.

FURTHER SUGGESTED READING

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>

Drawing on their interview study, the authors analyse degrees of data saturation and variability in their data analysis and make evidence-based recommendations.

Morse, J. (2015). 'Data were saturated ...' *Qualitative Health Research*, 25(5), 587–588. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315576699>

Saturation is routinely used in qualitative studies to justify stopping data collection or a particular sample size. More often than not, the term is incorrectly used to mean reaching the point at which a researcher has 'heard it all'. Morse points out the

problems with this reasoning and provides clear guidelines to identify ‘saturated’ research.

Morse, J., Barrett, M., Mayan, M., Olson, K., & Spiers, J. (2002). Verification strategies for establishing reliability and validity in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 1(2), 13–22.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690200100202>

The authors argue that qualitative researchers should ‘reclaim responsibility for reliability and validity’ and incorporate verification strategies and methods for self-correcting during the entire research inquiry.

Sugiura, L., Wiles, R., & Pope, C. (2017). Ethical challenges in online research: Public/private perceptions. *Research Ethics Review*, 13(3–4), 184–199.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016116650720>

The growth of online and digital data research – such as Twitter, blogs, and webpages—have given rise to new ethical challenges. What are the ethical obligations and standards for otherwise ‘public’ online and digital sources? Is information posted for non-research purposes (e.g. LinkedIn profile) ‘fair game’? What does consent, privacy, and confidentiality mean in these research environments? The authors provide a coherent discussion of some of the key issues and sources of information for further consideration.

SAGE CASE STUDIES

Brosdahl, D. J. (2019). The trouble with ‘twens’: Gaining consent and assent of preadolescent populations. In SAGE Research Methods Cases.
www.doi.org/10.4135/9781526466105

Motta, M. J. (2019). Triangulating theory and data: Tracing the policy learning and diffusion process. In SAGE Research Methods Cases.
www.doi.org/10.4135/9781526490360

Regmi, K. (2014). Triangulation in healthcare research: What does it achieve? In SAGE Research Methods Cases. www.doi.org/10.4135/978144627305014534931

Schumacher, C. L. (2020). Using the grounded theory method to delineate the central concept in a qualitative study: Crafting the story. In SAGE Research Methods Cases.
<https://dx-doi-org.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/10.4135/9781529734485>

Tietjen, P., & Sharma, P. (2017). Conducting an investigation into meaning-making in an online setting. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. <https://dx-doi-org.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/10.4135/9781473972872>

KEY TERMS

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| <u>Discrepant Evidence</u> | <u>Reliability</u> | <u>Trustworthiness</u> |
| <u>Feasibility</u> | <u>Researcher Bias</u> | <u>Validity</u> |
| <u>Informed Consent</u> | <u>Saturation</u> | <u>Validity Threats</u> |
| <u>Reactivity</u> | <u>Triangulation</u> | |

PART II THE INS AND OUTS OF COLLECTING QUALITATIVE DATA

5 HOW TO DO INTERVIEWS: MAKING WHAT PEOPLE SAY MATTER

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter you will have the tools to:

- Understand a variety of methods of interviewing, including face-to-face and photo interviewing
- Access hardware, software, and service options
- Prepare for the interview
- Develop an [interview schedule](#) and supplementary data collection tools for interview studies
- Conduct an interview
- Make transcription decisions and manage interview data

Chapter summary

This chapter first outlines the potential benefits and challenges associated with various types of interviews, including face-to-face and online options. We then provide you with concrete strategies for getting prepared and creating your data collection tools. This section of the chapter will take you through the process of crafting interview questions, preparing transition statements and probes, and organizing your interview schedule in a logical manner. Next, we outline standard practices for contacting potential interviewees, when to follow up, how to 'close the deal', and what to consider when recruiting interviewees. We then focus on specific interview techniques, including body language, effective listening, and the use of silence. Finally, the chapter will outline approaches to transcription and data management.

INTRODUCTION

Interviewing is one of the main qualitative data techniques used by students, researchers, and public and private firms. Interview studies are empirically and intuitively appealing. As a research tool, they can provide you with an instrument to probe more deeply into the thoughts, experiences, or perceptions of participants. Interviews can be used as a main or complementary source of data. Interviews are also personally appealing to qualitative researchers. They afford you the flexibility to craft questions that can be reworked or expanded as the project develops. They also may provide you with the feeling of having some control over what often feels like a murky and chaotic process.

Successfully conducting in-depth interviews can seem daunting in the beginning. How do you ask the right interview questions to make sure you are getting the data you need for your project? Daniel Hamlin (featured in this chapter) reflects on the

lessons he learned conducting semi-structured interviews for his mixed-methods dissertation. He did all the necessary preparation, including conducting an extensive literature review to guide his interview questionnaire and conducting pilot interviews to refine the questions. However, he discovered as he analysed and wrote about the initial interviews that some themes needed more depth. Reflecting on his interview questionnaire, he decided to launch another round of interviews that included more probing questions to provide more substance to some areas that had been vague. This process of reassessing – taking steps back before taking additional steps forward – is key to conducting an excellent qualitative project that provides new insights into a particular topic.

Lessons from Semi-structured Interviewing

Daniel Hamlin

One of the most valuable uses of semi-structured interviews is to probe mechanisms that may be behind statistical data. As a novice researcher working on my dissertation, I used semi-structured interviews in an attempt to understand factors underlying statistical differences in the perceived safety of schools. However, I learned that creating an interview questionnaire with carefully considered probes that are grounded in the literature can be critical to getting the most from interviews, and ultimately making a substantive contribution to existing scholarship.

In my mixed-methods dissertation, a major focus was on the intersection of school choice and school safety. To study this phenomenon, I selected the city of Detroit, Michigan, which was emblematic of high-choice cities where parents had consistently cited school safety as one of the main influences on their decision to seek out an alternative to their child's assigned neighbourhood public school. In the quantitative phase of my study, I analysed survey and administrative data and found differences in perceived school safety between neighbourhood public schools and their charter school peers. Yet, I wondered that if parents were indeed looking for safe learning environments for their children and that some schools were perceived as being safer, how did parents assess school safety? What strategies did they use? What resources were available to them? What aspects of a school signalled safety to them?

So in the second phase of my dissertation, I planned semi-structured interviews with parents in Detroit to try to understand how they assessed school safety when deciding where to send their children to school. To complement my parent interviews, I also did interviews with teachers as well as school site observations. Prior to interviews, I developed a semi-structured interview questionnaire that was based on a list of *a priori* codes that I had created from reading the literature on perceived school safety. After initial piloting and subsequent refining of the questionnaire, I began interviewing. After performing interviews with 20 parents, I analysed my transcripts and derived a series of themes that sought to explain how parents assessed school safety.

However, reviewers pointed out that although some of my themes contained thick descriptions that helped illuminate how parents assessed school safety, descriptions of other themes lacked substance. For example, one important finding was that parents often looked at the physical conditions of a school to assess its level of safety, but I had elaborated little on what this meant in practice in the findings section. The result was that I ended up with an interesting finding but one that provided only surface level understanding, and therefore did little to advance what was already reported in the school safety literature.

I returned to my interview protocols to see where my design fell short. I quickly realized that on themes that lacked substance, my questionnaire did not contain enough deliberate probes that would help me to explore a particular topic in depth. When discussing the physical conditions of a school, for example, I had not prepared probes that would allow me to determine what parents meant when identifying the physical conditions of the school as a marker of safety. During this re-analysis, I discovered other issues as well. When reviewing my transcripts, I found that I did not provide enough space during interviews to let parents think about and talk through what they meant. I often interjected too soon or did not follow up with prompts that would encourage my participants to continue articulating their rationales. The lack of depth on certain themes also made me realize that the 20 interviews that I had completed were probably insufficient for what I was trying to accomplish.

To improve the quality of my analysis, I decided to launch another round of interviews, but this time I would attempt to use carefully considered probes that could help me make a stronger contribution to the literature. When making adjustments to my questionnaire, I read more deeply in areas that I had neglected during the first round of interviews. Then, I built probes into my questionnaire that would allow me to dig deeper into themes that had given me only surface-level information previously. From the re-launching of interviews, I ended up doing 11 more interviews with parents. In these interviews, I covered all of my original questions but was able to probe the themes that remained vague and underexplored to a much greater extent.

As a result, I was able to collect descriptions that helped me to illustrate my themes with the kind of depth of description that makes qualitative research a rewarding learning experience for the researcher and those who eventually read the work. I was also able to publish the study in a peer-reviewed journal. Even though qualitative research does permit a degree of flexibility that allowed me to make slight modifications to the interview questionnaire to perform an additional round of interviews, in retrospect this strategy is one that I now try to avoid at the initial design stage by being more thorough with the development of my questionnaire.

In the years since doing this study, I have noticed that the issue of underdeveloped themes is a very common one in studies using semi-structured interviews. Too often promising studies (whether dissertations or manuscripts for publication) do not move beyond broad descriptions of themes, leaving the work unable to push the literature forward and raise new questions for future inquiry. For the qualitative researcher planning semi-structured interviews, my experience having to restart interviews imparted a few useful takeaways that I remind myself of when starting new qualitative projects. First, it is important to devote time to developing well-considered probes that not only emerge from the literature but also build on it. Second, giving participants time to think and talk through what they mean may be necessary to obtain nuanced participant descriptions that can be translated into detailed findings. Third, after reading the literature, I maintain a set of *a priori* codes that I use to create an initial set of themes before beginning any interviews. I then design my semi-structured interview questionnaire in ways that help me move beyond on or dig deeper into themes already existing within the scholarly literature. While new design questions always seem to arise depending on the qualitative research question I am exploring, these approaches have helped me to perform more effective semi-structured interviews.

Questions for reflection

1. Based on Hamlin's research project, what are some of the reasons to conduct in-depth interviews?
2. What are key qualities of a good interview?
3. Hamlin provides recommendations on how to avoid the trap of underdeveloped themes in semi-structured interviews. What steps would

you take to implement this advice?

Reference

Hamlin, D. (2020). Flight to safety in deindustrialized cities: Perceptions of school safety in charter and public schools in Detroit, Michigan. *Education and Urban Society*, 52(3), 394–414. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124519846288>

This chapter is suitable if you are interested in approaches that focus on participants' experiences and sense-making all the way to interviews that are used to hone quantitative survey questions. Our aim is to take you through the key steps including helping you prepare for an interview study, structuring an interview schedule, and managing your data. Our guidelines can be easily expanded on or modified to suit various kinds of interview studies (e.g. telephone), qualitative approaches (e.g. phenomenological) or research designs (e.g. longitudinal).

1. *Step One: Types of Interviews*: We will review types of interviews that are available, including conversational and semi-structured approaches, and the benefits and limitations of each.
2. *Step Two: Method of Interviewing*: We will review various methods of interviewing, including face-to-face and internet options.
3. *Step Three: Getting Prepared*: This section will outline practical tools you will need to conduct an interview, including hardware and software options and organizing an interview bag.
4. *Step Four: Data Collection Tools*: Next, we will show you how to construct an interview schedule and supporting data collection tools.
5. *Step Five: Closing the Deal*: We outline practices for contacting potential interviewees, when to follow up, how to 'close the deal', and what to consider when recruiting interviewees.
6. *Step Six: Interviewing Techniques*: We outline interview techniques, including body language, effective listening, probing techniques and the use of silence.
7. *Step Seven: Transcription Decisions*: This section describes de-naturalist and naturalist approaches to transcription.
8. *Step Eight: Managing Interview Data*: Finally, we discuss options for managing recruitment and participant information.

This chapter starts off at the point that you have already done a lot of groundwork including, but not limited to, conceptualizing your project, determining that interviews are the best method to answer your research question, and making informed sampling decisions. At this stage you should have also considered the feasibility and ethical soundness of your project (see [Chapters 2, 3, and 4](#)). You should return to the key issues raised in earlier chapters throughout your data collection, analysis, and write-up.

STEP ONE: TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

Key takeaways



- There are four basic types of interviews: [Conversational](#), [Narrative](#), [Semi-Structured](#), and [Fixed-Response](#).
- The structure of the interview depends on a number of factors, including the research question and disciplinary standards.

- **Synchronous internet interviews** use text-based, video-conferencing, and multi-channel information and communication technologies such as Skype, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and so on.
- **Asynchronous internet interviews** use text-based, picture, and video information and communication technologies such as email and social media.

Four basic structures of interviews

Face-to-face (or in-person) interviews are a mainstay and often preferred method in qualitative research. **Face-to-face interviews** occur in real time, and there is no time delay between questions and the responses.

There are four basic structures of interviews that range from a ‘friendly conversation’ model (Spradley, 1979; see also Bauer, 1996; Gall et al., 2003) all the way to more closed, fixed-response interviews (Table 5.1). Studies can also contain more than one type of interview; for example, a project that begins with standardized, open-response interviews may also benefit from informal conversations that spontaneously develop in the field.

Table 5.1 Four basic types of interviews: potential benefits and challenges

| Structure | Description | Benefits/challenges | Examples |
|-------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Conversational (Unstructured) | Informal and spontaneous interactions and conversations with participants | Allows for the spontaneous generation of questions Lack of comparability between responses | Interviews during fieldwork |
| Narrative (guiding) interview | Instead of a question–answer format, narrative interviews allow participants to narrate their experiences | Focuses on storytelling to provide insight into identity or to reconstruct events | Stories as a meaning-making device |
| Semi-structured | Standardized, but open-ended interview schedule. All interviewees are asked the same set of questions, but they are free to approach the question and answer it in any manner they choose | Also allows for some ‘spontaneity’, while providing a fair degree of comparison between participants and more systematic data analysis. Adds another data point, by allowing researchers to analyse <i>how</i> participants respond to questions | Phenomenological and ethnographic interviews |

| Structure | Description | Benefits/challenges | Examples |
|-----------------------------|---|---|---|
| Fixed-response (Structured) | Standardized, closed-ended interview schedule. Interviewees are asked the same questions in the same manner, and responses are selected from a pre-set range of options | High degree of comparison between participants and straightforward data analysis Does not allow for responses that deviate from the schedule | Clinical Large-scale or multi-researcher interview studies |

The structure selected is based on a number of factors, including the research question, the research design, disciplinary standards, and the interviewer’s experience and comfort with qualitative methods. Some research questions, problems, and populations also direct the structure and type of interviewing. If you are interested in a particular online community, for example, it may make perfect sense to conduct an online interview using a conversational or guided interview schedule. Rather than repeat material already covered in [Chapters 2, 3, and 4](#) we will simply ask you to consider: What is your research question? And, what is the best method for answering it?

STEP TWO: METHOD OF INTERVIEWING

Key takeaways



- There are four basic ways to conduct an interview: [face-to-face](#), [photo or video](#), [telephone](#), and online interviews
- The benefits and challenges of any method of interviewing are highly contingent on factors such as the skill of the interviewer

Interview methods come in four basic varieties (see [Table 5.2](#)). We have organized the four varieties of interview methods into two categories: in-person and remote interviews. We have made this distinction simply to capture the geographic proximity between you and your participants since each category of interviewing shares many of the same *potential* benefits and challenges. We stress the word potential to signal that many of the benefits and challenges of any method are highly contingent. Factors such as the quality of the interview schedule, skill of the interviewer, extenuating circumstances, and the relative fit between the method and the research question all contribute to the outcome of an interview study.

Table 5.2 Methods of interviewing

| | Potential benefits | Potential challenges |
|--|--------------------|----------------------|
| | | |

| | Potential benefits | Potential challenges |
|-----------------------------|--|--|
| In-person interviews | | |
| Face-to-face | <p>Stronger rapport with participants</p> <p>Ability to see non-verbal communication</p> | <p>Interviewer effect</p> <p>Cost</p> <p>Time</p> |
| Photo or video | <p>Stronger rapport with participants</p> <p>Ability to see non-verbal communication</p> <p>May improve communication with vulnerable populations (e.g. children)</p> <p>Richer responses</p> <p>Participant participation</p> | <p>Convenience and flexibility</p> <p>Safety</p> <p>Lower representation of difficult to reach populations</p> |
| Remote interviews | | |
| Telephone | <p>Cost</p> <p>Convenience and flexibility</p> <p>May be more appropriate or desirable for sensitive, painful, or embarrassing topics</p> <p>Improve representation of difficult to reach populations</p> <p>Safety</p> | <p>Interviewer effect</p> <p>Weaker rapport with participants</p> <p>Inability to see non-verbal communication</p> <p>Time</p> <p>Lower representation of less technology-savvy participants (internet only)</p> |
| | | |

| | Potential benefits | Potential challenges |
|--|---|----------------------|
| Online/Phone apps that support audio and video calling (e.g. Facetime) | Cost Convenience and flexibility May be more appropriate or desirable for sensitive, painful, or embarrassing topics Improve representation of difficult to reach populations Safety Closed capture feature (some programs) Ability to generate transcription (some programs) | |

In-person interviews: description

Photo or video interviewing

Photo or video interviews can be a powerful extension to traditional face-to-face interviews. There are two main approaches. The first is **photo or video elicitation interview studies**, which use photos or videos throughout the interview. You can also use a variety of other materials, including newspaper clippings, maps, paintings, YouTube clips, and Facebook pages. These resources may be taken from the participants' personal collection or provided by you.

The second main approach, **Photo and Video Auto-Driven Interview Studies**, are considered a form of 'collaborative seeing' (Luttrell et al., 2012) that includes participants in some or all aspects of data collection and analysis. Also referred to as 'photovoice', photos and videos are taken by the participants. Typically, you provide participants with a few themes or guiding questions, but generally participants have complete control over the content and representation of the images.

Two sources of data are generated from these approaches. First, after the photos or videos are taken, participants are usually asked to participate in an interview in which they are asked to reflect on the data. The photos and videos are used to guide the discussion and are especially useful when engaging with populations that are unable to fully communicate because of age, language barriers, education, or other circumstances. Second, you can also analyse the content of the photos or videos independently to determine the major 'themes' (e.g. items, people, sites), composition (e.g. how the space is organized), and relationships and interactions (e.g. which people are close or far apart) that are represented.

Example: Children's home reading practices

As part of a larger project on summer setback, Janice Aurini and Cathlene Hillier decided to conduct photo-interviews with 35 children to learn more about home-reading practices. Photo-interviews were an appropriate method

given the relatively young age of the participants (Grades 1, 2 and 3) and their desire to afford children more control over the interview and build rapport. They also wanted to give participants a fun way to express themselves in response to the questions. Children were given a disposable camera and a series of photo prompts (e.g. 'Take a picture of your favourite place to read'). When children returned the cameras a few days later, the research team immediately developed the pictures and set up an interview.

They did experience a variety of practical problems. Picture quality was an issue. Some children were disappointed when their photos turned out poorly. Fortunately, they found that poor photo quality did not limit their ability to use it as an elicitation tool. Instead, they asked children to talk about what they intended to capture.

Other issues, on the other hand, proved more challenging. The interviews were conducted at summer programme sites and parents had the option of attending but not participating. They wanted to hear from the children, and not their parents. They purposefully selected a child-friendly method (photo-interviews), developed straightforward photo prompts, and went over the prompts and camera-use with the children. They pre-tested these instructions with their own children (who happened to be the same age as the potential participants) to ensure the approach was accessible.

Despite these efforts, they found that parents who opted to attend the interview routinely interjected commentary and 'corrected' their children. After reviewing the data, they concluded that parents' involvement was a 'fortuitous accident'. Parent and child interactions shed light on the dynamics of their relationships and the degree to which children exerted 'child capital' over home-reading practices (Aurini & Hillier, 2018; see also Luttrell, 2010; Luttrell et al., 2012).

In-person interviews: benefits and challenges

Potential benefits

There are many potential benefits to sharing the same physical space as your participants. You may be able to build a stronger rapport and trust with participants, particularly if the contact is for an extended period or over multiple interactions. The ability to hear *and* see participants also allows you to witness conscious and unconscious forms of non-verbal communication, including a participant's physical and emotional responses to your questions.

Photo or video interviewing may generate additional benefits. In the case of elicitation, the use of photos or videos can be a powerful tool to guide an interview or probe deeper into an issue. Elicitation may also be used to generate memories, particularly if the topic under consideration occurred in the distant past or if the participant has trouble remembering. Collier (1957), who coined the term 'photo elicitation', compared and contrasted the responses from interviews with and without the use of photos. Collier and his team concluded that the response generated using photos 'was precise and at times even encyclopedic' (p. 856). The photos not only generated richer and longer responses, but also increased the participants' understanding of questions asked by the researchers. Interviews with very young children or persons whose first language is different from the researcher may also benefit from the use of visual aids.

Auto-driven photo or video interviews are commonly associated with participatory or community-based action research (or PAR and CBPR). Including participants in the research process is seen to give a 'voice' to populations who are considered vulnerable (e.g. children) or disenfranchised from decision-making processes.

Potential challenges

Despite the potential benefits, you should also be aware of the potential problems associated with this kind of interview study. Most notable is the potential for **interviewer bias**, a term used to describe the influence interviewers have on participants' responses. Participants may under-report or over-report behaviours that are considered more or less socially desirable. In the case of structured interviews, you may inadvertently influence participants' responses.

The time and cost of travelling to and from the interview site and, in some cases, of childcare must be factored in (see Quick tip: Time budget considerations). You will often have to work around the participants' schedule and location preferences which may or may not be the most ideal from a convenience, safety, interview quality, or recording quality standpoint. Some interviewees may not want family, friends, or co-workers to know that they are participating in an interview, especially if the topic is particularly sensitive, embarrassing, or contains some elements about the participant that is unknown to their associates. These challenges may result in a much lower representation of particular segments of the population.

In the past, researchers noted that photo and video interviews, particularly with auto-driven research, may also magnify other kinds of problems, particularly for student researchers and less advantaged or remote participants. The most basic challenge is cost. Unless participants have access to a smartphone that has picture and video capabilities, you will need to have a budget for equipment. Pioneers of this approach used disposable cameras; while this is a relatively inexpensive option, additional steps are required if you want to scan the photos onto a computer. Other options such as digital and video cameras are relatively expensive options, and you will have to build in time and money for possible equipment failure, breakage, and theft. However, given the widespread use of smartphones – which often have fairly high-quality picture, filming, and recording capabilities – these problems lessen by the day.

Quick tip: Time budget considerations

Practically speaking, in-person interviews are very labour intensive. You will need to build in time for recruitment, travel to and from interviews, conducting the interview, transcribing the interview, and coding the interview. Recruitment includes time to mail out introductory letters, scheduling phone calls, and the occasional 'no show'. Estimates will vary, but here is a reasonable time breakdown.

| Activity | Time estimate per interview (hours) | Time estimate for 50 interviews (hours) |
|---------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| Recruitment | 0.5 | 25 |
| Travel | 1 | 50 |
| Interview | 2 | 100 |
| Transcription | 8 | 400 |
| Coding | 4 | 200 |

| Activity | Time estimate per interview (hours) | Time estimate for 50 interviews (hours) |
|--------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| Total | 15.5 | 775 |

If you plan to conduct 50 interviews, you will need to budget approximately 775 hours. After you get over the initial shock, you may rationalize that it constitutes a little more than one academic term to collect 'all' of your thesis data. More experienced researchers, however, will recognize that most interview studies take much longer, largely due to scheduling and quality issues. Few studies afford researchers the luxury of scheduling interviews back-to-back. And such a model may compromise the quality of the interviews, especially given the mental and emotional energy that many interviews demand. In many cases, interviews are spread out over many months to accommodate the time commitments of the participants and to allow researchers time to reflect on their interviews.

If you are doing online interviews, some computer platforms (e.g. Microsoft Teams) have the potential of automatically generating a transcript that can be imported into NVivo. This should not be the reason for conducting online over in-person interviews but can be a very welcome perk. The amount of time saved – about 400 hours for 50 interviews – is substantial and can cut your time budget in half.

Remote interviews: description

Telephone interviewing

Telephone interviews allow you to collect your data in real time and may provide you with the opportunity to access a wider range of participants. Telephone interviews are used as a standalone approach or in tandem with other methods such as face-to-face and online options.

Online interviews and using smartphone apps

The internet has long been a source of data for researchers, including analysis of online communities, blogs, and websites. The focus of our discussion below will be on using the internet for interview studies. Referred to as internet-mediated research (IMR), the [internet interview](#) is used as primary source of data, rather than viewing materials online after-the-fact (Salmons, 2014). Online interviews may be conducted one-on-one, between one participant and one researcher, or in larger group formats that are more akin to a focus group. Some formats will allow you to send or post materials, including audio and video files, photographs, and charts. Participants may also be able to generate responses that include these materials and share personal artefacts (e.g. photographs). Online interviews may be supplemented with other forms of online data, including a web-based questionnaire. It is usually possible to save the communication; this feature provides you with an instant transcript of the exchange and will save hundreds of hours of transcription work.

There are two main types of online interviews: synchronous and asynchronous. [Synchronous interviews](#) occur in real time and use technologies that are afforded by options such as Facetime, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Skype. Several options offer video-calling, multi-channel, and web-conference features that will allow you to communicate with more than one participant and stream text, voice, and videos in real time (see Salmons, 2014).

Asynchronous interviews do not occur in real time. There are a variety of text-based asynchronous tools, including email, blogs, social media sites, wikis, and various chat forums that allow researchers to send or post questions. Some multi-channel options also allow you to send or post audio and video files, including video clips and photographs.

Remote interviews: benefits and challenges

Potential benefits

Telephone, online, and smartphone (e.g. Facetime) interviews have numerous benefits. Practically speaking, they are lower cost and often more convenient. Unlike face-to-face interviews, they do not require travel, booking time off, or special childcare arrangements. They may provide both parties with more flexibility (e.g. scheduling an interview later at night or during a lunch break) and often allow you to take notes without distracting the participant.

These options may also allow you to reach reluctant, relatively hidden or difficult-to-reach segments of your sample. Fathers, for example (hardly a group living in the shadows of society), are notably under-represented in research. As a consequence, the perceptions and experiences of fathers are absent, communicated by the mother or the child, or assumed to be the same as those of the mother. Davis Kirsch et al. (2002) found that the telephone option was appealing to fathers since it allowed them to schedule interviews early in the morning or later in the evening (or before and after work).

Telephone and online interviews may provide you with a measure of safety, particularly if the study includes people who engage in deviant or illegal activities, or if the research setting presents some danger (e.g. see Ferrell & Hamm, 1998). In some research settings, participants may not want others to know that they are participating in an interview (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). Remote interviews afford a respondent a measure of privacy and allow the person to participate without fear that their reputation, job security, or safety will be compromised. Participants may also prefer the relative anonymity afforded by remote interviews, particularly if the focus of the interview includes sensitive, painful, or embarrassing topics.

When in-person interviews are not possible, telephone and online interviews, and apps like Facetime, allow researchers to continue collecting data. Anecdotally, we found online interviews and focus groups an effective approach when in-person research shut down as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic; it allowed us to continue data collection and saved a substantial amount of time and money that would have normally been spent on travel. As our confidence grew in the quality of interviews that can be generated online, we have each considered how to integrate remote interviews (and focus groups) into our future projects.

Potential challenges

Telephone, online, and smartphone options will not provide you with an opportunity to see participants' non-verbal communication, physical surroundings, or other social artefacts. And having the ability to turn off the mic or video in the context of an online interview or focus group can become a challenge, particularly if it limits the researcher's ability to connect more deeply with the participant. Some online studies also demand a level of technical competence and familiarity with instant messaging, video-conferencing, or other platforms. The level of technological literacy of the target population should be seriously considered before embarking on a project that includes technology. As a consequence of these potential challenges, some researchers argue that these methods may compromise the quality of interview data and should only be used when the researcher does not have access to the participants, when the participants or research setting pose serious risk to the

researcher (see Creswell, 2018), or when the nature of the research demands a telephone, online, or smartphone approach (e.g. researching an online community).

However, others suggest that such concerns may be overstated. Researchers who have systematically compared telephone interviews with face-to-face interviews have found no significant differences in the quality of the interviews. Sturges and Hanrahan (2004), for example, found no differences when they were forced to switch from face-to-face to telephone interviews half-way through their study. Comparing transcripts from the interviews conducted in person and by phone, they found that the interviews were similar in terms of length, number of responses per question, and importantly the depth and nature of the responses. Others have also argued that respondents can use a variety of non-verbal forms of communication. You can also consider the pace and timing of the response, the length of silence between responses, and the volume or pitch of the respondent's voice over the telephone.

Text-based and video-conference options, whether synchronous or asynchronous, also have features that allow you to capture dimensions of participants' emotions, feelings, and physical responses. Respondents can use a range of fairly universal emoticons and acronyms to express themselves (e.g. LOL, ☺). While not sharing the same physical space, video-conferencing allows you to see participants' conscious or unconscious non-verbal communication. Although you will have to be aware of potential culturally based meanings associated with certain text or physical responses, there are a variety of strategies for overcoming at least some of the criticism associated with these options (Opdenakker, 2006).

Over time, concerns about access to technology and wi-fi have also lessened as internet access and smartphone technology become more prevalent and cheaper. In the countries that the first edition of this book was sold, approximately 80–90 per cent of individuals in Denmark, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Germany, Malaysia, and the United States have access to the internet. And close to 60 per cent of individuals in the Philippines, China, and South Africa have internet access. Mobile subscriptions are also prevalent worldwide. In the United Kingdom and the United States, for example, there are approximately 120 subscriptions per 100 people in the population. Access will only continue to grow. According to Our World Data, 27,000 individuals around the world try the internet for the first time each and every day!

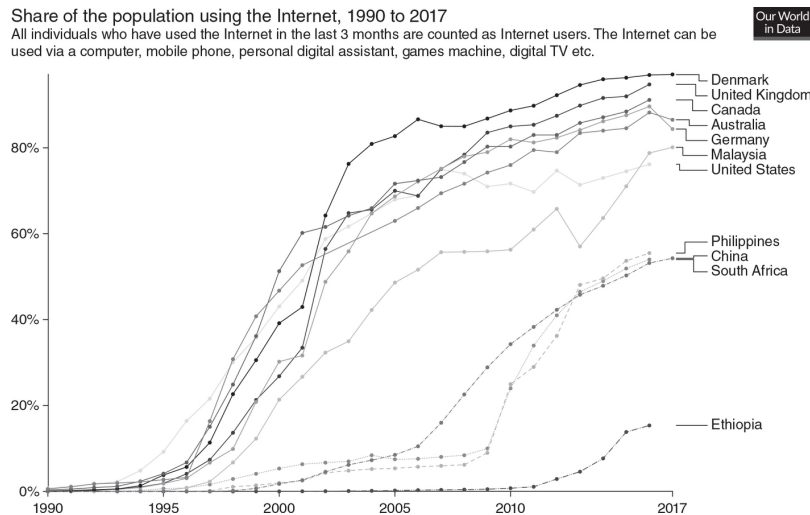


Figure 5.1

SOURCE: Roser, Ritchie, & Ortiz-Ospina (2015)

Max Roser, Hannah Ritchie and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina (2015) - "Internet". *Published Online at Ourworldindata.org*. Retrieved From: <https://ourworldindata.org/internet> [Online Resource]

Online interviews versus digital resources

Online communication has become an essential aspect of our lives. It certainly has increased the possibilities for conducting research online and using digital resources. What is the difference between doing research online and gathering digital resources? [Table 5.3](#) provides a useful outline for thinking about the various approaches to conducting online and digital research.

Table 5.3 Doing research online versus gathering data from digital sources

| | Data collected from | Relation of researcher and participant |
|---|---|---|
| Doing research online | | |
| Elicited data from participants | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews • Focus groups (see Chapter 5) • Participant observation of online communities or events (see Chapter 6) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactions between researcher and one or more participant |
| Collaborative data generated together <i>with</i> participants | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vignette or narrative interviews • Arts-based research • Community-based research | |
| Gathering data from digital sources | | |
| Existing data that uses online materials not influenced by the researcher | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blogs • Social networking sites • Posts and discussions • Archives on websites • Datasets and databases • Documents and reports • Published literature or books | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not include direct contact |

STEP THREE: GETTING PREPARED

Key takeaways



- Hardware options include digital recording devices and foot pedals
- Software options include voice recognition and qualitative analysis software
- You should also prepare an interview bag that contains everything you need to conduct an interview, including your interview schedule and consent forms

This section will outline practical tools needed to conduct an interview, including hardware and software options and organizing an interview bag.

Hardware and software considerations

The most low-tech option is to rely on your memory or note-taking abilities to record the interview. You may decide on this option to limit distractions or barriers to developing a good connection with the interviewee, particularly if they are self-conscious or hyper-aware of the recording device. For various reasons, including comfort level or the sensitivity of the topic, your interviewee may also ask you not to use a recording device.

The problems with this option should also be considered, including your ability to accurately and completely capture what the interviewee has told you, how you asked a particular question and additional probes that you used to encourage your interviewee to engage in a broader conversation about a particular topic or issue. Unless you are a master of shorthand, both options will require you to retrospectively re-create the interview after the fact. Consequently, your 'transcript' may unwittingly contain inaccuracies, omissions, or misrepresentations.

While many researchers use note-taking throughout their data collection process, most projects also rely on variety of hardware and software options ([Table 5.4](#)). We present some general hardware and software options; however, the type and aims of the interview will indicate the tools that are most appropriate for your study.

Table 5.4 Hardware and software considerations

| | Hardware options | Software options | Examples |
|--------------|--|--|---|
| Face-to-face | Digital recorder Video recorder Smartphone for voice, photo, and video recording Foot pedal | Voice recognition software File-sharing Qualitative data analysis software | Dragon Naturally Speaking VEC foot pedal yousendit NVivo, Atlas.ti, MAXQDA |

| | Hardware options | Software options | Examples |
|---------------------------------|--|-------------------------|--|
| Photo or video interview | Camera Video recorder Digital recorder Smartphone for photo and video recording Computer Foot pedal | | |
| Telephone interview | Telephone Digital recorder Call recorder adaptor Foot pedal | | |
| | Information and communication technologies (ICTs) | | Examples |
| Synchronous internet interview | Text-based Video-conferencing Multi-channel | | Facebook Chat Twitter Mobile Instant Messaging Skype Zoom Teams |
| Asynchronous internet interview | Text-based Pictures Videos | | Email Blogs Social media wikis Chat forums |

The interview bag

You will need to create an interview bag of sorts that contains everything you will need to conduct an interview. The method of the interviews (e.g. face-to-face or online options) as well as a variety of other considerations (e.g. whether you are driving or taking public transport) will factor into what you actually need to include in your interview bag ([Table 5.5](#)). Having an interview bag will keep you organized and prepared to conduct an interview at a moment's notice.

Table 5.5 Interview bag checklist

| |
|--|
| <p>Interview schedule</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 hard copies • 1 emailed copy |
| <p>Other materials</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any visual aids or other materials |
| <p>Consent forms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least 10 hard copies • 1 emailed copy |
| <p>Recording</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital recorder or smart phone • Pad of paper, clipboard, pens |
| <p>Participant information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Date and location of the interview • Cell number and email address |
| <p>Interview location</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programmed into smart phone or GPS or hard copy of map • Parking information • Local bus information • Numbers of local cab companies in case you get stuck somewhere (or you are in a 'dead zone') |
| <p>Supplies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extra batteries for digital recorder • Extra pens • Cell phone charger |

- Good assortment of change for parking
- Snacks and water (in case the opportunity arises to conduct additional interviews)

STEP FOUR: DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

Key takeaways



- Interview schedules have three main parts: introductory remarks, body, and closing remarks
- The body of the interview schedule contains your key questions. The most sensitive or difficult questions are usually placed somewhere in the middle of the body to allow for sufficient time to build rapport
- Transition statements allow you to move from one section of the interview schedule to the next
- Good interview questions share many of the same properties: They are clear, not double-barrelled, organized in a logical fashion, non-leading, value-neutral and open-ended
- Asking your respondents to fill out a demographic survey will allow you to efficiently collect information about your participants, including their age, education, occupation, and income
- There are four categories of memos: [summative memos](#), [theoretical memos](#), [methodological memos](#), and [personal memos](#)
- Memos include your ongoing reflections, experiences, interpretations, and challenges

Interview studies can include a range of data collection tools, but more commonly include the interview schedule, a demographic survey, and memos. An interview schedule includes all the questions you plan to ask and the probes that you may need to elicit a response or more detail. A demographic survey is an efficient way to create a snapshot of participants and will save you a lot of time compiling the information from the transcripts after the fact. Lastly, memos that you create will force you to reflect on your data throughout the collection process.

The interview schedule

The rigidity of an interview schedule varies. At one end of the continuum, researchers may only rely on a handful of guiding questions. At the other end of the continuum are fixed-response interviews that demand the researcher read the questions verbatim and in the same order every single time in order to compare and contrast responses between participants. In this section, we have provided you with a template for creating one of the most common types of interview schedules in the social sciences – a ‘semi-structured’ interview schedule ([Table 5.6](#)). However, many of the same rules apply to less and more rigid interview types.

A **semi-structured interview** schedule has three main parts: introductory remarks, body and closing remarks. Introductory remarks set the stage and include any administrative details such as recording procedures and consent documents. The body contains the questions reflecting the central aims of the research project; it may also include the most sensitive or difficult questions. Closing remarks should reflect a concerted effort to provide the interviewee and interviewer with some closure. In addition to these main sections, interview schedules often include transition statements and probes.

Table 5.6 Generic interview template

| Template | | |
|----------|--|--------|
| | Question | Probes |
| | <i>Section One: Introductory Remarks</i> | |
| A1 | | |
| A2 | | |
| | <i>Transition Statement</i> | |
| | <i>Section Two: The Body</i> | |
| B1 | Warm-up | |
| B2 | Warm-up | |
| B3 | Warm-up | |
| | <i>Transition Statement</i> | |
| C1 | Central | |
| C2 | Central | |
| C3 | Central | |
| | <i>Transition Statement</i> | |
| D1 | Cool-down | |

| Template | | |
|----------|---------------------------------------|--------|
| | Question | Probes |
| D2 | Cool-down | |
| D3 | Cool-down | |
| | <i>Transition Statement</i> | |
| | <i>Section Three: Closing Remarks</i> | |
| E1 | | |
| E2 | | |
| E3 | | |

The content of an interview schedule: part 1

With the generic interview template in mind, we now turn to the actual content of the interview schedule. We have divided this discussion into two parts. In part 1, we provide the broad strokes, and outline the basic contents of each section of an interview schedule. We first answer the questions: What do you want to ask? When will you ask it? How will you ask it? We also discuss the utility and content of transition statements and probes. In part 2, we provide detail as to the question types, organization of questions, and the wording of questions.

Section one: introductory remarks

Introductory remarks serve to establish rapport with the interviewee and to provide the interviewee with some context ([Table 5.7](#)). Embedded in a formal interview schedule, it also serves to remind you to review important administrative tasks.

Table 5.7 Section one: Introductory remarks

| Section one | |
|--|---|
| Introductory remarks | Example |
| 1 Introduce yourself and provide information that may be relevant to the interviewee | 'My name is John. I am a PhD student. For the past few years I have been working with Dr Zap on a project about summer literacy programmes offered by the school board' |
| 2 Thank the interviewee for their participation | |
| 3 Provide a brief description of the project | |
| 4 Establish the project's purpose | 'I am interested in learning about the potential benefits of the programmes' |
| 5 Establish how you will use the information | 'The interview portion of the study helps us understand the needs of families and children attending the programme. I plan to share the broad findings with the school board' |

Section one

6 Handle administrative details including:

- How long the interview will take
- Review and sign ethics forms
- If applicable ask for permission to record the interview and for how you will use the recording

7 Ask the interviewee if they have any questions or concerns before the interview begins

Section two: the body

The body of the interview contains your central, or the most pressing, questions ([Table 5.8](#)). The body is usually organized like a story arc or a 'workout'. It includes three parts: warm-up, central, and cool-down questions. Warm-up questions continue to build rapport with participants. Central questions tackle the main issues or themes and can include participants' experiences, perceptions, or emotional responses. The most personal or sensitive questions should be situated somewhere in the middle after a degree of rapport has been established and to provide the interviewer with sufficient time to cool down the emotional intensity of the discussion. Such cool-down questions may also include more future-oriented types of questions, and member checking to ensure that you have sufficiently understood what the participant has told you.

Table 5.8 Section two: The body

Section two

Warm-up questions

1 Set the stage for the main themes or issues explored in the interview including:

- Biographic questions
- Background questions
- Baseline perception or attitudinal questions

Example

How long have you lived in this community?

Before enrolling in the programme, what did you know about it?

| | |
|--|--|
| Section two | |
| Central questions | |
| <p>2 Cover all the main issues, themes, or concepts of the study. It includes the most difficult or sensitive questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See Part 2 for organization and wording guidelines | |
| Cool-down questions | |
| <p>3 Wrap-up questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be future oriented | What do you think are the next steps for the programme? |
| Other options include questions that serve as a form of member-checking | Thank you for speaking to me about the programme. My impression is that you feel x and y about the programme for a and b reasons. Am I on the right track? |

Section three: closing remarks

The end of the interview should provide the interviewee with a sense of closure ([Table 5.9](#)). After a participant has taken time out of their schedule to talk to you and in some cases discuss personal or painful experiences, it is important to communicate the value of their time and how this discussion has contributed to your understanding and stock of knowledge about the issue at hand. It may also be an opportunity to build on a referral chain and to think of new questions that could be incorporated into the interview schedule. Additionally, it is important to remind the interviewee that you are an email or phone call away should they have questions or concerns at a later time.

Table 5.9 Section three: Closing remarks

| | |
|--|---|
| Section three | |
| | Example |
| Establish that the interview is coming to an end | |
| Provide the interviewee with a specific example of how their insights have made a contribution | 'Thank you for agreeing to speak to me today. I had not thought about how staff hiring affects programme decisions' |

| Section three | |
|--|--|
| | Example |
| Unless you are conducting a fixed-response interview, ask the participant if there are additional questions that should be asked or issues that should be examined | 'What questions should I be asking to really get at staffing issues?' |
| Try to build new referral chains | 'Can you recommend any other people I should speak to?' 'If you think of anyone else I should speak to about the programme, please pass on my name and contact information' |
| Remind the interviewee of potential follow-up with the researcher or research team | 'If you have any other questions or comments, please feel free to contact me. My information is on your copy of the consent form' |
| Thank the interviewee again | |

Between section tools: transition statements

Transition statements are usually two or three sentences that serve as a bridge from one section of the interview schedule to another. It is worthwhile to plan the movement between sections to maintain the flow of the interview and to avoid awkward or abrupt movement between topics. In other words, constructing a seemingly natural conversation with an interviewee may require some planning ahead!

The length of a transition statement will vary. If the next section builds on the previous one, the transition statement can be short.

Example 1: Shorter transition statement

Now that we have talked about how you found out about the summer camp, I'd like to ask you some questions about your child's experience attending the camp.

A longer transition statement is often needed if the next section constitutes a new topic or if the researcher needs to set the context.

Example 2: Longer transition statement

Now that we have talked about your child's school performance, I would like to ask you some questions about your relationship with their teacher and the

school principal. We're really interested in learning more about connections between home and school.

Ongoing tools: probes

Probes serve to clarify questions or generate a more elaborate response by the interviewee. Sometimes interviewees do not understand a question as it is originally worded, they fail to provide sufficient detail, or their statements are vague. Probes are useful to plan in advance to ensure that any additional visuals, questioning, or comments on the behalf of the interviewer remain neutral and communicate the intended meaning and tone that is desired. They also serve as a good reminder to the interviewer to dig deeper beyond surface level responses and push for further clarification.

Probes come in two basic varieties: verbal and visual.

Verbal probes

Verbal probes are pre-prepared follow-up questions that encourage the participant to expand on their responses ([Table 5.10](#)). In the example below, a clarification probe is used to encourage the participant to describe what is meant by the term supportive.

Researcher (*main question*): What does the term parent engagement mean to you?

Participant: That's hard to say. It can mean a lot of things. I think for me, it's about being supportive. You know, being there for your child.

Researcher (*probe*): Can you tell me a bit more about what it means to be supportive?

What concrete actions or examples would you associate with the term supportive?

Verbal probes generally encourage the participant to provide more detail, to elaborate or to clarify what the participant wants to communicate.

Table 5.10 Verbal probes

| Verbal probe type | Examples |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Who, when, what, and how questions | Who else was with you? When did X happen? Where did X happen? What was your role? What was the outcome? How did you feel about that? How did you find out about X? How would you explain the outcome? |

| Verbal probe type | Examples |
|--------------------------|--|
| Elaboration questions | Can you tell me a bit more about that? Are you able to provide a few more examples? |
| Clarification questions | What do you mean by that term? How do you define X? Can you explain the process a bit more? How would you classify X? How would you identify X? Do others define X differently? |
| Comparison or relational | What characteristics would distinguish that from X? How does X compare with Y? How does X relate to Y? How would you prioritize X in relation to Y? |
| Imaginative questions | What would you propose? What is the ideal X? How would you change X? If you could start over, what would you do differently? What aspects of X would remain the same? |
| Verbal cues | Oh, I see Uh-huh |

Visual probes

Visual probes are also used to encourage participants to expand on their responses but involve the use of visual aids and using appropriately timed visual (and verbal) cues ([Table 5.11](#)). As we discussed above, the use of visual aids can also be a powerful tool to generate memories or enhanced communication between the researcher and the participant.

Table 5.11 Visual probes

| Visual probe type | Examples |
|-------------------|----------|
| | |

| Visual probe type | Examples |
|--------------------------|--|
| Visual aids | Photos, videos, maps, diagrams, flyers |
| Visual cues | Nodding, smiling, maintaining eye contact, positive body language (e.g. avoid crossing arms) |

The content of an interview schedule: part 2

This section largely refers to section two of your interview schedule, or the ‘central’ questions. Once you have established the basic structure and content of your interview schedule, it is time to do the heavy lifting of the interview and construct questions that will allow you to answer your research questions. We outline three key considerations: the wording of questions, the nature of questions, and the organization of questions.

The wording of questions

Qualitative researchers spend a lot of time writing, re-writing, and reflecting on their questions. Below we present some general rules that apply to many interview studies ([Table 5.12](#)). However, some of these rules will vary depending on the nature of the research. For example, interviews with professionals or experts may contain specialist language or insider jargon, evaluation studies may contain questions that are more value-laden, and structured interviews may contain several closed-ended questions.

The nature of questions

What kinds of questions do you need to ask in order to answer your research questions? Interview questions come in two basic varieties: descriptive and theoretical. There is often substantial overlap between the two. Certainly, [descriptive questions](#) help us answer [theoretical questions](#), and theoretical questions are often descriptive in nature. Interview schedules often contain both kinds of questions and are used at different times for different purposes depending on what you need the information for. We use that distinction simply as a way to categorize the initial starting point for interview questions (for a review of how this relates to coding, see Saldana, 2013).

Table 5.12 Wording questions well

| Good questions usually | Phase 1: Original question | Phase 2: Re-written question |
|---|--|--|
| Are clear and avoid using jargon, specialist language or acronyms | What publics does the CHP serve? | What groups participate in the community housing programme? |
| Ask one thing at a time | What programmes are offered for seniors and young families? | What programmes are offered for seniors? What programmes are offered for young families? |
| Are organized in logical order or sequence | When did you exit the programme? Can you tell me about how you found out about the programme? | Can you tell me about how you found out about the programme? When did you exit the programme? |

| Good questions usually | Phase 1: Original question | Phase 2: Re-written question |
|---|---|---|
| Are non-leading | Did the programme make you feel better? | How did the programme make you feel? |
| Are value-neutral | Do you really think that the programme benefits participants? | How do you think the programme affects its participants? |
| Are open-ended rather than closed-ended | Do you know about the community housing services? | Can you describe the services offered by the community housing programme? |

Descriptive questions

Descriptive questions are used more inductively, often to examine localized understandings ([Table 5.13](#)). They cover everything from basic experiences all the way to interviewees' understandings of a particular condition or outcome. While it may seem obvious, more novice researchers sometimes fail to ask the very questions that may best answer their main research questions. Hoping to derive interviewees' feelings about a particular event or process is not necessarily the same thing as simply asking them directly!

When considering these types of questions, you have to seriously reflect on crafting questions that get at the heart of your research questions. Are you attempting to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, or emotions? Are you trying to understand a particular process, or why or how a particular condition, event, or process happened?

Table 5.13 Types of descriptive questions

| Starting point | Description | Examples |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| Knowledge | Questions that examine who, what, why, where and how | Who developed the programme? When did the programme start? Where did you meet to discuss the programme? How did the programme develop? |
| Experiences and behaviours | Questions that examine participants' involvement, knowledge, or history | Can you describe your involvement with the programme? |

| Starting point | Description | Examples |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| Experiential | Questions that examine how participants' experience their involvement, knowledge, or history | Can you walk me through a typical day? |
| Interpretation | Questions that examine participants' comprehension | How would you explain X event? |
| Perceptions | Questions that examine participants' insights or interpretations | <p>What did you learn from that experience?</p> <p>How would you describe parents' commitment to the programme?</p> <p>How do you think X person would understand that?</p> |
| Comparison or relational | Questions that examine how participants understand one thing in relation to another | <p>What characteristics would distinguish that from X?</p> <p>How does that compare with X?</p> <p>How does that relate to X?</p> <p>How are things different now compared with three years ago?</p> <p>How would you prioritize that?</p> |
| Emotions | Questions that examine participants' feelings, reactions, or sentiments | How did the programme make you feel? |
| Imaginative | Questions that examine how participants would create, change or revise a particular event or thing | <p>What would you propose?</p> <p>What is the ideal programme?</p> <p>How would you change the programme?</p> <p>If you could start over, what would you do?</p> |

| Starting point | Description | Examples |
|-------------------------|--|---|
| Past or future oriented | Questions that examine perceptions or understandings of what was or what will be | How was the programme organized before? What do you think the programme will look like in five years? |
| Values | Questions that examine participants' morals, standards, or beliefs | How do you think the programme affects the community? |
| Evaluative | Questions that examine participants' assessments, estimations, or valuations | What impact does the programme have on the community? How did you decide to do that? |
| Frequency | Questions that examine participants' understandings about duration, regularity, or commonality | How often do you attend the programme? |
| Outsider | Questions that examine how participants would explain something to an outsider or someone with limited knowledge Questions that examine how participants understand their critics | How would you explain the programme to someone who had never heard of it before? What do critics have to say about this programme? |
| Local causation | Questions that examine how participants understand why something occurred | Why do you think the programme was started? |

SOURCE: Adaption and expansion of ideas found in J. Saldana (2013). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Sage. Saldana's book is one of the best coding manuals on the market

Theoretical questions

Theoretical questions take a more deductive approach and build questions around a theoretical proposition ([Table 5.14](#)). This approach starts with a theory or concept that you want to explore and develops questions that allow you to explore its micro-foundations. As we discuss above, often the distinction between descriptive and theoretical questions is more about the *intention* or purpose of the question rather than the nature of the question itself.

Table 5.14 Example of theoretically driven questions

| Starting point | Main question ideas | Sample questions |
|----------------|---------------------|------------------|
| | | |

| Starting point | Main question ideas | Sample questions |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Parents and cultural capital | Alignment with schools | How would you describe your relationship with your child's teacher? |
| | Philosophy of parenting | What role should parents play in their children's learning? |
| | Non-school time | Can you describe what your child does on a typical school night? |
| | Parenting practices | |

The organization of questions

You have probably heard the term 'timing is everything'. This statement is particularly true in interview studies. We have already noted the importance of situating the most sensitive or difficult questions within the body of the interview schedule, after introductory remarks and warm-up questions have paved the way.

The main rules still apply (e.g. leaving sensitive questions to the middle); however, there are other organizational considerations. So what timing is right for you, or more specifically for your research project? Some interviews may demand chronological question ordering. Other interview studies may demand structuring questions in a manner that outlines a particular process or development. Also common is bundling questions by issue, concepts, or theories, such as [theoretical bundling](#). Bundles can be organized around a particular descriptive account (e.g. local causality), thematically (e.g. patient advocacy), or theoretically driven. Building in such blocks of questions is a useful way to ensure that issues related to that concept are sufficiently addressed, rather than hoping to make connections backwards to a particular theme or theory from a collection of disparate statements made by the participants. It may also facilitate data analysis.

[Table 5.15](#) gives an example of how a researcher could start to theoretically bundle interview questions around three types of 'capital' that have been associated with school success. Starting with the main chunks, the researcher constructs question ideas (and eventually main or sub-interview questions) that address each kind of resource. We have only provided a few examples in each column for illustration purposes, but if this were a real project, columns 2, 3, and 4 would include many more categories and questions.

Table 5.15 Example of theoretical bundling of central questions

| Step 1 | Step 2 | Step 3 | Step 4 |
|--------------|--------|-------------------|------------------|
| Main bundles | Focus | Sample categories | Sample questions |
| | | | |

| Step 1 | Step 2 | Step 3 | Step 4 |
|------------------|-----------|--|--|
| Cultural capital | Parents | Philosophy of parenting Frames of reference Development of pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills Non-school time Parent education, occupation Alignment with schools | What role should parents play in their children's schooling? Can you describe what your child does on a typical school night? |
| Social capital | Networks | Connections to schools Information flows Support system | How would you describe your relationship with your child's teacher? |
| Economic capital | Resources | Preschool RESP Tutoring or other supports | What was your childcare arrangement before school started? |

The demographic survey

The second source of data is a [demographic survey](#). A demographic survey allows researchers to efficiently collect a variety of key demographic features such as the age, gender, education, occupation, and income of their respondents. Many qualitative journal articles and books contain a summary chart containing the key characteristics of the interviewees. The survey is usually filled out by the interviewees, typically at the end of the interview.

Template: Qualitative interview demographic survey

Sex: _____

Age: _____

Ethnicity: _____

Race: _____

Religion: _____

Highest level of education: _____

Occupation: _____

Marital status: _____

Residence: own or rent or other: _____

How many children live in the home full-time? _____ Ages?

What is your best estimate of your total household income, received by all household members, from all sources, before taxes and deductions?

> Please check off which category best fits you:

_____ \$0–\$29,999

_____ \$30,000–\$69,999

_____ \$70,000–\$99,999

_____ \$100,000 or more

Summative, theoretical, methodological, and personal memos

In addition to the interview and a demographic survey, the third source of data is the creation of memos. Memos are used to memorialize your ongoing reflections, experiences, interpretations, and challenges. Some memos serve as an early form of data analysis, while others point to areas that you need to work on. Memos are your personal notes, and you should not censor yourself.

Just like writing good field notes, we suggest separating your memos into four basic categories ([Table 5.16](#)). We return to these four types of memos in [Chapter 9](#), where we discuss the creation of and use of memos in relation to coding your data.

Table 5.16 Summative, theoretical, methodological, and personal memos

| Type of memo | Description |
|----------------------|---|
| Summative memos | A summary memo is your 'check sheet' and includes a short description of the interviewee and the broad strokes of the interview |
| Theoretical memos | Summarize theoretical or conceptual ideas that emerged during the interview Reflect on the connections between theories and concepts that are central to your project and your interviews |
| Methodological memos | Summarize the methodological issues that emerged during the interview, including events that could affect the quality of the interview, problematic questions, and any new questions that should be added to the interview schedule |

| Type of memo | Description |
|----------------|--|
| Personal memos | Personal memos summarize how you felt during the interview or any personal issues that may have affected the quality of the interview (e.g. you were not feeling well) |

STEP FIVE: CLOSING THE DEAL

Key takeaways



- The recruitment process includes three key steps: initial contact, follow-up, and scheduling
- The initial contact usually includes presenting or mailing a potential participant an information letter or flyer
- Recruitment materials should be staggered in a manner that can accommodate a manageable pool of interviewees at any given time
- You will often need to follow-up after the participant receives a letter of introduction. If you are *mailing* the introductory letters, each batch should be sent out one week and followed up approximately 5–7 days later. If you are *emailing* the introductory letter, follow-up times are much shorter, within 48 hours
- We recommend trying to contact potential participants *no more* than two or three times by phone or email
- Once you have successfully landed an interview, try to schedule the interview as soon as possible

If you are fortunate, interviewees are pre-selected and organized in advance. Most interview studies, however, require researchers to actively recruit people who are essentially strangers. Most people are inundated with various kinds of requests by advertisers, businesses, charities, and quasi-legitimate research outfits, making recruiting participants for qualitative research increasingly challenging.

So how does one close the deal, particularly when one is trying to engage strangers? At many universities and government agencies, recruitment guidelines are often specified by the research ethics office. These guidelines include recruitment scripts, letters of introduction, and other formal consent procedures. However, we can provide you with a set of general guidelines and tips for increasing your recruitment success.

The recruitment process includes three key steps: initial contact, follow-up, and scheduling.

Initial contact

The initial manner by which you contact people will vary depending on whether you have access to the sites or people. However, many research ethics boards also demand some type of formalized introduction. Sometimes participants are given the letter of introduction before being contacted by telephone or email. Other times an information letter or flyer is given to participants at the time of recruitment. The introduction letter or flyer usually includes a brief description of the project, the type, and duration of participation that is being requested, contact information, and a formal request for participation. It can also specify suitability for the study. If applicable, it will also include statements produced by your institution's research ethics office.

Sample: Introduction letter

Dear Parents,

My name is David Smith. I am a researcher at the University, Department of Sociology. I am conducting a study on after-school activities (e.g. ballet, tutoring).

My goal is to generate a sample of families who have all of the following characteristics:

- At least one parent who has received at least an undergraduate university degree.
- At least one parent who has been or is employed in a professional, managerial, or business-related field (e.g. teacher, doctor, financial advisor).
- Currently has at least one child under the age of 14.

I will be calling you shortly. If your family has all three of these characteristics, I will be asking you to participate in an interview. Interviews will take approximately one hour and will be conducted at a time and location that is most convenient for you.

My project is currently funded by the Government Agency (Grant number: OO-2345). The project has received full ethics clearance by the University (Certificate number: 2013-01-09).

Sincerely,

David Smith

Email: david.smith@university.com

Home: 617-666-7777 Cell: 617-333-5555

Timing

Recruitment materials should be staggered in a manner that can accommodate a manageable pool of interviewees at any given time ([Table 5.17](#)). If you are the sole researcher on the project, then it makes no sense to mail out 150 introductory letters all at once. All 150 candidates must be contacted and could theoretically agree to participate – an impossible task to accommodate even by the most seasoned researcher. Estimates will vary depending on the willingness of people to participate and how many interviews can be accommodated in any one week. If you are contacting strangers, it is reasonable to plan for a 10–20 per cent rate of participation, so adjust the pace of your initial contact accordingly.

Table 5.17 Timing of mailed introductory letter

| Week | Introductory letters mailed | Follow-up phone-call using recruitment script | Scheduled interviews |
|------|-----------------------------|---|----------------------|
| 1 | 1–25 | | |
| 2 | 26–50 | 1–25 | 2 |
| 3 | 51–75 | 26–50 | 2 |
| 4 | 76–100 | 51–75 | 1 |
| 5 | 101–125 | 76–100 | 3 |
| 6 | 126–150 | 101–125 | 2 |
| 7 | | 126–150 | 3 |
| 8 | | | 2 |
| | Total | 150 letters | 15 interviews |

Follow-up and recruiting

If you are fortunate enough to have access to the potential interviewee's phone number or email, you can follow up and provide more detail about the study, answer questions, and importantly secure an interview. If the interviewee is a stranger, then additional factors should be taken into consideration.

Recruitment script

A recruitment script is commonly used for telephone or email recruitment. It is often used to follow-up after a letter of introduction has been given to potential interviewees. It may be especially important when people other than the researcher are handling recruitment since the person will essentially be representing the project, even if it is only for a few minutes. However, even if the researcher is handling the recruitment, it is a good idea to work through how the project should be communicated and represented to potential participants and to ensure that they receive all the necessary information they need to make an informed decision. While it may seem redundant, researchers should not assume that the potential interviewee has actually received the introductory letter or, even more likely, read it carefully. Similar to the letter of introduction, a recruitment script includes a brief description of the project, the type and duration of participation that is being requested, and usually a formal request for participation.

Example: Sample recruitment script

Interviewer – May I please speak to the owner or manager of the business?

Potential participant – I'm the owner, Bob. How may I help you?

Interviewer – My name is Raj Ali and I am a PhD student in the Department of Education at the University. I am working on a project about the private tutoring industry. My supervisor and I are conducting interviews with business owners. The questions include your background, the history of your business, and the characteristics and tutoring habits of your students. You should have received an information letter about this project approximately one week ago. Did you receive this information?

Potential participant – Yes, I received the letter last week.

Interviewer – Wonderful. Would you be willing to participate in an interview? The interview would last about one hour and would be arranged for a time convenient to your schedule.

Timing

The timing of contact is important. If you are *mailing* the introductory letters, each batch should be sent out one week and followed up approximately five to seven days later. If you are *emailing* the introductory letter, then follow-up times are much shorter – within 48 hours if the recipient has not already contacted you. It is best to schedule the interview soon after the interviewee agrees to participate in order to maintain enthusiasm and reduce the chance that they will forget or change their mind (see [Table 5.17](#)).

Other timing contingencies matter for recruiting. Think carefully about the population under study and whether things like the day of the week, time of day, weather, or time of year matter. A Monday evening follow-up phone call may seem perfectly reasonable to a retiree but may be a source of irritation for a parent struggling to put young children to bed. Similarly, day-time follow-up calls may be suitable if you are intending to contact stay-at-home moms, but not sensible if you are interested in mid-career professionals. And as strange as it sounds, you should be aware of other contingencies such as the weather. Phoning people who have struggled to make it home after a severe snowfall will not put you in participants' 'good books'!

Contact attempts

After sending the letter, we recommend trying to contact potential participants *no more* than two or three times by phone or email. After two or three unsuccessful attempts to reach someone, you can reasonably assume that the person is not interested in participating.

Personality

Recruiting strangers is a very challenging task. It requires you to sell the project. You have to consider whether you have the right personality to entice potential interviewees. If you are very uncomfortable or awkward recruiting interviewees, it

may be worthwhile having someone who has more confidence or charisma to follow-up and close the deal on your behalf.

Scheduling

Once you have successfully landed an interview, try to schedule the interview as soon as possible. Long delays between your initial contact and the interview may increase the likelihood a participant will cancel or lose interest or forget about the interview. The day before the scheduled interview, you should phone or email the participant to remind them of the interview and confirm its location and time.

As a rule of thumb, you should be prepared to conduct the interview at a moment's notice. In some cases, your newly recruited participant may want to conduct the interview right then and there. Unless there is some methodological reason for denying the request, have your interview schedule and recording devices (e.g. digital recorder, call recorder adapter) ready – this is when you will be especially thankful to have an interview bag ready to go!

STEP SIX: INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES

Key takeaways



- Before conducting a face-to-face, photo, or video or video-conference interview, you should know your interview schedule inside and out
- In most cases, you will be interviewing virtual strangers. It is important that you make your participant feel comfortable and build a rapport
- During the interview, engage in active listening and seeing. Active listening and seeing involves more than sitting quietly and politely; it involves being highly attuned to not only what your interviewee has to say, but also what is communicated through body language
- Good interviewers stay in control and manage their physical and verbal reactions to participants' responses

At first glance, it seems strange that many books and articles about interview studies have lots to say about gaining access and ethics but provide little detail in terms of how one actually conducts an interview. How come? Well, part of the reason is that unlike other methodological issues, many aspects of conducting interviews defy standardization. The structure of the interview, the topic of the study, and the characteristics of the interviewer and the participants shape how an interview is actually conducted. This does not mean that anything goes, however. There are some general rules that transcend all forms of interview studies and personalities.

Know thy interview schedule

Before conducting a face-to-face, photo or video, or video-conference interview, you should know your interview schedule inside and out.

- First, memorizing the interview schedule will allow you to quickly move back and forth between sections. In the context of a guided or semi-structured interview, your participant may jump around in their discussion, focusing on material that is relevant from one part of your interview schedule to another, and you have to be prepared to go with the flow, return to questions that are still unanswered and stop yourself from re-asking a question that the participant has already answered out of sequence.
- Second, reading from an interview schedule not only makes you look unprepared, it limits your ability to build rapport. How can you put your interviewee at ease and make eye contact if you are constantly looking down at a piece of paper or flipping wildly through your interview schedule? Periodic and discreet glances at the interview schedule are fine but should be done only as a quick reminder.
- Third, in the case of remote interviews, the interviewee may not be able to see you, but they will be able to hear you. Reading from the interview schedule will make you sound robotic and unnatural. Similar to other types of interviews (e.g. face-to-face) you will have difficulty managing exchanges that are fast-paced or that jump back and forth between topics unless you can easily move seamlessly from one question to another.

Build rapport

In most cases, you will be interviewing virtual strangers. It is important that you make your participant feel comfortable. The degree of trust and comfort that you can create is the **rapport** you build with your participants.

- First, identify yourself and thank them for participating. If the interview is in person, shake the person's hand, make eye contact, and smile warmly (however, you must be aware of cultural, religious, or health practices that discourage physical contact). Even if you are nervous, you should exude a degree of confidence.
- Second, if it is appropriate try to connect with the participant on a personal level in some way. In most cases, any personal exchanges should be about positive and non-controversial topics (e.g. not the results of the last election or your dislike of a former president).
- Third, in the case of in-person interviews, anticipate and dress for the occasion to make your participant (and yourself) more comfortable in the interview setting. If you are interviewing recent high school drop-outs, you may damage your credibility if you show up for the interview in a three-piece suit!

Be alert: active listening and seeing

Active listening and seeing involves more than sitting quietly and politely; it involves being highly attuned to not only what your interviewee has to say, but also what is communicated through body language.

- First, reflect back your participant's communication style and energy level. So, if the participant is laid back and soft-spoken, try to match their interactional style.
- Second, do not interrupt your participant. Your job is to ask your questions, probe when necessary and be highly attuned to what and how the participant responds to questions and their body language.

- Third, allow for silence. Do not attempt to lighten the moment or fill the void with mindless chit-chat and jokes. Worse yet, do not respond to the question or try to direct the response. Give your participant the time and space to answer the question and consider why the silence occurred. Was the participant simply taking a moment to reflect on the question? Is this simply their interactional style? Is the question sensitive or embarrassing? Or has rapport broken down?
- Fourth, consider whether probes are necessary. Has the question been fully answered? Do you fully understand the meaning? Should you ask a follow-up question?
- Fifth, receive rather than offer support or criticism. As a rule, you should keep your opinions to yourself and only use verbal (e.g. 'Oh, I see') or visual cues (e.g. nodding) that encourage the participant to fully flesh out their experiences or understandings.
- Sixth, read participants' non-verbal cues, including their tone, posture, facial expression, and gestures. Good interviewers pick up not only what people say but the way in which they say it.
- Seventh: Even if you 'hit it off' with a participant, they are not your friend. You have to find a way to make your interviewee comfortable, while also being professional.

Control your physical and verbal reactions

In theory, good interviewers should make excellent poker players. A good interviewer stays in control and manages their own physical and verbal reactions to the participants' responses. See [Table 5.18](#) for strategies on how to limit interview bias.

- First, start off with good body language, including maintaining eye contact, and not doing things such as crossing your arms or slouching in your chair.
- Second, control your physical and verbal reactions. Some interviews involve sensitive or embarrassing topics and behaviours that are not culturally or socially sanctioned. Sometimes your interviewee will tell you something that is far more personal than you were expecting. Looking down or away, flinching, gasping or shifting in your seat may make your participant feel judged or embarrassed and will surely kill any rapport that you have built up.

Table 5.18 How to limit interview bias

Conduct a pre-test to practise the interview

- Anticipate one's own predispositions
- Minimize 'shocks' from unexpected participant responses

Use follow-up and probing questions during the interview

- Do ask for participants to elaborate on their responses
- Don't do so in a manner that might be viewed as seeking an 'approved' response

After each interview, keep a reflexive journal

- Keep a record of how one's reactions/questions might have biased the outcome
- Nurture a 'reflexive objectivity' to recognize one's own prejudices (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 278)
- Reflect on how one's personal characteristics (tone of voice, type of personality, demographics) might influence the outcome

STEP SEVEN: TRANSCRIPTION DECISIONS

Key takeaways



- There are two main approaches to transcription: de-naturalist and naturalist
- De-naturalist approaches do not record the idiosyncratic elements of the interview or speech, including background noises, stutters, pauses or laughter
- Naturalist approaches attempt to capture all idiosyncratic elements of speech, including sighs, pauses, and stutters
- Regardless of your approach, make sure you properly label your transcript, including the name or pseudonym of the participant, contact information, location, date of the interview and any other information that may be helpful

Transcription is rarely discussed other than to comment on the drudgery of the task. Since it serves as the main source of data for interview studies, the practice of transcription is worth reflecting on and will vary depending on the approach and aim of the interview study (see Oliver et al., 2005). Some researchers make detailed notes and only transcribe key quotes from interviews; others subscribe to the belief that the entire interview should be transcribed.

There are two basic approaches to transcription: de-naturalist and naturalist. We will discuss each in further detail.

De-naturalist transcription

De-naturalist approaches do not record the idiosyncratic elements of the interview or speech, including background noises, stutters, pauses or laughter. This approach is more interested in *what* meaning-making processes are more important than *how* these understandings are articulated. This does not prevent researchers from jotting notes during the interview or formulating memos afterwards that capture the mood and tone of the interview.

Naturalist transcription

Naturalist approaches attempt to capture all idiosyncratic elements of speech, including sighs, pauses, and stutters. Common in conversational analysis, naturalist

transcriptions are appropriate when both the content and the pattern of speech is important. While there is no standard set of transcription symbols, many researchers build on a version of Jeffersonian Transcription Notation (see Jefferson, 2004). If you create your own symbols, it is a good idea to create a chart or legend to jog your memory. [Table 5.19](#) gives a few examples of common transcription symbols.

Table 5.19 Common transcription symbols

| Symbol | Notation | Example |
|----------------|-------------------------------|--|
| (.) | Brief pause | I (.) think that it helps patients |
| (#) | Longer pause timed in seconds | I'm just not sure (#) if the programme really makes a difference |
| CAPS | Increased volume of speech | I have JUST HAD IT with her |
| : | Stretched out sound | I am just so gl:ad that it's over |
| <i>Italics</i> | Emphasized speech | That is <i>the</i> worst part of it |
| (NOISE) | Sound of noise | I know I sound a bit paranoid (LAUGHTER) |

STEP EIGHT: MANAGING INTERVIEW DATA

Key takeaways



- There are three basic data managing issues that are easily handled in an Excel file: recruitment, participant information and labelling
- Recruitment data management is focused on keeping track of who, how and when you contacted potential participants. It also documents potential participants' contact information and the date, time, and location of scheduled interviews
- Participant information data management documents your interviewees, including their name, contact information, demographic information (from a demographic survey, discussed previously), any key reflections that you noted in the field and the status of the transcription
- Labelling includes properly identifying your materials, including sources, dates, locations, and contact information

Experienced researchers are well aware of the mountains of data that quickly pile up over the course of a research study. Unless you have an encyclopaedic memory, the people, places, strange events, locations, and reflections can become unmanageable unless you have a good system in place to store and organize your interview data.

Below we present some fairly ‘low-tech’ and user-friendly, easy-to-implement options that can be generated in Excel for more novice qualitative researchers who are not yet familiar with various computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) options. If you are familiar with [CAQDAS](#) options, you are already aware that these programs allow you to store audio and video recordings, transcripts, photos, journal articles, and other information pertaining to your interview study. We discuss these software options more in [Chapter 9](#).

There are three basic data managing issues that are easily handled in an Excel file: recruitment, participant information, and labelling.

Recruitment data management

Once you have identified your sample of participants, you should keep track of a list of potential interviewees and their contact information. You may also need to keep track of when you contacted them, the number of contact attempts, whether they agreed to participate or not and whether they asked you to phone them back at a more convenient time. If they agreed to participate in an interview, you will want to record the date, time, and location of the interview ([Table 5.20](#)). You may also want to create a colour-coding or shorthand system so you can quickly identify the status of the potential interviewee.

Maintaining good records has the added benefit of quantifying how successful your recruitment efforts are. If you find that few people have agreed to participate, you should retool your approach, your letter of information or method of recruiting.

Table 5.20 Template: Recruitment data management

| Name | Phone number | Address | Date of mailed introduction letter | Phone call attempts | Interview status | Other |
|------------|--------------|-------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| J. Peters | 888-8765 | 11 Chestnut Drive | March 1 | March 7 March 12 | Not interested; do not contact again | |
| P. Jenkins | 888-6543 | 20 Walnut Street | March 1 | March 7 | March 15 1 pm Shakespeare's coffee shop | Send reminder email Tuesday |
| R. Rose | 777-6543 | 15 Lake Drive | March 1 | March 7 March 12 | Interested, but on vacation for 2 weeks. Call back April 1 to schedule an interview | |

Participant information data management

Once you have conducted an interview, you will need to develop some kind of system to keep track of your interviewees, including their name, contact information, demographic information (from a demographic survey, discussed above), any key reflections that you noted in the field and the status of the transcription. Even if you are at the stage of assigning pseudonyms, it is still a good idea to keep at least one master file of your informants' names and contact information in case you need to reach out to them at another time. This master file should be kept in a secure location that is only accessible to you or other people who have been cleared for access. Most, if not all, of this information can be housed in an Excel sheet ([Table 5.21](#)).

Table 5.21 Participant information data management

| Name | Pseudonym | Phone number | Address | Interview date | Notes/reflections | Transcript status | Age | MaritaStat |
|------|-----------|--------------|---------|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----|------------|
| | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | |

Quick tip: The added-value of good record keeping

Using the demographic survey and participant information data management spreadsheet, you will be able to quickly create a variety of summary charts that contain key pieces of information about your participants. These charts provide a snapshot of your participants, and help you and your readers keep track of your interviewees. These charts are routinely included in books, journal articles, and theses that draw on qualitative data.

Example: Interviews

| Name | Role | Sex | School name | School type | Number of interviewees | Total interviews |
|---------|------|-----|------------------|-------------|------------------------|------------------|
| Simone | P | F | Verona Street | JK-6 | 1 | 3 |
| Richard | T | M | West End Drive | JK-8 | 1 | 2 |
| David | CYW | M | Parkville Avenue | JK-8 | 1 | 3 |
| Whitney | VP | F | Parkville Avenue | JK-8 | 1 | 2 |
| Total | | | | | 4 | 10 |

Names: Pseudonyms are used.

Roles: P = Principal; VP = Vice-Principal; T = Teacher; CYW = Child and Youth Worker.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined concrete strategies for developing an interview study. We reviewed the main types of interviews, including conversational and fixed response and the main methods of interviewing, including face-to-face and internet interviewing. Next, we discussed various kinds of hardware and software options. We then turned to the heart of the chapter – developing an interview schedule. In this section we detailed the key steps, considerations and strategies for crafting interview questions and ordering and bundling questions. We also outlined specific interview techniques that will improve the quality of your interview. Finally, we addressed transcription decisions and provided you with important data management tools. As we noted in the introduction, you should return to the guidelines outlined in [Chapters 3 and 4](#) to critically evaluate every dimension of your project, including your research design and whether you have reached ‘saturation’.

Now that you have the tools you need to conduct an interview study, the [next chapter](#) is on the cousin of this approach: focus groups. Focus groups are a useful standalone or complementary data collection tool. Focus groups have several advantages, including the ability to interview several people at once. By the end of the [next chapter](#), you will have the tools you need to design and execute a focus group.

FURTHER SUGGESTED READING

Archibald, M., Ambagtsheer, R., Casey, M., & Lawless, M. (2019). Using Zoom videoconferencing for qualitative data collection: Perceptions and experiences of researchers and participants. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, 160940691987459–. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919874596>

Communication technologies such as Zoom, Skype, and Teams offer researchers another way to reach their participants. This article explores one of these videoconferencing platforms – Zoom – to examine how it impacts on the data collection experience for both the researcher and participants. Despite a few technology issues, the authors found that it was a viable data collection tool.

Constantinou, C. S., Georgiou, M., & Perdikogianni, M. (2017). A comparative method for themes saturation (CoMeTS) in qualitative interviews. *Qualitative Research*, 17(5), 571–588. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794116686650>

Social scientists largely agree that saturation of data is evidence of rigour in qualitative research. This article describes a new method for achieving saturation using interviews called Comparative Method for Themes Saturation (CoMeTS). This method requires all themes from all interviews to be compared with each other, and the sequence of interviews to be reordered multiple times in order to check saturation again.

Jerolmack, C., & Khan, S. (2014). Talk is cheap: Ethnography and the attitudinal fallacy. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 43(2), 178–209. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124114523396>

This article addresses a central question that arises from interview studies: Is what people say a good predictor of what they actually do? The authors examine the ‘attitude–behavior problem’ and argue that self-reports are of limited value if you want to understand how people act and interact.

Roulston, K., deMarrais, K., & Lewis, J. B. (2003). Learning to interview in the social sciences. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9(4), 643–668.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403252736>

How do novice researchers develop their interview skills? This article provides an overview of postgraduate students' experiences during an intensive 15-day interview course. Some of the challenges they found include unexpected participant behaviours, dealing with the consequences of their own actions and subjective responses, constructing and delivering questions, and handling sensitive research topics. Tips are given on how to deal with these challenges.

SAGE CASE STUDIES

Gowin, M., Maness, S., Larson, D. J., Branscum, P., & Cheney, M. K. (2020). Conducting qualitative research in hard-to-reach young adults using online recruitment and interviewing. In SAGE Research Methods Cases.
www.doi.org/10.4135/9781529741032

Scanlan, C. (2020). Preparing for the unanticipated: Challenges in conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews. In SAGE Research Methods Cases.
www.doi.org/10.4135/9781529719208

van der Hoorn, B. (2019). Studying the 'lived experience' of project managing using photo elicitation and semi-structured interviews. In SAGE Research Methods Cases.
www.doi.org/10.4135/9781526464668

Wilhoit, E. D. (2019). Investigating materiality and meaning in workspaces through photo-elicitation interviews. In SAGE Research Methods Cases.
www.doi.org/10.4135/9781526462411

KEY TERMS

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| <u>Asynchronous Internet Interview</u> | <u>Methodological Memos</u> | <u>Summative Memos</u> |
| <u>Conversational Interview</u> | <u>Narrative Interview</u> | <u>Synchronous Internet Interview</u> |
| <u>De-naturalist Transcription</u> | <u>Naturalist Transcription</u> | <u>Telephone Interview</u> |
| <u>Demographic Survey</u> | <u>Personal Memos</u> | <u>Theoretical Memos</u> |
| <u>Descriptive Questions</u> | <u>Photo or Video Auto-Driven</u> | <u>Theoretical Questions</u> |
| <u>Face-to-Face Interview</u> | <u>Photo or Video Elicitation</u> | <u>Theoretical Bundling of Questions</u> |
| <u>Fixed Response Interview</u> | <u>Photo or Video Interview</u> | <u>Transition Statements</u> |

| | | |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|
| <u>Internet Interview</u> | <u>Rapport</u> | <u>Visual Probes</u> |
| <u>Interview Schedule</u> | <u>Semi-Structured Interview</u> | <u>Verbal Probes</u> |

6 HOW TO DO FOCUS GROUPS: MAKING THE MOST OF GROUP PROCESSES

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter you will have the tools to:

- Understand the advantages and disadvantages of focus group discussions
- Develop a focus group discussion guide
- Choose a location for your focus group
- Moderate a focus group

Chapter summary

This chapter presents information on focus groups, including key considerations for the focus group composition, group dynamics and the location of the focus group interview. It outlines the steps needed to create an effective interview discussion guide. It also outlines the main roles in the focus group interview, including that of moderator and that of note-taker. The chapter then presents information on selecting a location to host the focus group. It also outlines some of the advantages and disadvantages of using a focus group discussion.

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS A FOCUS GROUP?

Khan and Manderson (1992) describe focus groups as a method for 'describing and understanding' a 'particular issue from the perspective of the group's participants' (p. 57). Focus groups can be used for exploratory research, explanatory research, evaluative research or policy-oriented research (Hennink et al., 2011). Focus groups are used as a standalone method or a component of a larger study. They are frequently paired with quantitative data or other qualitative methods such as survey research or in-depth personal interviews.

Focus groups are often referred to as 'focus group interviews' or 'focus group discussions'. Each term conveys an important piece of what focus groups are: an opportunity for several participants to interact with one another and have a conversation in a group setting. The key point, however, is to remember that a focus group captures a group process; it allows researchers to observe 'how an issue is discussed, how participants influence each other or how a strategy or an outcome is decided' (Hennink et al., 2011, p. 138).

Focus groups are not merely what individual respondents are saying about a particular topic, but also how their thoughts, feelings, and opinions were formulated and shared (Morgan, 2012). David Morgan (featured in this chapter) emphasizes the principle of **common ground**. When considering the group size, composition, and (potential) dynamics, what really matters is that the participants can relate to the topic

and have a basis for understanding each other's opinion (even if they disagree). Bringing together people based on their shared knowledge and interest has numerous benefits, including encouraging participants to respond more spontaneously.

In this chapter, we will walk you through the important steps that are involved in conducting a focus group, including making decisions about the composition of the group, formulating the discussion guide and managing group dynamics.

1. *Step One: Types of Focus Groups*: Determine whether your research objectives are best served by conducting online or in-person focus groups.
2. *Step Two: Group Size and Sample Size*: The size and number of focus groups will be determined by the nature and range of topics you want to cover and the composition of the participant pool.
3. *Step Three: Group Composition*: The degree to which focus groups are homogeneous or heterogeneous will be determined by research objectives and the nature of the topic under investigation.
4. *Step Four: Group Dynamics*: Group dynamics must be managed so all participants can have an equal opportunity to share their thoughts.
5. *Step Five: Incentives*: Consider offering incentives to their participants, such as refreshments.
6. *Step Six: Roles*: You should arrange for two to three researchers to play one of the following roles: moderator (main interviewer) and a note-taker. If possible, a second interviewer can help manage the discussion and help with parts of the focus group (e.g. lead or support a group activity).
7. *Step Seven: Selecting a Location*: You should select a location that is easily accessible for participants and free from avoidable distractions.
8. *Step Eight: Discussion Guide*: The basic structure of a focus group and interview guide are similar; however, they are designed to generate group discussion. There are fewer questions, and you should avoid asking questions that are too personal.
9. *Step Nine: Recording*: Along with a note-taker, video or audio recording of focus group discussions allow for more detailed analyses.

In earlier chapters we have discussed the foundational issues including conceptualization ([Chapter 2](#)) and research design, saturation, and sampling ([Chapters 3](#) and [4](#)). This chapter builds on this discussion and assumes that you have already done a lot of earlier 'heavy lifting': you have identified the research problem you want to solve, crafted researchable research questions, determined that focus groups are the best way to answer your research question over other options and have developed a defensible sampling strategy.

STEP ONE: TYPES OF FOCUS GROUPS

Key takeaways



- Focus groups come in two basic varieties: face-to-face and online focus groups
- The benefits and challenges of any method are highly contingent on factors such as the skill of the focus group moderator

There is no such thing as a perfect or problem-free method. It is important to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages when planning your methodology in order to accentuate the strengths and minimize the weaknesses within your project.

Additionally, it will allow you to ensure that you are choosing to use focus groups for the right reasons (Berg and Lune, 2012; Bryman et al., 2012; Hennink, 2007; Hennink et al., 2011; Holloway & Wheeler, 2010; Liamputtong, 2009; McParland & Flowers, 2011; Morgan, 2012; Stewart et al., 2007). Focus group interviews provide the researcher with less control over the proceedings than is available during a personal interview. Some researchers see this as a disadvantage, though others see the lack of researcher control and the group's influence over the direction as being advantageous (Bryman et al., 2012).

Table 6.1 Focus groups: potential benefits and challenges

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <p>Potential Benefits</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants are able to question one another's reasoning. • Results may be more realistic or naturalistic than in an interview because people may challenge opinions and views in real life. • A wide variety of perspectives on one issue may be generated at one time; insights may be generated about the sources of motivations and behaviours. • There is opportunity to witness interactions and uncover how meaning is jointly constructed and shared collectively. • Issues are debated and justified; new issues can be identified. • Individuals may feel more comfortable sharing perspectives than in face-to-face interviews. • Participants can ask questions and achieve clarification easily, which reduces the opportunity for misunderstanding. • Focus groups can be used for a wide variety of topics, research questions, and types of groups. |
| <p>Potential Challenges</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals may modify what they have said after hearing someone else's opinions. • If certain individuals are either domineering or too quiet, the conversation could turn to an argument; group dynamics could hinder the participation of some members. • The amount of data that is produced may be so great that it is difficult to manage. • Researcher control is limited once the group is engaged in the conversation. • Attitudes and perspectives may become more extreme and polarized after the discussion. • Participants could potentially conform to the ideas of the other group members, or not share their personal views and opinions in front of others. • Generalizations to larger populations can be problematic because there are small numbers of individuals participating and because the group members' responses are not independent of one another. |

- Bias may occur if the moderator – whether knowingly or unknowingly – shows favour toward certain types of answers over others.
- A limited number of questions can be asked in the allotted time.
- Only group responses, not individual responses, are obtained.

In addition to the more generic benefits and challenges associated with focus groups, you should also consider the method or medium that is used to conduct the focus group. We have organized the two varieties of focus group methods into two categories: in-person and remote interviews. We have made this distinction simply to capture the geographic proximity between you and your participants since each category of interviewing shares many of the same potential benefits and challenges. Like any method, the benefits and challenges are contingent upon a variety of factors including the questions that are asked, the composition of the group and ability of the researcher to manage a group discussion (and many personalities!).

Typically, one to two hours is an ideal length for a focus group discussion; anything less will not provide enough data, and anything longer can become cumbersome to your participants. Depending on the composition of the participant group (e.g. children) and whether it is in-person or remote may also factor into the amount of time you plan for.

Table 6.2 Methods of focus groups

| | Potential benefits | Potential challenges |
|-------------------------------|---|---|
| In-person focus groups | | |
| Face-to-face | <p>Stronger rapport with participants</p> <p>Ability to see non-verbal communication</p> <p>More easily build individual and group activities</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviewer effect • Cost • Time • Convenience and flexibility • Safety • Lower representation of difficult to reach populations |
| Remote focus groups | | |

| | Potential benefits | Potential challenges |
|--|--|---|
| Online apps that support audio and video calling (e.g. Zoom) | <p>Cost</p> <p>Convenience and flexibility</p> <p>May be more appropriate or desirable for sensitive, painful, or embarrassing topics</p> <p>Improve representation of difficult to reach populations</p> <p>Safety</p> <p>Closed capture features (some programs)</p> <p>Ease of recording video and audio</p> <p>Automatically transcribed data (some programs)</p> <p>Functions that turn off sound and video can allow participants to participate more easily (e.g. turn off sound if he needs to speak to his child)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviewer effect • Weaker rapport with participants • Inability to see non-verbal communication • Time • Lower representation of less technology-savvy participants • Challenges managing conversation • Less 'natural' or spontaneous interactions (e.g. only one participant can speak at a time; more 'turn taking') • Functions that turn off sound and video can limit interactions and observations (e.g. participant can 'check out') |

STEP TWO: GROUP SIZE AND SAMPLE SIZE

Key takeaways



- Group size should be determined by the subject of the research
- The number of focus group discussions and length of each is determined by the diversity of the topic and the point at which **saturation** is reached

Group size

There is no 'right answer' when it comes to the question: How many people should be in a focus group? The existing research suggests anywhere from as few as four to as many as 12 participants (Warren & Karner, 2010). Morgan (1998) suggests 6–10 members, but he elaborates that the number of participants truly depends on the topic at hand. Smaller groups are better if the topic is of an emotional nature or when you can expect that each individual will have a lot to say on the particular topic. Larger groups are better for more general topics, and when the researcher wants to hear brief thoughts from as many people as possible. Smaller groups are easier for a [moderator](#) to manage, but the group is more vulnerable to negative group dynamics (for example, if there are one or two domineering participants, this will be quite noticeable if there are only five participants in total). Larger groups will have a greater number of opinions, experiences, and stories to share, but it may take some time to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings. [Table 6.3](#) outlines when to choose a smaller group or a larger group.

Number of group discussions

No matter what your topic is, one focus group will not be sufficient. Just as one interview does not tell you a lot about what people, in general, think or feel about a subject, having only one focus group may not be representative of other groups. However, you do not want to have too many focus groups either! Morgan (2012) suggests that most projects should consist of four to six focus groups but notes that the number will vary dependent on both the range of topics and the diversity of participants. A focus group that is more structured and homogeneous will require fewer focus groups (three to six range) than a focus group that poses more open-ended questions and includes a more diverse sample of participants (four to eight range). You should return to [Chapter 3](#) and review saturation, sampling, and sample size guidelines for focus groups, keeping additional considerations outlined in [Table 6.3](#) in mind.

Table 6.3 Additional considerations for determining group size

| Small groups | Large groups |
|---|---|
| Emotionally charged topics | Neutral topics |
| Each participant has more time to discuss | Wider range of responses, ideas, opinions |
| (May be) easier for moderators to manage heated discussions | (May be) easier for moderators to manage (e.g. less 'dead air') |
| Limited range of experiences to be shared | Exploratory research |
| May be more or less vulnerable to group dynamics | May be more or less vulnerable to group dynamics |

STEP THREE: GROUP COMPOSITION

Key takeaways



- Groups can be [homogeneous](#) or [heterogeneous](#)

- Decisions about the nature of the group are contingent upon the nature of your research topic and research question(s)

The composition of the group will depend on the goals of your research. In some cases, having a **homogeneous group** will be most beneficial, but in other cases a **heterogeneous group** will provide the greatest information. Regardless of the group's makeup, the goal is to create a comfortable environment so that productive discussion can occur.

When planning your groups, think about demographic information such as age, race, sex, social class, religion, income, education, and so on. It is important to have all relevant groups represented, which means you will need to have a number of focus group discussions to ensure everyone is included and as many different perspectives as possible can be captured. But you will need to decide whether your groups should be homogeneous or heterogeneous. For topics like perceptions of school violence, a heterogeneous group would be a great way to gain a number of different views from people of all ages, races, and so on. However, for exploring a topic such as intimate partner violence, it would not be a good idea to have men and women in the same group; therefore, a homogeneous group would be the best choice.

Group homogeneity: common ground

A homogeneous group is beneficial because the participants are often willing to share their thoughts, feelings, and opinions with others who are similar to them and can understand their point of view. One benefit of homogeneous groups occurs during data analysis; the researcher can determine whether or how participants vary in how they discuss or respond to a topic or issue (Hennink et al., 2011).

Morgan discusses the principle of common ground. He challenges the common belief that group composition should be primarily viewed along demographic lines (e.g. gender, race). Instead, he emphasizes the importance of bringing together participants who share an understanding and interest about a particular topic (e.g. bringing together a group of gamers to talk about their industry).

Common Ground

David L. Morgan

When I first began doing focus groups in the 1980s, most of what we knew came from marketing researchers, who typically used relatively large groups and relatively structured approaches to moderating those groups. Since then, I and others have adapted focus groups for research in the social sciences, and I will highlight three lessons I have learned in that process. One lesson relates to group size, which has become much smaller than it was 30 years ago, and another relates to moderating style, which has become less structured over time. I will begin, however, with lessons about the importance of group composition, because each of the other two developments depends on what we have learned in that regard.

As this chapter emphasizes, group composition is typically discussed in terms of homogeneity and heterogeneity. One limitation of this approach, however, is that it is possible to misinterpret homogeneity strictly in terms of demographic characteristics, when what really matters is how similar the participants are with regard to the research topic. A term that has emerged to capture this distinction is the extent to which participants share *common ground*. The point of common ground is that participants can easily understand not only what others have to say about the research topic but also why someone might feel

the way they do. So, even if they have different perspectives on or experiences with the research topic, they can still relate to each other in a way that generates mutual interest.

This mutual interest is important because it helps produce a lively conversation. When I first began working with focus groups, I worried that if the participants were too similar with regard to the topic, they would not have very much to say. Instead, I have learned that the more common ground people share, the more interested they are in what each other has to say. What might seem like small differences to an outside observer can be fascinating to those whose lives are immersed in a topic. Of course, the range of things that very similar participants have to say may not be of as much interest to the researcher as a more diverse group might be, but there is very little chance that such similarity will limit the participants' own interest in their discussion.

The idea of common ground also helps answer the question of when differences between participants are too large. If those differences will limit their ability to understand each other's views on a topic, then there is too little common ground. And if they are unlikely to accept each other's beliefs and preferences, that is equally unworkable. So, thinking in terms of common ground and participants' comfort level are useful strategies for making decisions about group composition.

Common ground also plays a role in making decisions about group size. When I first became involved with focus groups, it was common to hear marketing researchers recommend that there should be 10–12 participants. Now, smaller groups have become the norm. The reason is that social science researchers typically work with topics that have more meaning to participants, and when something is important in your life, you have both more to say about it and more interest in what others say. This produces an active give and take among the participants as they compare their own opinions and experience to what others have already shared in the ongoing conversation. In addition, the more common ground that participants share, the less likely there is to be a problem with one or two participants dominating the discussion, because more mutual understanding often leads to more mutual respect.

Finally, shifting from a more structured to a less structured moderating style is also possible when participants share a clear interest in the topic. As this chapter notes, approaches to moderating are frequently compared along a dimension from less structured, where the moderator gives the group a substantial amount of control over its discussion, to more structured, where the moderator tends to be in control of the discussion. I begin by establishing my moderating style as part of my introduction of the research to the participants. One part of those instructions includes a description of my role and theirs during the discussion. I describe my role as a 'learner' rather than a 'director', and I tell them that they will be the ones who are largely in charge of their own discussion. I also reassure them that the questions I will be asking should be easy for them to answer and interesting to discuss.

From this perspective, it is the questions rather than the moderator that have the most influence on the participants' group dynamics. My typical moderating strategy is to pay particular attention to the question that starts the discussion, so that every participant can easily respond in ways that will motivate the others to join in. Frequently, a group will spontaneously move on to one of my other questions, and when this happens I simply encourage them to continue in that direction. Of course, there are times when I want to probe for more material on a topic, and times when the participants get off topic and I need to pull them back, but overall I find it quite easy to carry out a semi-structured moderating strategy.

So, as my approach to focus groups has evolved over the years, I now pay more attention to participants' common ground, use smaller groups who all share an interest in the topic and rely on strong interview questions that let me

pursue a less structured moderating style. Note that these choices rely heavily on things that happen during the planning phase of the research. Rather than trying to perform magic as a moderator, I put as much effort as possible into research design that help the participants develop their own ongoing interaction. That preparation provides me with the opportunity to sit back and listen and learn during the group, rather than feeling like it is my job to manage the discussion.

Questions for reflection

1. What are the key 'takeaway' lessons?
2. How does the principle of common ground differ from viewing group composition as a function of demographics or other characteristics?
3. What are some of the benefits of taking a common ground approach? In what way does it influence aspects such as group size and the role of the moderator?

Group homogeneity: demographic or other characteristics

The principle of common ground serves a variety of research topics well. There are, however, projects that lend themselves to **segmenting** participants by characteristic-like gender. Using the example of intimate partner violence, having groups for male participants and groups for female participants is one way to ensure that participants feel comfortable sharing their views within the focus group setting (for examples, see Fern, 2001; Hennink, 2007; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1997). Some projects may also be specifically focused on examining differences along these characteristics: for example, how men and women differ on a particular topic, or how older men's views differ from younger men's views.

The downside of this approach, on the other hand, is that the total number of focus groups necessary to achieve **saturation** may multiply greatly; it is unlikely that only one group per segment will be enough to gather strong data (Knodel, 1993; Morgan, 2012). And as Morgan's contribution points to, segmenting participants by a characteristic-like age may mean missing the variety of ways people share common ground on a particular topic.

Group heterogeneity

A heterogeneous group allows for different views and opinions to bubble to the surface. This can open up the dialogue, allowing individuals to explain why they hold a particular viewpoint. It might also create some disagreement among the participants, which will ensure that there are varied opinions presented. The more explanation that is given for why individuals hold their views and opinions, the richer the data will be.

Should the participants know one another? This is one aspect of focus groups that is widely debated, and there are pros and cons to each answer. On the one hand, sometimes attempting to recruit individuals who have no connection to one another is challenging. Participants may not want to come and chat about their opinions and feelings without having a friend, co-worker, or family member present. Holbrook and Jackson (1996) reported that they had great difficulty when attempting to find respondents with no personal connection, as nobody wanted to participate alone. On the other hand, when '**natural groups**' are utilized – those that occur on their own without the influence of the researcher, such as a group of friends, students, or co-workers – people may not share as detailed information about their opinions and experiences, assuming that the other group members already understand where they are coming from. Morgan (1998) suggested that in cases where the details and

background are important, then a group of strangers is a better option than a natural group (Bryman et al., 2012). However, in certain contexts (for example, dense neighbourhoods or small organizations), it is next to impossible to draw a sample where the respondents are strangers.

Use of pre-existing groups

Groups that already exist, such as through a particular social group or even a counselling group, can be recruited for focus group discussions. In these situations, recruitment is usually quite easy, and often **rappport** already exists within the group. However, participants will also have knowledge about one another. This can be a benefit, for example, if respondents are able to remind each other of details that they may have forgotten; it can also be a drawback, as participants may not share as much information, assuming that their peers already know what they were going to say. There is also a concern about confidentiality. Individuals may not share as much personal information because they do not want their group members to know particular things about them or their family.

STEP FOUR: GROUP DYNAMICS

Key takeaways



- The group dynamics must be managed so all participants can have an equal opportunity to share their thoughts
- The group interactions are an important part of focus group research and are key components of the data

Have you ever held back from sharing your opinion with others because of the group that you were in? Maybe you did not want to draw attention to yourself, so you did not share your thoughts or feelings. Or maybe you spoke up in order to be different from the rest of the group and stand out from the crowd. This happens in focus group research as well. How people work as a group and how they present themselves in a group setting can vary and is something the researcher must take into consideration.

In a personal interview, respondents will certainly act differently than in a small group. Hollander (2004) found that men and women interacted differently, possibly as a result of the diversity of the small group. In conversations about violence, women shared stories about their concerns whereas men did not. Similarly, Karner (1995) found that men's presentation of self differed greatly between personal interviews and focus groups; during personal interviews the men shared much more emotion, but in the focus group setting they attempted to appear tough or strong (Warren & Karner, 2010).

Though each group will be different, there are some personality types that will likely emerge within each focus group interview. Hennink et al. (2011) call these the **quiet participant**, **dominant participant**, **rambling participant**, and **self-appointed expert**. [Table 6.4](#) outlines the characteristics of each of these participant personalities, as well as some strategies that the moderator can use to manage them (adapted from Hennink et al., 2011, pp. 160–161).

Table 6.4 Types of participations and methods of management

| | Characteristics | Facilitation tips |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| Dominant participant | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monopolize discussion First to respond Respond to every question, even if they have nothing productive to contribute Interrupt other participants | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Body language: Turn away from participant; look at other participants; avoid eye contact Verbal cues: Thank participant and ask others to contribute to discussion |
| Quiet participant | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only speak when asked directly Remain quiet during discussion Only provide short answers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Body language: Turn toward participant, smile and nod while they answer Verbal cues: Probe for more detail; reinforce that everyone's opinions are valued; ask person directly if they have anything to share |
| Rambling participant | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monopolizes discussion Provides very long, elaborate answers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Body language: Turn away from participant; look at other participants; avoid eye contact Verbal cues: Interrupt participant by thanking them; redirect discussion and invite others to share |
| Self-appointed expert | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> May state outright that they are an expert/have extensive knowledge on the subject State their opinions as though they are facts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Verbal cues: Moderator should reiterate that everyone's values are encouraged and respected, and that everyone in the group is an expert on the subject |

Managing the group can be challenging. If certain individuals are either domineering or too quiet, the whole point of a focus group is lost. The facilitator needs to step in to actively encourage the quiet participants to share their thoughts, and to keep the domineering participants at bay. Statements like 'That's an interesting opinion on the topic. Does anyone else have an opinion?' can help keep the conversation flowing.

Encouraging group discussion, and not merely having each respondent answer in turn is crucial to conducting a focus group interview. Though it is considered an interview, a focus group is considered a **non-directive interview**, where the goal is to gather data from the discussion, any disagreement, and the interactions among participants (Hennink et al., 2011). Ample discussion and interaction will ensure that respondents are probing each other, asking for clarification or for additional information to back up their point (in other words, doing the job of the moderator!). On the one hand, if the respondents disagree and question one another, the researcher is able to see various viewpoints and understand diverse perspectives on the topic. On the other hand, if the respondents agree with one another, the researcher can feel

confident that their data is supported. This is only achieved, though, when there is ample discussion and interaction among the group members.

Group interaction

The interactions within the groups are an important part of the focus group process and the data to be gathered and analysed. In order to fully understand how the focus group participants view the issues under discussion, noting the types of interactions, the agreements and the disagreements is crucial. Hollander (2004) argues:

the relationships among the participants and between the participants and the facilitator, as well as the larger social structures within which the discussion takes place – affect the data that are generated in ways that have not yet been widely acknowledged by focus group researchers. (p. 603)

Since it is the group environment itself that brings about such a wide range of issues and variety of perspectives, the details from the group interactions are key components of the data.

STEP FIVE: INCENTIVES

Key takeaway



- When planning focus group interviews, the researcher should consider offering incentives to their participants, such as money or food

Many focus groups will pay respondents for their time or provide them with other incentives such as a gift card to a local establishment (e.g. a coffee shop or bookstore) or a water bottle or travel mug. This serves to thank the respondent for their time and effort. Any incentives that are being used should be highlighted during recruitment to help entice respondents.

How much should you offer? Think about how long you expect your respondents to be there for, how far they have to travel, whether they will have had to hire a babysitter, and so on. Thinking about your respondents and their life situations will help you answer this question. For example, if you are interviewing parents of small children, you know that they will have to arrange for a babysitter and pay them; work this into your compensation. Remember that your respondents are doing you a favour by participating. Any incentives or payment offered should be a reflection of their sacrifice.

Offering snacks or a light meal after the focus group is a nice way to thank your respondents for their participation, and to provide some closure to the group. If food will be offered, this can be mentioned to your respondents during recruitment so that they know whether or not they should pack their own snacks, and also so they can inform you of any serious dietary concerns. Food can be put out before the focus group as a way of encouraging respondents to mingle and meet. It also gives them something to do in the awkward few minutes before the focus group discussion begins. However, food can serve as a distraction if the respondents bring it to the table. Imagine someone taking a large bite of a sandwich and then trying to share their opinion ... it is not an ideal situation. Refreshments can cause other challenges,

specifically if the focus group respondents include individuals from religious or cultural communities, where a certain preparation might be required or a particular type of food should not be consumed (Barbour, 2018). At the very least, offer your respondents some water so that they do not feel parched while they are talking.

STEP SIX: ROLES

Key takeaways



- There are three main roles in a focus group interview: the **moderator**, the **second interviewer**, and the **note-taker**
- The style and facilitation skills of the moderator are key for an effective focus group discussion and managing the group dynamics
- The moderator has four main tasks: **introductory tasks**, **ethical tasks**, **group cohesion tasks**, and **facilitating discussion tasks**

The moderator

The **moderator** plays a key role in the successful execution of a focus group interview. The moderator serves to guide the questioning of the group, and also plays the role of a facilitator to ensure that discussion occurs, that each participant's voice is shared and that the conversation stays on topic. The moderator's role is similar to the interviewer's role in an in-depth interview, as they are both tasked with developing **rapport**, asking questions, responding to the flow of discussion and probing for detail. The moderator is also tasked with ensuring that a group of respondents are all able to share their views, speak their opinions and not dominate the group, and with managing the group dynamics that will inevitably differ with each group of people. The amount and type of direction that the moderator provides can influence both the quality and the type of data that comes from the group (Stewart et al., 2007).

Hennink et al. (2011) outline four main tasks that moderators perform during a focus group interview: (1) **introductory tasks**; (2) **ethical tasks**; (3) **group cohesion tasks**; (4) **facilitating discussion tasks**. Introductory tasks are those that help to welcome the group and set up what the next hour or two will be about for the participants. The moderator should be sure to introduce themselves, and also the note-taker, or any other individuals that are present. They should broadly outline the research and how the information gathered from the focus group will eventually be used. The moderator should outline any guidelines or rules for how the focus group participants should conduct themselves. Ethical tasks include ensuring informed consent and dealing with any questions regarding tape recording, confidentiality, or data storage. The moderator should make sure that they receive consent from each member of the focus group discussion. Group cohesion tasks are related to creating an encouraging and welcoming environment where all members feel comfortable, including positive body language and creating a friendly atmosphere. Finally, facilitating discussion tasks include managing the group dynamics as they arise, probing all group members to ensure thorough responses, ensuring the discussion remains focused on the research topic, and watching the timing of the questions and overall discussion.

The level of structure that the focus group takes will impact on the moderator's role and the style of discussion. A focus group with more structure will need a moderator who has a high level of control over the group. The moderator will have to control the

questions and the topics, and to focus the group discussion. The moderator can also take control of the group dynamics, facilitating the interactions among participants and ensuring that there is equal participation (Morgan, 2012). Groups with less structure have more flow to the discussion, as the moderator can let the participants steer the conversation without much interference. In this instance, some participants may dominate the conversation while others may barely share anything at all. The biggest difference between the two forms of groups is that 'a less structured discussion means that the group can pursue its own interests, while a more structured approach means that the moderator imposes the researcher's interests' (Morgan, 2012, p. 277). Finding a balance with the level of structure is often best for both the researcher and the participants.

When should the moderator intervene? This is a tricky question. Minimal intervention is the best situation, as it will allow the conversation to flow as naturally as possible. However, sometimes the discussion can go completely off topic and the moderator needs to bring the group back to task. The moderator should be careful in these instances, as seemingly unrelated conversations can sometimes actually be peripherally related to the topic at hand and might reveal some significant information. The moderator's main task is to facilitate data collection, and they should be familiar with the research to a point that they can make the best decision whether to intervene or allow the discussion to continue. Hennink et al. (2011) note that 'a focus group discussion is therefore working effectively when the moderator has limited input yet is subtly managing the discussion' (p. 159).

A word of caution: research has demonstrated that the **deference effect** can be present in focus groups. The deference effect is when respondents share information that they think the moderator wants them to share instead of what they really want to say (Bernard, 1994). The moderator should be careful to remain impartial, and to encourage both positive and negative opinions and viewpoints to avoid the deference effect occurring (Hennink et al., 2011).

Second interviewer/note-taker

It is wise to have a **second interviewer** and **note-taker** present in addition to the moderator. While the moderator is the person who will ask the main questions and keep the discussion flowing, the second interviewer can take on some of the peripheral tasks to ensure the conversation and activities run smoothly. The second interviewer can also play a supportive role such as writing notes on a chalk board and handing out any supplies needed for activities (e.g. paper, pens).

A note-taker – who should be used whether a second interviewer is present or not – writes down the key issues that are being discussed and takes down enough information to recreate the conversation in case the recording device fails or if the group refuses to allow the discussion to be recorded (Hennink et al., 2011). A note-taker can also keep a running record of who said what by jotting down the person's name and a short snippet of what the person said. These notes will be crucial when it comes time to finalize your transcript; you will be able to write in after the fact who said what and attribute key passages to each participant (rather than relying on your memory). The note-taker should also record any non-verbal information, such as the respondent's body language.

STEP SEVEN: SELECTING A LOCATION

Key takeaway



- Choose a location that is easily accessible for participants, is thoughtfully arranged and free from avoidable distractions

When focus groups occur on TV or in movies, they are usually based on market research and not social science research. They often take place in rooms with two-way mirrors, where the subjects are all sitting around a table discussing their views on a particular topic, and there are people behind the two-way mirror interpreting the responses. This is an option for the types of focus group interviews discussed in this chapter, but not many researchers have the facilities or money to conduct their focus groups in this type of location.

Focus groups can be conducted in a variety of locations to suit the needs of the researcher, research topic, and participants. You will want to make sure, though, that the location is quiet, private, easy to locate, and distraction free. The physical layout of both the group and the room are important aspects of the location to consider. Below are some key considerations when planning out where to hold the focus group discussion.

Proximity

Focus groups that are held in familiar and comfortable locations, such as a shopping mall or recreation centre are easy for participants to access, have ample parking, and are often perceived as more attractive to participants (Stewart et al., 2007). If a group of professionals, such as doctors or nurses, are being asked to participate, try to have the focus group at or near their place of work, such as a private conference room in the building where they work. If you use a location that requires paid parking, arrange to have your participants' parking validated or provide them with pre-paid parking passes to alleviate any financial burden on them. No matter what type of location you select, you should make sure that you visit it beforehand to ensure that it is physically accessible to all of your respondents (Barbour, 2018).

Focus groups outdoors

There will likely be more distractions to contend with outside (birds, bugs, wind) but depending on the topic you are studying, it may be more conducive to creating a comfortable environment for your participants. Be sure to inform your participants beforehand if you will conduct a focus group outside so they can wear the appropriate clothing, sunscreen, insect repellent, and so on. Microphones are sensitive to background noise, and a location that is windy, has traffic or even has a stream nearby could affect the quality of the tape recording.

Seating arrangement

Stewart et al. (2007) claim that respondents will feel most comfortable when they are seated around a table. A table serves as a barrier between respondents which can give more reserved members of the group a sense of comfort. It also gives each participant their own personal space and a location to put their hands, rest their elbows and place their food or water. A table also provides cover for legs and can make individuals feel more comfortable if they are in a group with both men and women. We recommend seating the participants in a circle or oval, so that everyone is a part of the discussion and can have eye contact with all the other respondents. This will help facilitate a true discussion. We also recommend that the moderator sit as a member at the table, so that they can facilitate the discussion in a smooth manner and see each of the respondents as well.

Name tags

One way of encouraging conversation and rapport among participants is to offer a name tag. It's best to only put first names on the tag to maintain as much privacy as possible. Having the name tags sit on the table facing the other respondents ensures that they are always visible, and not covered by a scarf or crossed arms, for example, which is one concern with name tags that are worn on the chest. Make sure that the moderator has a list of all participants' names, and where they are seated to ensure that they can address everyone personally.

Distractions

Be sure to eliminate as many physical distractions as possible. Wall decorations should be kept to a minimum, as paintings, artwork, or other decorations can serve as a distraction from the group conversation. If props are being used as part of the activities, try to keep them out of view until they are about to be used. If food and refreshments will be provided after the focus group, keep them out of sight or in another room so they do not attract the attention of hungry participants. Similarly, if you are having a catering company set up refreshments, make sure they do not come in to set up while you are in the middle of a focus group interview!

STEP EIGHT: THE DISCUSSION GUIDE

Key takeaways



- The discussion guide has four key parts: introductory remarks, opening questions, body questions and closing questions
- Probing respondents and having activities can help guide the discussion

Like the interview schedule discussed in [Chapter 5](#), the [discussion guide](#) includes all of the topics and questions that the researcher or moderator will ask during the focus group discussion. Unlike the interview schedule, the discussion guide should be shorter. You are directing the questions to a group of people and want to capture a wide range of views and opinions. Focus group discussion guides often include too much information and attempt to ask too many questions. This can turn the focus group interview into a group survey, as opposed to an interactive group discussion (Stewart et al., 2007). Because of the variety of participants within a focus group, the discussion guide should serve as a checklist to ensure topics are covered, even when they do not play out in the same order during the focus group discussion. Having a moderator who is flexible will allow for a more fluid discussion (Hennink et al., 2011).

A focus group discussion guide follows the structure of a funnel, beginning quite broadly and becoming more focused as the questions and discussion progress. Typically, the discussion guide will begin with introductory remarks, where administrative details are outlined along with a brief discussion of the research topic. This provides the participants with some idea of what to expect during the rest of their time together. Following the introductory remarks are some opening questions. These are usually general or broad questions, designed to develop rapport among the participants and make them feel at ease when sharing their opinions and ideas. These questions often do not add anything to the analysis; in fact, 'information from these questions is rarely analyzed' (Hennink et al., 2011, p. 144). Moving the group forward, the body questions become more focused and directly related to the central research issues addressed. These questions are the main thrust of the focus group, and from them you will generate the data for your analysis. Placing them towards the

middle of the focus group discussion ensures that the participants are more comfortable, relaxed, and honest with one another. The final section consists of closing questions which help to conclude the discussion. In addition to these main sections, the discussion guide often includes transition statements and probes (see [Chapter 5](#) for a more detailed discussion on transition statements). [Table 6.5](#) provides an overview of a general focus group discussion guide. Similar to advice we have given in other chapters, we emphasize the importance of ongoing reflection and making adjustments along the way. In the context of focus groups, the term [emergence](#) is used to describe the process of taking what you have learned in one focus group to adapt or improve your discussion guide and subsequent rounds of data collection.

Table 6.5 Generic focus group discussion guide

| |
|--|
| <i>Section One: Introductory Remarks</i> |
| A1 |
| <i>Transition Statement</i> |
| <i>Section Two: Opening Questions</i> |
| B1 Warm-up |
| B2 Warm-up |
| <i>Transition Statement</i> |
| <i>Section Three: The Body</i> |
| C1 Central |
| C2 Central |
| C3 Central |
| <i>Transition Statement</i> |
| <i>Section Three: Closing Questions</i> |
| D1 |

Section one: introductory remarks

The introductory remarks serve to provide your respondents with information about the research topic ([Table 6.6](#)). It also is an opportunity to discuss any administrative information, such as the use of a digital recorder. This section should outline how the interview process will occur, including the requirements for an open, honest and polite dialogue, that everyone will be encouraged and invited to participate, that questions can and should be answered by anyone, and that those who have a differing or dissenting opinion from the one presented should share their opinion as well (Berg & Lune, 2012).

Table 6.6 Section one: introductory remarks

1. Moderator introduces themselves/herself/himself, along with any other members of the research team and note-taker
2. Thank the participants for their participation
3. Provide a brief description of the research in broad terms
4. Establish the project's purpose
5. Establish how you will use the information
6. Handle administrative details including:
 - How long the focus group will take
 - Review and sign ethics forms

If applicable ask for permission to record the interview and for how you will use the recording

7. Ask the participants if they have any questions or concerns before the interview begins

Section two: opening questions

The opening questions allow the group to warm up to one another; these questions are designed to 'break the ice' ([Table 6.7](#)). Typically, the questions in this section are generally about a term or a concept related to the research. The moderator will take time to probe the respondents for complete answers and encourage them to answer in a conversational manner. This way, the opening questions also serve to teach the respondents how they should answer the remaining questions.

Example: 'A lot of our discussion today will focus on X. Can you describe your experiences with X? How do people you know/in your family feel about X?' Probe: 'Can you tell me what the term X means to you?'

Table 6.7 Section two: opening questions

1. Ask participants to introduce themselves
2. Ask general questions related to the main themes or concepts of the study
 - Take time to probe for complete answers, and encourage interaction and dialogue

Section three: the body

After a brief transition – either a question or statement – the respondents are directed to the *body* of the focus group discussion ([Table 6.8](#)). These are the key questions of the most importance to the research at hand. Typically, there are two or three main topics of discussion with two or three questions related to each topic. They are usually the most challenging questions for the respondents to answer, and can lead to debate, disagreement, or insightful discussion. This is the most important section of the focus group interview as most of the data for analysis will be generated from the responses to the body questions.

Table 6.8 Section three: the body

- | |
|---|
| 1. Introduce the first key topic of discussion |
| • Ask two or three questions about this topic |
| 2. Introduce the second key topic of discussion |
| • Ask two or three questions about this topic |
| 3. If there are any other key questions, ask them now |

Section four: closing questions

The questions in the closing section will once again be more general and provide some closure to the focus groups (Table 6.9). Often, the moderator will provide a brief overview of what has been discussed, summarizing the key points and insights that have been made, and then turn it back to the group to ensure that their opinions are being accurately reflected.

Example: 'We're now reaching the end of our conversation. Does anyone have anything that they would like to add to the discussion before we conclude? Is there anything you were hoping we would ask about, but we didn't? I would like to thank you for your participation in today's discussion. The opinions, views, and experiences you have shared are very valuable to the research process.'

Table 6.9 Section four: closing questions

1. Establish that the focus group interview is coming to an end
2. Summarize the key points and insights that have been made
3. Thank the respondents for their time
4. Remind the respondents of potential follow-up with the researcher or research team
5. If applicable, ask the respondents to fill out a post-discussion questionnaire and offer them some refreshments
6. Thank the respondents again

Probes

The use of probes during a focus group is an important way for the moderator to keep the group focused. The moderator can probe the respondents individually or the group as a whole. Table 6.10, adapted from Hennink et al. (2011), describes eight different types of probes used in focus group discussions.

Table 6.10 Probes

| Type of probe | Explanation | Examples |
|---------------|--|---|
| Individual | Prompt one individual to elaborate, clarify, or otherwise extend their statement. | Can you elaborate? Can you tell me what you mean by the term 'respect'? |
| Group | Ask the group as a whole to highlight a concern or perspective that one participant has raised and seek input from everyone. | Does anyone else want to respond to Emma's point? Does anyone have an example of that? |

| Type of probe | Explanation | Examples |
|---------------------|---|--|
| Group explanation | Ask the group as a whole to explain/elaborate on an issue when everyone is in agreement. | Is this everyone's experience? You all seem to understand 'X' in the same way. Can you explain it to me? |
| Ranking | Ask the participants to order a number of items. Follow up by asking why they placed them in that particular order. | Here is a list of ten types of school safety measures. Rank them in order from what you think will be most effective at preventing school crime and violence, to those that are least effective. |
| Participant gesture | Note a participant's body language or non-verbal cues to draw them into the conversation. | You look confused. What don't you understand? |
| Diversity | Ask the group for different or divergent views. | Does anyone have a similar/different perspective? |
| Silent | Remain silent for seven seconds. People are often uncomfortable with silence and will try to fill it by talking. | |
| Activities | Share an activity with the group. | See the section (below) on Activities. |

Additional information

Often, you will want to collect personal information from the focus group participants. You can collect demographic information either before or after the focus group. One suggestion is to have a brief questionnaire with demographic information (also called a **demographic survey**) ready for respondents to fill out when they arrive, so they have something to do while they are waiting for everyone to congregate. Some information, however, you will want to wait and collect after the focus group discussion has concluded. If you are doing a survey on the research topic, this should be done after the focus group discussion concludes so as to not potentially influence the discussion topics by raising issues before the focus group interview begins. At the close of the focus group discussion, you can direct the participants to fill out the post-discussion questionnaire, and to help themselves to some refreshments (if any will be provided). This provides a nice way to end the focus group and will make your respondents feel that their time and effort has been appreciated.

Interview schedule versus focus group discussion guide

You will note that there are similarities between an [interview schedule](#) and a focus group discussion guide, especially in terms of the organization of the questions. However, focus group questions are designed to be asked of a group and therefore should promote group discussion. This means that there will be fewer questions in a focus group discussion guide than in an interview guide. It also means that direct personal questions should be avoided (those are best for personal interviews). Focus group discussion questions should be open and conversational in nature (Hennink et al., 2011). The questions should be written so that participants can answer in various ways (not just 'yes' or 'no') and feel as though they are engaging in a conversation with one another. Use of group probing or an activity can help facilitate the discussion and make the participants feel more at ease (see below for more information on use of activities with focus groups).

Taking advantage of what you learn in one focus group and adapting the questions accordingly is referred to as 'emergence' (Morgan, 2012, p. 274). Morgan (2012) argues that 'standardization is actually a matter of degree' (p. 274), with predetermined and fixed questions on the one end of the spectrum, and emergent questions on the other end. Thus, the focus group discussion guide takes on a life of its own, changing and becoming more relevant with each focus group interview that takes place. Though standardization is advantageous – you can directly compare the results from one focus group to another if the questions are the same from group to group – there is a severe disadvantage when the questions are determined before entering the field, if they are not necessarily the most relevant for gathering data from the group (Morgan, 2012).

The discussion guide should be well developed, and even pre-tested on a small group (if you can, use your friends, colleagues, or classmates to help you pre-test the order and wording of questions). A discussion guide that is well developed will provide the moderator with the necessary information to introduce the research topic, open the discussion, develop rapport within the group and eventually close the discussion. Whenever possible, the moderator should facilitate the pre-test so that they can have practice with the questions and topics. Some questions to consider during the pre-testing of your focus group discussion guide include:

- Did the introductory remarks provide enough of an overview of the research, but not steer the participants towards particular answers?
- Was the wording of the questions clear?
- Was there flow to the discussion?
- Was the order of questions and topics easy to follow?
- Did the answers to the questions aid in answering the overall research questions?
- Is the discussion guide long enough, or too long, for a typical focus group discussion?
- Was the discussion guide clear enough for the moderator to follow?
- Did the moderator facilitate the conversation well?
- Were enough or too many probes used?

Activities

Focus group interviews can include activities that the participants are asked to engage in. These might include drawing a picture representative of something relevant to the research; writing a list of concerns, issues, or important points; word association techniques or sentence completion tasks; watching/hearing a vignette or

scenario and discussing responses to it; to ranking or sorting items provided to them. Activities allow participants to focus on the task at hand, thus making it easier for them to talk as the activity can be used to promote discussion. For example, if there is a quiet participant in the group, the moderator could ask them to share what they had written down, or to explain why they drew a picture in a particular way. Additionally, activities produce additional data that researchers can use in their analysis; all of the pictures, lists, or ordered material can be gathered and analysed after the focus group discussion has concluded. Group activities will take up some of the discussion time, and thus the number of questions should be reduced if an activity will be used.

Example: Focus groups with educators

Aurini and her colleagues used two activities during a focus group. While Aurini led the conversation and managed the discussion (moderator role), another colleague (second interviewer) supported group activities and ‘jumped in’ and asked questions or probed further from time to time. A third colleague served as the note-taker. The team also took photos of the completed activities and used the information that was generated to construct their policy report and recommendations.

The first activity asked participants to collectively contribute to a list concerning the benefits and challenges associated with integrating robotics in the classroom. Participants contributed to the list and were able to read, reflect, and respond to the contributions of the colleagues. The list proved to be a powerful visual cue; it sparked new ideas, examples, and lines of discussion.

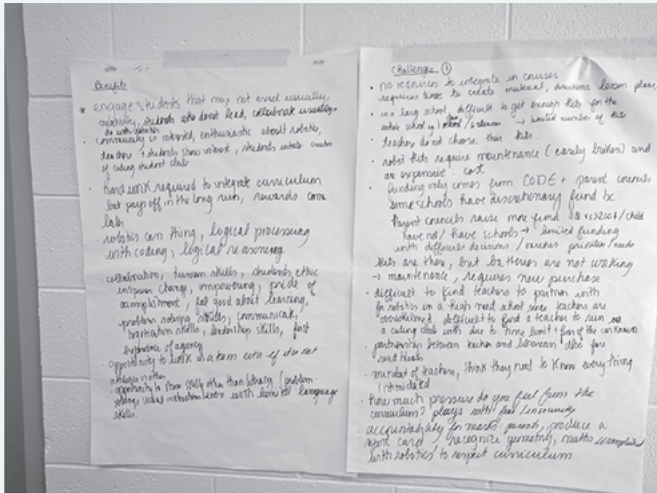


Photo 6.1 Benefits and challenges

The second activity asked participants to finish a series of questions about what various actors (e.g. school board, teachers) ‘should do’ to facilitate the incorporation of robotics in the classroom. Aurini asked participants to put each response on a sticky note and place it under the appropriate heading. After everyone was done, the group came together to talk about the responses. Similar to the ‘benefits and challenges list’ activity, the ‘sticky note’ activity also generated a lively discussion about practice and policy.

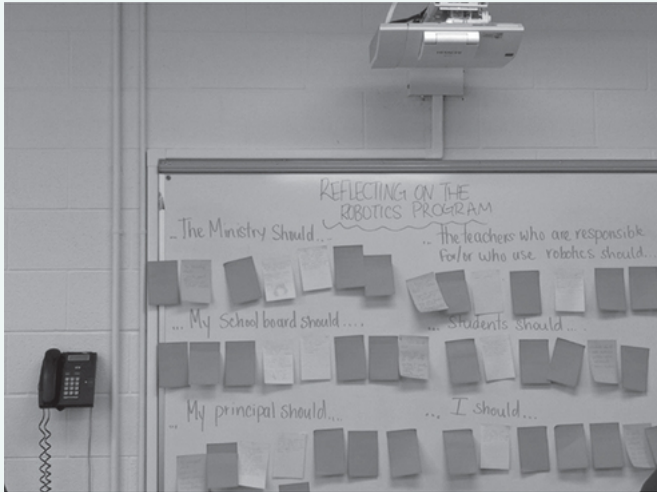


Photo 6.2 Reflecting on the robotics program

STEP NINE: RECORDING

Key takeaways



- Video or audio recording of focus group discussions allows for more detailed analyses after the discussion concludes
- Large numbers of focus group participants can make transcription challenging and recording devices should be used to manage these challenges

Whenever possible, and with consent of your respondents, you should attempt to record the focus group discussion for later transcription. This will allow the moderator to focus on the discussion at hand and ensure that you do not miss anything that someone has said. In an interview, you can ask the respondent to repeat what they said or to pause while you jot down some notes. In a focus group setting, however, it is important to maintain the flow of discussion without interruption. There is little research to suggest that a recording device will alter the group discussion; the very nature of the group setting already means that the comments are public (Stewart et al., 2007).

However, there are challenges associated with recordings. In the case of in-person focus groups, you need to decide if you will use an audio recording or a video recording. If using a video recording, be sure to not draw too much attention to the cameras, or the respondents may focus their attention on the video camera and not towards one another. Video recording is only advised when it is important to see the respondents' body language in addition to their conversation. Remember that the [note-taker](#) can also record information about people's body language and non-verbal communication (such as if people are uncomfortable, fidgeting, etc.). Any type of recording you choose should be discussed at the outset of the focus group discussion.

If you choose to use an audio recorder, you will need to be careful to think about the placement of the machine. Many audio recorders are quite small and do not provide much distraction to the respondents. We recommend using more than one recording device if the table is large (an oval or rectangle); placing one recorder at each end of the table ensures that the respondents at the end of the table can still be heard, and it also serves as a back-up should one recorder malfunction.

Transcribing focus groups can prove to be challenging, especially if there are many people talking all at once or if some respondents have faint voices (or others are quite loud). Transcribing focus groups may take longer than transcribing individual interviews, as there will be more information covered and it could prove difficult if some voices are muted or if individuals talk over one another. One way of making the transcribing process easier is to have the note-taker jot down the start time and the name of each person who is speaking. The note-taker can even write the first few words of the respondent's statement, which may help the transcriptionist immensely. Similarly, no matter how many cameras or audio recording devices are present, not every facial expression or non-verbal communication will be captured. The use of a note-taker is the best way to moderate these disadvantages.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined concrete strategies for developing a focus group discussion. First, we outlined the key aspects central to any focus group, including group size, the number of interviews and the length of each. We discussed concerns regarding the group composition and group dynamics. We reviewed the key roles associated with facilitating an effective focus group interview; namely, a moderator and a note-taker. We also provided an overview of other key concerns, such as location, seating arrangements and recording of the focus group interview. Then we provided a thorough discussion and steps for creating an effective focus group interview discussion guide. Finally, we reviewed the advantages and disadvantages of using focus groups as presented by the literature. Readers should use the guidelines articulated in [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#) to reflect on foundational issues that cut through all methods including saturation and building in 'checks and balances'.

FURTHER SUGGESTED READING

Abrams, K. M., & Gaiser, T. J. (2016). Online focus groups. In R. M. Lee & G. Blank (eds), *Sage handbook of online research methods*. Sage.

The chapter on online focus groups provides a useful discussion of how they are similar and different from in-person formats, techniques (synchronous and asynchronous), benefits and challenges, and how to moderate an online focus group.

Barbour, R. (2018). *Doing focus groups* (2nd edn). Sage Publication.

This textbook provides further practical advice on how to conduct successful groups. Further discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of gathering data based on focus groups is discussed.

Hennink, M. M., Kaiser, B. N., & Weber, M. B. (2019). What influences saturation? Estimating sample sizes in focus groups. *Qualitative Health Research*, 29(10), 1483–1496. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732318821692>

The article introduces six parameters influencing saturation in focus group data: study purpose, type of codes, group stratification, number of groups per stratum, and type and degree of saturation.

Lijadi, A. A., & van Schalkwyk, G. J. (2015). Online Facebook focus group research of hard-to-reach participants. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 14(5). doi: 160940691562138.

This article offers an analysis of using a secret Facebook focus group for research purposes. It discusses recruiting participants, building rapport between facilitator and participants, monitoring and keeping track of participants' responses, and the dynamics emerging within an online focus group.

Matthews, K. L., Baird, M., & Duchesne, G. (2018). Using online meeting software to facilitate geographically dispersed focus groups for health workforce research. *Qualitative Health Research, 28*(10), 1621–1628. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732318782167>

This article provides information on the growing use of online-meeting software-mediated focus groups. Using the example of a health workforce study among geographically dispersed professionals, it offers an analysis of research that applies such software.

SAGE CASE STUDIES

Geiger, T. (2017). Acquiring opinions of a high school dropout prevention program: Conducting focus groups with adolescents. In *SAGE Research Methods Cases*. www.doi.org/10.4135/9781526401274

Hormel, L. (2014). Focus groups in action: Problems of purposeful sampling and group composition when initiating research from afar. In *SAGE Research Methods Cases*. www.doi.org/10.4135/978144627305013514664

Khan, A., & Schofield, S. (2020). Challenges in conducting a focus group discussion: Using card sorting to facilitate open discussion. In *SAGE Research Methods Cases*. www.doi.org/10.4135/9781529743722

Sargent, S., Samanta, J., & Yelden, K. (2017). A grounded theory analysis of a focus group study. In *SAGE Research Methods Cases*. www.doi.org/10.4135/9781473997233

KEY TERMS

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| <u>Common Ground</u> | <u>Group Cohesion Tasks</u> | <u>Note-Taker</u> |
| <u>Deference Effect</u> | <u>Heterogeneous Groups</u> | <u>Quiet Participant</u> |
| <u>Discussion Guide</u> | <u>Homogeneous Groups</u> | <u>Rambling Participant</u> |
| <u>Dominant Participant</u> | <u>Introductory Tasks</u> | <u>Saturation</u> |
| <u>Emergence</u> | <u>Moderator</u> | <u>Second Interviewer</u> |
| <u>Ethical Tasks</u> | <u>Natural Groups</u> | <u>Segmenting or Segmentation</u> |
| <u>Facilitating Discussion</u> | <u>Non-Directive</u> | <u>Self-Appointed Expert</u> |

Tasks

Interview

7 HOW TO CONDUCT FIELD RESEARCH: GETTING IN AND GETTING OUT WITH HIGH-QUALITY DATA

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter you will have the tools to:

- Conceptualize strategies for entering the [field](#) and negotiating roles
- Identify the right time to exit the field
- Make meaningful observations and write [field notes](#)

Chapter summary

This chapter builds on [Chapters 2, 3, and 4](#) and provides the steps for conducting field research. Field research is a form of qualitative data collection based on understanding, observing and interacting with people in a setting (or 'field'). The 'field' can include a physical space, such as a neighbourhood, but it can also include an online environment. The type of data that emerges from the field includes field notes documenting conversations, interactions, and organizational processes, and photos, videos, or other physical and social traces.

INTRODUCTION

It seemed as if the academic world had imposed a conspiracy of silence regarding the personal experiences of field workers. In most cases, the authors who had given any attention to their research methods had provided fragmentary information or had written what appeared to be a statement of the methods the field worker would have used if he had known what he was going to come out with when he entered the field. It was impossible to find realistic accounts that revealed the errors and confusions and the personal involvement that a field worker must experience. (Whyte, 1943/1993, p. 358)

Fieldwork is an applied method that usually requires getting your 'hands dirty'. It emphasizes collecting data first hand over a long period of time; this can include observing, having unstructured and/or formal conversations (e.g. interviews), analysing 'artefacts' (e.g. webpages), and even becoming a full participant in the activities of the group or organization. Getting into the [field](#) and observing people's behaviour, actions and interactions, and their social world involves some of the most complex planning and negotiation in qualitative methodologies. The above words of William Foot Whyte capture the messiness of field research that often requires substantial revisions of the research design. Regardless of the theoretical approach (e.g. [ethnography](#), [symbolic interactionism](#)), the goal is to shed light on the day-to-day life of individuals in their 'natural' settings and gain insight into the question: 'What is going on here?' And as C. J. Pascoe (featured in this chapter) illustrates,

researchers in the field are not the only folks doing research. The people we engage with in the field also study us!

Field research is often quite labour intensive. As we noted in [Chapter 3](#), it generally necessitates immersion in a setting for an extended period in order to build relationships and gain an insider's perspective, something you will not get by conducting an 'airplane' study (quick, fly by, data collection). Although developing a strong research design is a key to success, once in the field researchers must remain flexible, re-evaluate their research design when necessary, and make difficult choices about the parameters of observation and engagement.

In this chapter, we will take you through the main steps that are involved in conducting fieldwork, including how to gain access and negotiating your role in the field.

1. *Step One: Types of Field Research:* There are three basic approaches to conducting field research. Each approach has advantages and disadvantages.
2. *Step Two: What is the 'Field'?* We provide conceptual and practical guidelines for bracketing your study.
3. *Step Three: Theoretical Development.* We provide guidelines for developing a theoretical link between your research question and your fieldwork options.
4. *Step Four: Gaining Access.* Once the 'where' and 'when' have been identified, it is time to consider the 'how' of getting in.
5. *Step Five: You're in, Now What? Negotiating Roles in the Field.* We discuss the consequences of being an insider and/or outsider to the research setting, including ethical dilemmas.
6. *Step Six: Time Matters: How Long Is Enough?* In this section we examine the difficult question of when and how to leave the field.
7. *Step Seven: Field Notes: Data Recording and Organizational Devices.* We outline approaches to observation and field notes.

In earlier chapters we discussed core foundational issues that cut across methods including conceptualization ([Chapter 2](#)) and research design, saturation, and sampling ([Chapters 3 and 4](#)). We have written this chapter with the assumption that you have completed the foundational work needed to bring you to the point of selecting field methods. You should continue to reflect on and rigorously engage these guidelines throughout the research process.

STEP ONE: TYPES OF FIELD RESEARCH

Key takeaways



- There are three basic approaches to field research: non-participant observation, passive participant and full participant observer
- Researchers can observe the field 'naturally' or manipulate aspects of the field
- Research can be covert and non-covert
- The approach depends on a number of factors, including the research question and disciplinary standards

Field research ranges from 'being a fly on the wall' (non-participant observer) to becoming a full participant ([Table 7.1](#)). The structure selected is based on a number

of factors, including the research question, the research design, disciplinary standards and the researcher's comfort level engaging in the field. Rather than repeat material already covered in [Chapters 2, 3, and 4](#) we will simply ask you to consider: What is your research question? What is the best method for answering it? And how feasible and ethical is a particular approach? Additionally, you should reflect on whether you are a good candidate, particularly for the types of projects that require full participation.

Table 7.1 Types of field research: roles

| Structure | Description | Potential Benefits/challenges |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Non-participant observer | Observing either online or in-person without engaging with participants (e.g. 'being a fly on the wall'). Research can be covert or non-covert. | <p>May reduce researcher reactivity</p> <p>Limits ability to gain 'hands on knowledge' and more intimate connections with participants</p> |
| Passive participant | The researcher is 'present' in the setting, online or in person, but participation in the core activities of the group or setting is minimal (e.g. asking people questions after a meeting). Research can be covert or non-covert. | <p>Allows researchers to gain more realistic and empathetic knowledge of how a group, process, or organization 'works'</p> <p>May (inadvertently) alter the field, people, or processes</p> <p>Limiting range of observations by marrying the researchers to one dimension of the topic or one group</p> |

| Structure | Description | Potential Benefits/challenges |
|--------------------------------|--|---|
| Participant observation | Researcher is fully engaged and participates in the same activities and interactions as the people, groups, and social/organizational processes under investigation. Research can be covert or non-covert. | <p>Allows researchers to gain more realistic, empathetic, and/or insider knowledge of how a group, process, or organization 'works'</p> <p>Allows researchers to gain better rapport with participants</p> <p>May (inadvertently) alter the field, people, or processes</p> <p>Closeness to the people may invite biases into the interpretation</p> <p>Limiting range of observations by marrying the researchers to one dimension of the topic or one group</p> |

Natural and contrived observations

Natural observations do not manipulate or alter the research setting. And in fact, researchers attempt to reduce the amount of reactivity involved (see observer effects discussed in [Chapter 3](#)). Researchers who use this approach are not interested in how people respond to a particular stimulus or change, but rather how they behave and interact as they normally would in a particular context. Projects that are 'natural' include everything from observing people at a park or viewing what people post on an online message board. This type of fieldwork can be done as a non-participant, passive participant or full participant.

Although many types of fieldwork try to minimize the impact of the researcher and the research, **contrived observations** purposefully alter or manipulate the setting, social arrangements or behaviours in some way. Researchers typically add or remove material in an environment to see how participants add, erode, or respond to them. Researchers may also be interested in examining how these changes alter social interactions and ways of doing. There are many ways a contrived observation can be designed. Below we provide one example.

In the [Table 7.2](#), we provide an example of contrived observation, where the researchers were interested in observing whether a change in condition or setting affects how people respond to the same stimulus. In condition 1, the parking zone was clean. In condition 2, the parking zone was covered in graffiti. The researchers asked: Are people more likely to litter when the environment is disorderly (graffiti) or orderly (clean)?

Table 7.2 Example of contrived observation

| |
|--|
| |
|--|

| | Time 1 | Time 2 | |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Condition 1: Clean parking lot | Alter setting (e.g. place flyer on a windshield) | Observe erosion or accretion and social behaviour in condition 1 | Compare and contrast conditions 1 and 2 |
| Condition 2: Littered parking lot | Alter setting (e.g. place flyer on a windshield) | Observe erosion or accretion and social behaviour in condition 2 | |

Example: Testing Broken Windows Theory

Keizer et al. (2008) were interested in testing 'Broken Windows Theory' (BWT). BWT suggests that the presence of one kind of disorder (e.g. broken windows, litter) triggers other kinds of disorder (e.g. theft). To test BWT, the research team created six field experiments. One of the experiments examined how the presence or absence of graffiti in a bicycle parking zone influenced whether people littered a flyer the researcher team attached to the handlebar of each bike.

In condition 1, the parking zone was clean and there was no graffiti. In condition 2, the parking zone wall was covered with graffiti ([Figure 7.1](#)). In both conditions there was no trash can nearby, so the only option for participants was to take the flyer with them or to litter. Observing from the sidelines, the team found that in condition 1, 33 per cent of bike owners littered. The team found that in condition 2, almost 70 per cent of people littered. They repeated this field experiment in other settings and found similar results. The results of their experiments lend support to BWT: disorder begets more disorder.



Figure 7.1 Testing broken windows theory

SOURCE: Kees Keizer, Siegwart Lindenberg, and Linda Steg. 2008. 'The spreading of disorder.' *Science* 322: 1681–1685.

SOURCE: Keizer, Lindenberg, & Steg (2008)

Breaching Experiments

Breaching experiments are most associated with **ethnomethodology**, an approach to the study of social life that focuses on the discovery of implicit, usually unspoken assumptions and agreements. Breaching experiments are an example of a contrived and **covert observation**. Sociologist Harold Garfinkel developed this method to help unearth societal rules, norms, and social order. Many societal 'rules' are unspoken and taken for granted. However, these rules bubble to the surface when they are violated. What would happen if you spontaneously sang at the top of your lungs in the middle of your classroom, took an item out of someone else's shopping cart, cut in line or sat too close to a stranger when there was clearly plenty of room?

Rafalovich (2006) describes the 'waiting in line experiment', a student-friendly experiment that you can try. Picture a long line of customers trying to make a quick purchase at a lunch counter – a sandwich, bowl of soup, coffee, and so

forth – in between classes or on their lunch break. This is a familiar ritual that we have all engaged in hundreds of times: customers shuffle to the counter and when it's their turn they quickly order and pay, they move over to the side as they wait for their order, allowing the next person in line to have their 'turn'. However, after a period of time engaging in the ritual, the researcher purposefully holds up a line and does not move forward as the line progresses towards the counter. After conducting this experiment several times, Rafalovich's student realized that very little time elapsed (5–10 seconds) before customers realized that 'something was wrong' and began to initiate a series of responses including asking 'What's the deal?' 'What's happening?', and so forth (p. 160). These insights were used to illuminate Merton's concept of anomie and how actors (or in this case customers) responded when culturally approved 'means' (advancing to the lunch counter in a predictable manner) and 'ends' (getting food and drinks) became questioned, threatened or unclear.

SOURCE: Rafalovich (2006)

Non-covert or covert field research?

Should you be known or not known to the people you are observing? You and your ethics research board will need to work out a variety of issues, including: What are the potential ethical issues, and how are they influenced by whether the research is conducted in a **covert** or **non-covert** manner?

Non-covert research

In this type of study, your presence in the research setting is known to your participants. Interviews, focus groups and field research in many formal settings (e.g. day care) usually requires speaking to your participants about their involvement and rights. Beyond allowing you to obtain informed consent, since the participants know that they are being observed or questioned, you are often less restricted in your ability to record in the field. While non-covert field research has many benefits, it may introduce observer effects. In fact, even if you are simply observing, your lack of participation – and your presence on the side lines 'watching' – may intensify reactivity.

C. J. Pascoe (2007) also reminds us that the relationships that we formulate in the field are a two-way street. Participants and researchers 'study each other'; participants may ask questions and attempt to engage in conversations that challenge our belief systems or push our ethical boundaries. They may also invite us to offer an opinion that 'muddies the water' and invites reactivity, particularly if we do not share the participant's point of view (see Fine, 1993).

Going Back to High School: Lessons from Classroom Teaching for Ethnographic Practice

C. J. Pascoe

I spent much of my time at American High School sitting on a planter in the student lounge next to Jason, a member of the school's campus safety staff. The student lounge, really a fancy name for an open area centrally located in the school off of which spoked multiple hallways leading to classrooms, functioned as the hub of social life at American. Jason spent a notable portion of each day greeting students as they walked by, often calling out nicknames or initiating brief 'check-ins' about their health, their parents' jobs or

schoolwork. One fall morning as Jason asked me questions about my recent trip to give an academic talk in Amsterdam, Brian, a senior, sat down, as students often did, next to Jason. Jason introduced me to Brian, describing him as 'a frequent flyer' (a student who had numerous run-ins with the school's disciplinary system) while handing him a quarter piece of paper on which was written my research information – a brief description of my study and contact information. Overhearing that I had just returned from Amsterdam, Brian asked, 'What was your talk about?' I paused, as I often do when respondents ask about my larger research programme, before answering, 'Whiteness, Trump and masculinity'. Immediately Brian responded not with more questions about that talk or topic, but by asking, 'Do you think there are only two sexes?'

Nothing about the way I described my talk had to do with (in any immediate sense at least) contemporary understandings of biological sex, yet Brian immediately followed up with a quite pointed question on that topic. On the surface this seems like a confusing response. However, this interaction actually symbolizes a larger set of dynamics in ethnographic fieldwork. As Tey Meadow writes, ethnographers and respondents are continually 'studying each other' (Meadow, 2013). By asking 'Do you think there are only two sexes?' Brian was studying me. While I took notes on Brian and his fellow students trying to make sense of them and their social world, Brian (and his peers) were trying to make sense of me. Schools, like many ethnographic research sites, are deeply networked environments, so the way I answered this question had the potential to shape not just my interactions with Brian, but with those in his network as well. Brian's question, seemingly triggered by the constellation of topics in my talk, has everything to do with a set of political, social and moral stances that might shape not only the contours of my rapport with him, but my very ability to gather data at this school. What respondents and researchers know, or imagine we know, about each other can shape future interactions and, indeed, the very findings to come out of ethnographic research itself.

The dynamic of 'studying each other' takes on particular dimensions when conducting fieldwork on inequality in a moment of intensely shifting social norms. Engaging in ethnographic research on topics like gender, race, class and sexual inequality in a heated political and social period means that I needed to think seriously about how various respondents might or might not be curious about my perspectives on the very topics I'm asking them about and how their perceptions of my perspective might shape the research process itself.

When I first engaged in fieldwork almost two decades ago, the political and social landscape looked so different that questions from respondents centred less on intellectual questions about sex and gender and more on personal identity, something that had distinct ramifications for the fieldwork process. For instance, when I began conducting fieldwork at a high school I called River High I pulled the rainbow sticker off my car before I arrived in the parking lot. I was not 'out' to a single student there – gay marriage was not yet the law of the land, few laws protected LGBT people and students regularly expressed homophobic sentiments. Staying 'closeted' during that fieldwork may have facilitated interviews with straight identified teenage boys, though I have no way of truly knowing. I did learn, however, that it actually hindered my ability to interview a student who was regularly targeted for homophobic harassment. His friends said that he was 'heterophobic', and as such he was hesitant to talk to me. In other words, my decisions about sharing my own sexual identity shaped relationships with respondents in a different way than I expected, precisely because at the same time I was studying him he was studying me.

Years later, norms around gender and sexuality had shifted significantly, such that while my own sexual identity seemed to generate little concern or interest at American High, my views about sex and gender did. As a result, I had to think carefully about how to answer questions like Brian's. Indeed, this was not just about managing identity, it was about managing information so as to

maintain and enhance rapport while also being ethical and honest. My strategy in this instance and in others like it owed much to lessons I had learned as a college instructor. That is, rather than focus on my own belief system or research, I described what other researchers had found and suggested, as I often did with my own students, that my respondents weigh the evidence and reach their own conclusions. So, I answered Brian's question by explaining that some biologists think that there is a lot of variation in sex (I left the sex/gender distinction by the wayside for that moment) and tell us that people's hormones, physical make-up and genes do not always go together in the way we commonly think they do. I explained that some researchers have suggested somewhere between 1 in 200 and 1 in 1,000 people do not fall into the neat biological categories of male and female. Brian paused to think about this for a second and then we moved on to other topics.

My conversation with Brian did not end there, however, as it continued to percolate in his friendship network. We met some weeks after that first encounter for a formal interview at the local library. Brian announced to me during the interview, 'My friend really thinks there's only two genders.' Before the interview Brian had let his friend know that he was meeting me, to which his friend texted 'Ok cool/tell her there are two genders sorry', and to which Brian responded with a 'lolcry' emoji writing 'come to the meeting/and tell her your thoughts'. Brian's friend had clearly demurred to come, so at our meeting Brian grabbed his phone saying, 'Yeah. I'm going to Facetime him right now because I bet he would love to get some points across ... he's really intellectual.' While calling his friend, Brian said, 'Can you explain to him what you know of the multiple sexes? ... You don't need to convince him ... if you have the background then he'll actually listen to you ... I told him that you're a very well-known writer, and you're a professor at a university. And you study sex.' Not surprisingly after Brian got his friend on the phone, his friend declined to talk to me saying that he was 'stoned'. Concerned about Brian's friend generating a narrative about a researcher attempting to convince students about some (seemingly) radical perspectives on biological sex, I shared my research philosophy with Brian: 'I'm not going to try to convince him of anything. You know that, right? It doesn't matter to me. It's cool ... For me? It doesn't matter to me. Does that make sense?' Indeed, Brian's friend did appear in a class I observed for several months, and, while I have no way of knowing, I think that conversation with Brian paved the way for me to have later conversations with his friend.

In a field site rich with extensive and overlapping social ties, like a school, each conversation may have effects beyond those initially involved as it spreads through friendship networks. Additionally, various constituencies at a research site (such as faculty, staff, administrators and student groups at a school) might receive similar information with different filters. Jason, for instance, did not comment on the topic of my talk, while for Brian the topic launched an extensive line of inquiry that eventually involved his friend. Developing a fieldwork strategy about how to ethically answer questions in a way that both honours participants' willingness to share (sometimes quite personal) information, ensure appropriate research boundaries and maintain rapport is an important component of ethnographic research. The guiding principle I use as a fieldworker is similar to the one I use in the classroom – share what researchers have found, when appropriate provide a variety of perspectives and encourage students/respondents to draw their own conclusions. Ethnographic fieldwork continually demands spontaneous responses to a seemingly unpredictable array of situations, so having an informal philosophy about how to address at least one of these in an ethical, respectful and perhaps even educational way is an important component to successful ethnographic fieldwork.

Questions for reflection

1. What are the key 'takeaway' lessons?

2. What are some examples that illustrate how researchers and participants 'study each other'? How has this dynamic changed over time?
3. What are some fieldwork strategies that allow us to both honour what participants tell us *and* our personal or ethical boundaries?

Reference

Meadow, T. (2013). Studying each other: On agency, constraint, and positionality in the field. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 42(4), 466–481. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241613485431>

Covert research

Covert research reduces reactivity since participants will not be aware that they are being observed in the first place. In the case of **contrived observations**, covert research may generate more authentic reactions if the participants are not actively looking for alterations or variations in the social setting. Covert research might include observation of public behaviour involving anonymous participants, or joining an organization in some integrated role to conduct research clandestinely. Arguments have been made for the benefits of conducting covert research to observe interactions or organizational processes that might not be possible otherwise. A prominent example is the research on casual homosexual encounters conducted by Humphreys (1970), a study that required concealing his identity as a researcher. Playing the role of 'watch queen' at a public bathroom where men met for brief homosexual encounters, Humphreys discovered that many had wives and families. His research pointed to the fact that homosexuality was not a disease, as was the common understanding at that time.

As discussed in [Chapter 4](#), covert research, however, is often fraught with controversy. Such cases require careful consideration of the actual social or scientific benefit to ensure not to abuse the rights and privacy of the research subjects (e.g. Rainwater & Pittman, 1967). First, participants will not have the opportunity to make an informed decision about whether they want to participate in a research project. Importantly too, you may violate your participants' right to privacy if they have a reasonable expectation that their presence, statements, or actions will remain private. In some cases, these potential ethical dilemmas are contingent on the nature of research (e.g. covert research at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting is quite different than observing people in a shopping mall food court).

Second, the idea that a researcher can imperceptibly slip into the field to conduct observations unnoticed is highly implausible even as an ideal. You will be limited in your ability to record information in real time unless there is some logical and natural reason for jotting down notes, audio recording, or taking pictures or videos. Writing down notes at a mommy-and-me play group will seem rather strange, while furiously typing on a laptop during a university lecture will appear perfectly natural and appropriate. Finally, you may risk your safety if people ask you to participate in illegal or dangerous activities because they think you are part of the group (see [Chapter 4](#)).

STEP TWO: WHAT IS THE 'FIELD'?

Key takeaways



- The 'field' can include physical spaces, people, objects, public places, groups, organizations, online chat rooms, blogs, visual representations and artefacts, and other organizational documents and discursive materials
- Fieldwork helps us uncover mechanisms and processes that can answer 'how' and 'why' questions

William F. Whyte (1943/1993) documents in his appendix, written 12 years after the first edition of *Street Corner Society* was published, the haphazard way he found a suitable community to study and, once he found it, his clumsy attempts to communicate and gain acceptance by the community's members. After graduating from Swarthmore in 1936, he became a junior fellow at Harvard University, which provided support for three years of research. He first engaged the community he named Cornerville as a representative of a private agency concerned with housing matters to do a survey with tenants about living conditions. Of this choice, he states:

This brought me into contact with Cornerville people, but it would be hard now to devise a more inappropriate way of beginning a study such as I was eventually to make. I felt ill at ease at this intrusion, and I am sure so did the people. (p. 288)

After several more false starts, Whyte was introduced to 'Doc' through a social worker at a settlement house, and Doc became his main informant. He would spend the next four years living in this Italian community, becoming a pioneer of participant observation. Whyte was fortunate to find an informant who opened the door for conducting his research. However, his initial awkward attempts to gain access as an **outsider** may have ended very differently, causing distrust among community members and preventing further attempts to study this population. Whyte's experience demonstrates the importance of carefully choosing a research site, crafting a design grounded in the literature, and reflecting on the potential effects that the research may have on the participants who are being studied. All of these components are central to approaches and decisions one must consider before entering 'the field'.

The concept of 'the field' is often left rather vague. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) define it as participation 'overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research' (p. 1). This legacy treats the field as 'laboratory' or a site of discovery for 'privileged sojourners' (Geertz, 1997, p. 194). In recent years, the idea of the field has expanded to encompass visual representations and artefacts – photographs, video, etc. – and other organizational documents and discursive materials. The field may also include studying online communication and interaction, as well as related mediated and interactive spaces, such as virtual universities, communities, care systems, organizations, telemedicine, teleshopping, marketplaces, households, and so forth. Institutional artefacts, archival data and historical documents can also be important elements of data collection.

How do you go about selecting a 'field'? Importantly, you must select a 'fair' field that directly speaks to your research questions and adopt an optimal sampling strategy (see [Chapter 3](#) for specific guidelines on sampling strategies and sample size). If one is studying hospitals, for example, decisions must be made about how many hospitals to include, which wards to study and where the researchers should locate themselves. And within this site, what should one study? The choices are endless – administrators, researchers, doctors, nurses, patients, family members, interactions between certain types of people (e.g. doctors and nurses), organizational practices or processes, the relationship between hospitals and the community or higher education (e.g. medical schools), the online presence of hospitals (e.g. webpages), and so forth.

Adopting an Analytical Lens

Practically speaking, even if you plan to immerse yourself for a year or more, you will not be able to record everything. Jerolmack and Khan (2017) provide practical guidelines for narrowing the focus of a project based on the type of questions the researcher wants to answer. As they argue, researchers usually must privilege a particular dimension of social life:

Once someone enters the field, there is simply too much data, too many potential directions the research can take; the most punctilious ethnographer studying the most bounded field site cannot record and analyze everything. To make fieldwork manageable in a way that is methodologically defensible (i.e. not arbitrary), the ethnographer must choose what aspect of social life will be privileged in data collection and analysis...That is, he or she must select what we call an *analytic lens* ... (p. 1)

While their discussion focuses on ethnography, the three broad 'lenses' apply to many approaches to fieldwork:

- The first is adopted when a researcher wants to explain something at the micro-, meso- or macro-level. A study, for example, that has a meso-level focus may focus on how organizational rules structure interactions while also analysing how actors make sense of and transform those rules in everyday situations.
- The second set of lenses focuses on questions about the people or the places. This lens does not simply 'tell people's stories' but analyses how various circumstances and 'place' shape people's biographies. This approach can also examine generic social processes and patterns.
- The third set of lenses focuses on the situations and dispositions of behaviour. For example, examining how the socialization of upper-class children teaches them the 'ease of privilege' (Khan, 2012). You could also focus on the macro level and examine how structures become embodied as 'habits of thoughts (schemas) and "action" (habitus)' (Khan, 2012). In his study on violence, for example, Collins (2009) focused not on individuals or individual biographies (e.g. bad childhood), but rather the situations that make violence more likely.

Quick tip: Are you a suitable candidate?

Here are some questions to ask when considering whether to conduct fieldwork (note: the importance of these questions will depend on the actual site/project):

- Do I feel relatively comfortable in new situations where the rules for behaving are not clear? Can I work for extended periods of time in situations that are ambiguous and unstructured?
- Am I comfortable playing the student role? Or do I prefer to be in the expert role?

- Am I socially awkward in new situations? Or do I find it relatively easy to build new relationships, a rapport, trust? Am I comfortable initiating an interaction?
- Am I able to handle surprising, embarrassing, and awkward situations with grace? Or am I easily flustered?
- In new situations, am I overly self-conscious? Am I able to 'go with the flow' and fit in? Am I quick on my feet?
- Am I comfortable asking people I really do not know for something I want (e.g. information, an interview, access, to record what's happening)? Am I good at 'selling' myself?
- Do I mind asking questions if I do not understand how things work or what is going on?
- Can I live without many of the comforts and conveniences of home? Will my partner/spouse or job understand the time commitment, odd hours, etc.?
- Am I a detail-oriented person? Do I have the discipline to engage in such a labour-intensive method of research?

STEP THREE: THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

Key takeaway



- Three possible paths to developing theory through ethnographic methods are theoretical discovery, theoretical extension and theoretical refinement

Overall, the identification of a topic for field research requires theoretical clarification of the object of study. Sociologists sometimes bemoan the lack of theoretical development – 'processes by which theories emerge, change, and grow in scholarly work' (Snow et al., 2003, p. 185) – that sometimes occurs within ethnography (Emerson, 1987). Generally, attention to theory in the beginning stages of fieldwork, as well as later on, guards against a conceptually impoverished study that may be interesting but does little to answer the 'So what?' question (Lofland, 1970). Snow et al. (2003) identify three paths to developing theory through ethnographic methods: theoretical discovery, theoretical extension, and theoretical refinement. We discuss and outline an example of each below.

Sociological ethnographic research often seeks 'discovery' as a way to develop theory. For example, Lofland (1970) embraces an inductive approach where the researcher begins with as few preconceptions as possible and allows theory to emerge from the data. This form of discovery seeks to develop taxonomies and mini-concepts through 'detailed coding and emergent constant comparative analysis of observational data' (Snow et al., 2013, p. 186). It is consistent with the highly influential methodology of Glaser and Strauss in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), who stress the importance of comparing cases to maximize differences in the contexts of varying phenomena.

Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943/1993) offers a classic example of theoretical discovery in its development of concepts to explain the processes of stratification and mobility at the community level. Whyte (1996) described his interest in economics and social reform that led him to seek a poor urban neighbourhood in Boston's North End to conduct his study that focused on gangs of young men who hung around the street corners in a tightly knit Italian-American community. His review of the literature revealed that no real community study had been conducted of such a district. Thus, he set out to discover the patterns and organizational structure of this community. He uncovered the complex relationship between street-corner gangs and the political and economic structures of the community in which they were immersed.

Theoretical discovery in Whyte's research was not based on expanding extant theory. Instead, he developed concepts and theoretical principles that emerged from ethnographic observations. This type of theoretical discovery has produced significant findings used by qualitative and quantitative researchers alike to generate research and hypotheses on various groups, neighbourhoods, and communities. In contrast, Snow et al. (2003) warn that the prevalence of this tradition 'has blinded ethnographers to alternative forms of theoretical development' (p. 186). They argue that most theoretical development in fieldwork comes from the other two paths of extension and refinement.

A second path to developing theory seeks to extend prior theoretical models to other 'groups or aggregations, to other bounded contexts or places, or to other sociocultural domains' (Snow et al., 2003, p. 187). Sharon Hays (2004), who conducted ethnographic research on the effects of welfare reform in the United States, provides an example of theoretical extension. In her book *Flat Broke with Children*, she applies the concept developed in previous research on the cultural contradictions of intensive mothering to her fieldwork on welfare reform, thereby extending her analysis of the political processes of cultural contradiction, distortion, and exclusion to the case of single mothers. She found that stereotypes deriving from and perpetuating these distortions led to policies that buttress conditions of poverty. Ultimately, similar to her research on intensive mothering, Hays was interested in the ways that ideas about welfare reform reflect national values. She chose to study these issues in two welfare office sites in different states, one in the downtown area of a quaint historic city and the other in the centre of a larger city. While there were different regulations and interactions between caseworkers and clients in the two sites, Hays found important similarities in the cultural contradictions between the market logic and the logic of care and commitment.

A third way to develop theory is through theoretical refinement, or the adaption of an existing theory based on new data. Snow et al. (2003) note that this possibility is consistent with analytic induction because it implies that the theory is modified on the basis of new evidence. In her book *The Challenger Launch Decision*, Diane Vaughan (1996) offered new perspectives on the series of events that led to the doomed Challenger launch decision. Vaughan was interested in studying the NASA case as an example of organizational misconduct. Yet, she found that the data contradicted the starting theory: the explanation of NASA's history of booster decision-making involved conformity rather than misconduct. Thus, she refined theories of disaster to attend to the 'normalization of deviance' through: 1) the 'production of culture' that allowed the erosion of the O-ring to become normalized; 2) the 'culture of production' that permitted managers and engineers to see cost/schedule/safety compromises as normal and non-deviant; and 3) the structural secrecy that existed in the organization where patterns of information obscured the seriousness of the problem. Vaughan's method was historical ethnography, which sought to elicit structure and culture from documents created prior to an event to understand how people in another time and place made sense of things.

These examples demonstrate the importance of identifying upfront the specific ways that your project will build theory. The role of guiding research questions is particularly important in pinpointing theoretical development and determining where, when, and how the research will be conducted. Whyte's (1943/1993) theoretical approach of discovery was based on an open and general question: How is the social structure of a 'slum' organized? To answer this question, he identified a community of first- and second-generation Italian immigrants who lived in an urban area, and conducted

fieldwork for a number of years to discover how the relationships of group members related to the political structure of the community. For Hays (2004, p. 10), the important question to ask was: How does the 'cultural logic' of the 1996 welfare reform law, including cultural norms, beliefs, and values, organize and regulate the lives of poor single-mother families living in poverty? She chose to study the cultural impact of welfare reform in two different welfare offices in two different states, logging 600 hours in the field. This design made it possible to extend the theory of cultural contradiction to the case of welfare mothers. Vaughan (2004, p. 323) asked a cultural question that led to meticulous analysis of documents and allowed her to refine existing theories of risk and disaster: Was NASA's a risk-taking culture, where production pressures pushed schedule ahead of safety, as the report implied?

Thus, planning for field research – whether the research question demands a more inductive or deductive approach – requires theoretical conceptualization (Table 7.3). The theoretical approach may change as the researcher delves into fieldwork and analysis, but this first important step will provide necessary direction and depth to the project. The next important step, and for some lines of inquiry perhaps the most difficult, is establishing a plan to gain entry in the field.

Table 7.3 Linking research question to method to theory

| Research question | Data collection | Theoretical strategy |
|--|--|---|
| How is the social structure of a 'slum' organized? | William Foote Whyte (1993 [1943]) spent over three years conducting participant observation in a community study of Italian-Americans. Whyte collected in-depth ethnographic data to examine the interactions among group members, including patterns of reciprocity and exchange | Whyte's theoretical strategy was one of discovery. He sought to understand the political and economic structures of street-corner gangs and their relationships with the rest of the community. Rather than simply detailing disorganization or pathology – the dominant way at the time to describe these communities – he found a complex organization of relationships that participated in a highly developed social structure |
| How does the 'cultural logic' of the 1996 welfare reform law, including cultural norms, beliefs, and values, organize and regulate the lives of poor single-mother families living in poverty? | Sharon Hays (2004) spent over three years observing welfare offices in two cities and conducted over 90 in-depth interviews with welfare caseworkers and female welfare recipients. Her fieldwork provides a window into the impact of the welfare reform law on the wellbeing of recipients | Hays' theoretical strategy can be characterized as theoretical extension. In her first book (Hays, 1996), she introduced the concept of the 'cultural contradictions of motherhood' to theorize the contradictory nature of 'intensive mothering' among women trying to simultaneously raise their children and pursue a career. Her 2004 book considers the contradictory values of the welfare reform law between work and family. The law requires participation in the work force and paradoxically promotes marriage as a way out of poverty |

| Research question | Data collection | Theoretical strategy |
|--|---|--|
| Was NASA's a risk-taking culture, where production pressures pushed schedule ahead of safety, as the report implied? | Diane Vaughan (1996) employs a historical ethnography, spending the better part of a decade studying archival records – an astounding 122,000 pages of documents, including 9,000 pages of the 160 post-accident interviews – to reconstruct a thick description of the events as seen by those in NASA culture | Vaughan's theoretical strategy exemplifies refinement. She began with the dominant theory that the events at NASA represented organizational misconduct, but found that she must apply a different theoretical framework to capture the 'normalization of deviance' in the organizational and environmental context in which the decision was made |

STEP FOUR: GAINING ACCESS

Key takeaways



- One of the greatest hurdles to field research can be gaining access. Efforts to get into the field should be recorded as data
- You must decide early on whether to enter the field overtly or covertly. This decision will influence all subsequent experiences in the field
- Gatekeepers who guard the boundaries of public and private field research sites can present problems for access, especially when you are studying elite organizations or institutions

Establishing contacts and **gaining access** into the field are often time-consuming and stressful aspects of doing field research. Throughout this book we strive to offer tangible guidelines, but there is no 'one best method' or set of rules for gaining access to the field. In fact, negotiating access is a task that is never readily accomplished in fieldwork, and it must be managed cooperatively and negotiated with intended participants. Managing the necessary steps to gain access is not only methodologically important but can also generate important insight into the structure of the field. It can help identify what defines the field and who are the key players. Thus, the ordeals, detours, and false starts researchers often experience in gaining access to the field not only present problems to be solved but also opportunities for discovering significant aspects concerning the structures and the boundaries of the field. At times, however, trials and tribulations can discourage the research process. The worst-case scenario means changing the focus of the study due to barriers and gatekeepers who may block access.

Research snapshot: Gaining access to difficult to reach populations

Jessica Braimoh (2015) conducted a case study of a single youth organization that works across rural and urban settings to understand how geography shapes organizational supports for marginalized youth. She did not anticipate some of the challenges that she would face entering the field.

To gain entry into the field, Braimoh began hanging out at the sites of the organization during regular hours of service. Although she began to connect with youth across both sites, she was only successful at gaining interviews with youth in the rural setting. The challenge was how to get urban youth to agree to an interview.

After a couple of months in the field, Braimoh learned from staff that other researchers had conducted interviews in the past with youth in the urban location but not the rural community, and these researchers remunerated urban youth for their time. She revised her research protocol and advertised that all youth research participants (both rural and urban) would receive a \$20 gift card to either McDonald's or Tim Horton's for their participation in the study.

Braimoh's original plan to gain access to young people included the following:

- Speaking with staff about herself and what the research was about.
- 'Hanging out' during regular hours both inside and outside of the organization to connect with youth.
- A local cell phone number that would be free for youth to call to learn more about the project and to schedule an interview time.
- Advertisements that were posted in all common spaces of the organization and in 'hang-out spots'.
- Conducting interviews in spaces where youth felt safe.

After receiving the approval on the amendment to her ethics protocol, her *revised approach* added the following:

- Changing advertisements to reflect remuneration.
- Locating the youth who had already completed an interview and providing them with a gift card.
- Buying gift cards ahead of time.

What are some strategies for gaining access? Lincoln and Guba (1985) stress the importance of preparation before entering the research setting. Knowledge about the individuals, communities and 'objects' of study, and familiarity with their norms and routines, is essential to the ongoing negotiation of access. Thus, an important step is immersion in the literature and related information (e.g. information provided on an organization's webpage). This knowledge can help you to identify key informants and gatekeepers who may be willing to share their insights and contacts.

There is general agreement that researchers need to address existing networks to seek a 'known sponsor' or 'orienting figure' able to offer referrals or facilitate access into the field (Monahan & Fisher, 2015 p. 3; Patton, 2002; Weiss, 1994). Doc is a recognized example who provided William F. Whyte with contacts and acted as a guide. Whyte also rented a room from a local family as a strategy to gain understanding and acceptance in the community. Ashley Mears (2013) tells the story

of being approached during her first year of graduate school by a model scout in a coffee shop, who praised her 'look' and promised that she could 'make it big' in the fashion industry. Mears jumped at the opportunity for accessing the industry but found dependence on her agents and bookers to be a challenging aspect of fieldwork.

Another important element of gaining access involves the identification and management of '[gatekeepers](#)' who guard the boundaries of public and private field research sites. Morrill et al. (1999) point to several important aspects in managing access to organizations with formal gatekeeping mechanisms: whether gatekeeping involves individual or collective actors, whether it operates from the top down or on multiple levels of an organization, and how external factors affect those in different managerial roles in ways that might impact the research. They also point out that gatekeeping negotiations can lead to useful data, including information about how an organization operates and its managerial structure (see Jackall, 2010).

Quick Tip: Accessing gatekeepers

Gatekeepers can be especially difficult to manage when one studies more powerful groups, such as 'elite' informants who are able to control access to their domains. Monahan & Fisher (2015) offer the following strategies for accessing elite organizations with strong formal gatekeeping. However, many are useful tactics for gaining access to a wide variety of fields.

- Attend industry or government conferences, which may allow contact with informants of an organization and/or may provide the opportunity to treat presentations as sources of data. Heath (2012) used this strategy to gain access to study a statewide marriage-promotion initiative by meeting with representatives of the organization at a national marriage conference.
- Determine the names of key informants and make cold calls.
- Communicate succinctly your institutional legitimacy and the importance of your research. Organizations or individuals may have had negative past experiences with journalists (or other researchers) that make them wary of participation. Clear communication strategies, such as explaining the difference between journalism and research, are important to establishing legitimacy.
- Understand the complex ways in which potential informants might view researchers as potential threats to their organization, and be ready to take steps to diminish this perception.
- Make unexpected or barely announced visits. Although not an ideal strategy, this may work if you are travelling from a distance or there is an inconvenience to your schedule that puts the onus on the organization to give you access.
- Immersing yourself in the community that surrounds a research site might be a way to gain data about the organization.

We want to stress again the importance of recording these efforts as part of your data collection (see our discussion of strategies for taking inclusive [field notes](#)) and your 'audit trail' (see [Chapter 4](#)).

STEP FIVE: YOU'RE IN, NOW WHAT? NEGOTIATING ROLES IN THE FIELD

Key takeaways



- In negotiating your role in the field, it is important to consider how your social location, and your **insider/outsider** status, might limit what or where you can study
- Building **rapport** and sustaining trust with participants is key to successful managing of roles in the field

Often it is hard to determine exactly the moment you have made it 'in' to the field, and a constant negotiation of roles takes place as you interact with new and established participants. As field relations vary over time, from person to person, and situation to situation, the ability to spontaneously respond and alter your role in the field is key to successfully navigating it.

Successfully negotiating roles in the field requires awareness of one's ascribed characteristics – age, gender, social class, social status, and race and ethnicity, as well as one's social identity. These characteristics can influence access and the ways that interactions take place. Mazzei and O'Brien (2009) point out that gaining access and establishing **rapport** with participants often means acknowledging and strategically acting within the socially constructed meanings assigned to our ascribed attributes that take on more or less relevance depending on the field setting. They note:

The field setting determines which of a researcher's 'key attributes' are most important and that socially constructed meanings, 'scripts', are attached to these and other attributes, ... [which] contain messages about what individuals in particular groups – female, Latina, white, Black-female, American, male, gay white male, etcetera – are 'typically like', and therefore what is expected of them. (p. 360)

A central consideration in managing your role as a researcher depends on identifying these established scripts in the process of building rapport.

One's status in the field also depends on whether one is viewed as an '**insider**' or '**outsider**' to the group or organization being studied. Conducting field research often requires toggling the dual role of recognition as a group member and as a researcher separate from the group. Seeking to 'fit-in' has inevitable trade-offs. Ashley Mears (2013), who conducted long-term participant observation as a fashion model, detailed the perils of negotiating her insider role within a stratified field. As a model, she was situated at the bottom of a hierarchy that subjected her to continual judgements about her appearance, her weight, and her personality. However, she worried that 'pushing back' may place the project at risk if she were expelled from the field. Furthermore, her role as participant observer circumscribed her ability to ask pressing questions to the bookers and clients she worked for about meanings attached to ideals of beauty. Negotiating her insider/outsider role, she waited until the end of her participant observation to step into the 'researcher' role and interview important players. Still, her insider role as a model and as a young graduate student placed her in a hierarchical relation that made it difficult to ask certain questions concerning gender. In the end, this insider/outsider stance shaped the data Mears gathered and allowed her to uncover the stratification system that makes modelling a form of precarious labour.

A key aspect of managing your role in the field is building rapport and sustaining trust with participants. This is a particularly challenging aspect of fieldwork, and

unexpected events and/or opportunities in the field can lead to fresh data but can also jeopardize established relationships. Peter Magolda (2000) explains that during his fieldwork involving a residential college community he gained knowledge that put him at the centre of a contentious relationship between two groups: an invisible and marginalized clique of students who held illegal parties that included the use of marijuana, and the resident assistants (RAs) who sought to prevent drug abuse. He could not engage in open conversations with the RAs about the illegal activities of the students and protect the students' confidentiality, nor could he openly discuss the RAs' strategies to deter illegal activities while maintaining the confidentiality of RAs. He explains that 'establishing rapport with groups whose agendas are competing complicates the conventional wisdom that advocates self-disclosure and candidity. Trust and confidentiality usually go hand-in-hand, but not always' (p. 143).

Establishing trust is generally more circuitous than the linear process that is often assumed to take place in field research, from a wary regard from participants to eventual acceptance and full disclosure. You should expect setbacks or times when trust is called into question. Successfully managing your role in the field requires keeping detailed field notes to document how unexpected events might affect rapport.

STEP SIX: TIME MATTERS: HOW LONG IS ENOUGH?

Key takeaways



- Methodologically, you must determine when your data collection has reached [saturation](#)
- In some instances, you may not have a choice about when to leave the field

While gaining access to the field requires an ongoing process of negotiating roles, personal relationships and social interactions, these concerns remain important considerations in completing fieldwork and deciding when to leave the field. How long is enough, and how do you handle the relationships that you built while in the field? The answers to these questions will depend on both theoretical and methodological factors that are specific to your project. Below, we outline some important considerations in deciding when and how to leave the field.

First, methodologically, it is important to determine when your data collection has reached [saturation](#) (see [Chapter 4](#)). Also known as informational redundancy, saturation does not simply mean that the researcher has 'heard it all' (Morse, 2015, p. 587). Instead, it is the point at which you 'saturate characteristics within categories that emerge as significant in the process of analysis' (p. 587). Thus, in your analysis, each category, theme, or claim is supported with a substantial amount of evidence – not just a few quotes or observations for example. Frequently it is necessary to make a decision based on an assessment of diminishing returns. Will collecting more data cease to contribute important insights or theoretical development? Do I have sufficient data to conclude that a 'one-off' finding is really just that (rather than a by-product of insufficient data)?

Quick tip: Strategies for reaching saturation

Here are some strategies to help you reach saturation quickly and efficiently without sacrificing depth (see [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#) for more details on designing your project):

- The sample should be cohesive. Too much variability among demographic groups will make saturation challenging. Remember that the goal is not generalizability.
- While cohesiveness is important, ensure that your sampling frame is not so narrow that you will reach saturation prematurely. Make sure that you are not just skimming the surface of the phenomena you are studying.
- **Purposive sampling** can help to balance the need for cohesiveness and breadth. Select your participants based on the need to build and validate emerging theory.
- Make sure you will have enough time in the field. Sustained fieldwork can uncover the intricacies of the research setting and help you identify redundancy.
- Search for **negative cases** to identify possible gaps in your theoretical development.

In [Chapter 4](#) we have discussed standard timelines for conducting fieldwork; however, there are times when the researcher has little choice about when to leave the field. The group or institution being studied may determine the period of time in the field or you may run out of funding. If you must travel to conduct field research, it is often necessary to decide in advance a window of time in which to complete the research. If you find that saturation has not been reached during that window, it will be important to plan a second stint of fieldwork to ensure there are no gaps in study.

Issues of conflict and/or safety can also precipitate when to leave the field. Ruth Horowitz (1986) described the process of negotiating multiple identities in her research on Chicano gang members and the girls who hung around with them in the park. Early on, the male members identified her as a 'lady reporter', an identity that resolved the tensions that arose by the nature of her involvement as a woman who spent substantial time in this largely masculine world. She cultivated this identity as a way to stave off perceptions of her as sexually available, in contrast to other girls who hung out with gang members who were either girlfriends or potential objects of desire. Over time, some of the young men began to redefine her identity as potential girlfriend, making her sexual identity salient. After 18 months studying gang members, she found it necessary to shift her fieldwork to focus on studying the young women at the park, as she 'was unable to negotiate a gender identity that would allow me to continue as a researcher' among the male youth (1986, p. 423).

Horowitz's experience also speaks to the emotional aspects of leaving the field. Exiting can bring strong emotions both for the researcher and the researched. The more time spent in a research setting, the more difficult it can be to complete fieldwork in an ethical manner. It is important to avoid distressing a research community. For example, Shaffir et al. (1980) state:

Personal commitments to those we study often accompany our research activity. Subjects often expect us to continue to live up to such commitments permanently. On completing the research, however, our commitment subsides and is often quickly overshadowed by other considerations shaping our day-to-day lives. When our subjects become aware of our diminished interest in their lives and situations, they may come to feel cheated – manipulated and duped. (p. 259)

Every field situation is unique, and you must consider the specific relationships you have cultivated when considering the best way to leave. In most circumstances, you must prepare the community members for your exit. At the same time, you must also prepare yourself. Relationships are two-way streets, and personal emotional commitments built during fieldwork can have an impact both for you and for those you study.

Carolyn Ellis (1995) offers a germane example of the emotional and ethical 'quagmires' of leaving and returning to the field based on her research experiences studying two isolated fishing communities in which she did fieldwork from 1972 to 1984. Over time, rather than a researcher and outsider, she became 'just Carolyn coming to visit' (1995, p. 71). After she completed her fieldwork, she did not discuss the book that she wrote during her subsequent visits to the community. Because most in the community were illiterate, she assumed they would never read her book. She was wrong. In 1989, another researcher from a nearby college read parts of Ellis's book to the community, particularly 'the "sinful" things I had written about sexual practices' (1995, p. 73). This damaged her relationships with many and caused much emotional pain, both for those who felt that the stories they had shared with her had been exposed and for Ellis herself who recognized the impact of the pain she had caused. Ellis did not leave the field suddenly without returning, and she cared about the people with whom she had built relationships. Still, she recounts the mistakes she made in not discussing her publishing plans and in not confirming parts of the book with community members before it was published (for another example see Lareau, 2011).

Accordingly, some cases require a quick exit, or a shift away from a potentially dangerous situation, as was the case for Horowitz. In other fieldwork situations, a more gradual exit may be best (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As Ellis's account exemplifies, however, these decisions are fraught with possible ethical challenges that can be very difficult to manage. One tool to help manage these choices is the act of recording and taking notes on the process of leaving. While Ellis would never have anticipated that another researcher would read portions of her book to community members, outlining the pros and cons of giving the community more information about her plan to write a book might have ended in a different decision.

STEP SEVEN: FIELD NOTES: DATA RECORDING AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVICES

Key takeaways



- Construct detailed field notes throughout the data collection process. Do not leave it to the end or allow too much time to elapse between the observation and note-taking
- How and when to record your data will vary greatly from project to project, setting to setting
- Create a system to distinguish the different types of notes, including jottings, descriptive, methodological, analytic, and personal

Taking precise field notes is the backbone of conducting a successful field research project. Field notes allow you to record in a systematic way the behaviours, activities, events and other aspects of the setting being observed. There are multiple strategies

for taking comprehensive field notes. In this section, we outline important steps to consider in deciding your approach.

Quick tip: The what, when and where of field notes

- Draw on your research question and study design for theoretical guidance in deciding the what, when and where of taking field notes.
- Establish your relationship to the field and to the members of the setting, and decide the best mechanism(s) for remembering the behaviours, activities and events you observe. Jotting down your thoughts periodically is an important memory tool.
- Set a regular time and place to write field notes, generally directly following observations, or as soon after as possible.
- Include the date, time, location, and all details of the main informants at the top of the page of each field observation.
- Every hour in the field will require about approximately one to two hours to write up.
- Distinguish between descriptive, methodological, and analytic field notes.
- Keep a separate record of your personal reactions and reflections.
- Organize your field notes in a manner that allows for easy manipulation, especially if you are using a qualitative data analysis program.

The first important decision to make about taking field notes is how to remember what you observe. In some research settings, it is possible to use your computer, notebook, or iPad to take field notes directly onsite. Apps such as Notes (iOS), Microsoft OneNote, and EthnoAlly are just a few examples. Melanie Heath (2012), for example, conducted participant observation of marriage-promotion classes where it was possible to bring her computer and take field notes during the sessions. Her note-taking was not conspicuous, since other participants also took notes during the class. In many research settings, however, taking field notes while observing can be disruptive both to your ability to perceive details and to the flow of events, conversations, and so forth. Note-taking may also make participants uncomfortable.

There are many challenges to keeping an accurate record of your observations while in the field when you are unable to take simultaneous field notes. If the duration of fieldwork is relatively short, you will likely be able to take more complete field notes right after exiting while events are still fresh in your mind. Fieldwork that lasts for a longer duration, more than two hours, presents many difficulties. First, you may become fatigued and your ability to observe may be diminished. Other concerns include how accurate your memory will be after a long stint in the field, or whether you will be able to recall conversations concerning who said what. Finally, your memory may favour the extraordinary or last event, rather than the ordinary or earlier events. Planning ahead, you will want to limit the time you remain in the setting to ensure you are able to write up high-quality field notes.

During observation, find a creative way to take notes. In the past, field researchers often jotted notes on small notebooks that they kept in their pockets, or to be less conspicuous on a napkin or even their hands. Today, smartphones make it easier to 'jot' notes in the field since it is not out of the ordinary for a person to text or surf the web. Most smartphones have an application for note-taking, and the app in iPhones syncs with other devices. If possible, build in breaks that allow you to jot down key phrases and cues. If you are able to find a quiet spot, the use of a recording device

may be more efficient. During observation with school resource officers (Broll & Howells, 2019), Stephanie Howells would turn on her digital recorder during the drive in her car while she travelled in between schools throughout the day. She would outline things she remembered, wanted to investigate further, or just observations and ramblings while she drove between sites. These recordings were later turned into clearer field notes and memos.

You should also record the sequence of events, indicating what occurred before each action and following the noted event. Outlining the sequence of events will enable you to recall more details later when you do the write-up. You may also want to create a personal style of shorthand for jotting observations to allow you to take notes more quickly. Finally, it is key to balance the need to record events and conversations with the possibility that you will miss important nuances in your observations if you spend too much time writing. This balancing act is also important when more complete field notes are taken onsite.

Another tool that can aid in documenting events in the field, and can be a source of data as well, is taking photographs or use of video recording. If you can gain permission from participants, video recordings or photos are extremely helpful devices for remembering sequences of events.

Once you leave the field, it is important to write up your field notes as soon as possible. We recommend doing so directly after exiting. You should allow about one hour of write-up for every hour of observation (for beginners, three to four hours!). There are many extenuating circumstances that can make writing up soon after leaving the field difficult or impossible. If you are too fatigued, this can affect the quality of your field notes. Or, you may have an opportunity to conduct an interview or another set of observations right away. In these cases, you need to do your best to record the bare bones of what you can remember to better jog your memory when you can sit down to write with more detail. In other words, you would expand your jottings before writing the more complete notes. It is important, however, to be wary of putting off writing up field notes to a later time. Annette Lareau (1996) describes the serious mistake she made in falling behind on writing her field notes. She states: 'missing sessions of writing field notes can, like skipping piano practice, get quickly out of hand ... exponentially, in fact' (p. 218). She developed what she called the 'Lareau Iron Rule of Scheduling': she would never go into the field unless she had the time in the next 24 hours to write up her notes. This seems like very good advice to us.

When writing up notes upon returning from the field, you need to 'fill in the blanks'. Admittedly, this can be 'painful, because it forces you to confront unpleasant things, including lack of acceptance, foolish mistakes in the field, ambiguity about the intellectual question, missed opportunities in the field, and gaping holes in the data' (Laureau, 1996, pp. 217–218). While it is important to record your frustrations and personal reflections, these should be kept separate from field notes. Below we outline some options to record your personal experiences, but first we discuss what good field notes look like.

You should decide on a system of standardization for typing up your field notes (see the example below). This will aid with data retrieval later on and help ensure that you include comprehensive details. Every entry should contain the time you entered and exited the field, the date of the field experience and a title that captures the essence of the field session. Make sure to include page numbers. We recommend saving separate documents for every field observation rather than a long-running document. This will help you better organize the data, especially if you will be using a qualitative data analysis program to analyse your data.

Example: Field notes and marriage promotion classes (Heath, 2012)

February 3, 2004, Christian PREP, JC Baptist Church

Time In: 10:30 am

Time Out: 12:30 pm

10:30 am JC Baptist Church is located about 20 minutes outside Oklahoma City. I was a few minutes late for the Christian PREP class, because I had trouble getting into the church. When I arrived, the parking lot seemed empty and the door was locked. I called the church's number, but no one answered. Five minutes later a tall white man in his fifties wearing work clothes opened the door, and I was able to enter. [I was feeling very nervous because I did not know what to expect from the class or who would be present. My anxiety heightened my frustration when I found the door locked.]

The church stood on a smallish lot not surrounded by other buildings. It was an ordinary stucco white church, built as a rectangle, small, and no frills. Upon entering, the man who had opened the door was nowhere to be seen. I wandered through the hall past the sanctuary and towards some small classrooms. The hallway was bright with several pictures on the walls representing the teachings of Jesus. Finally, I heard voices and found the PREP class in a small room painted white that appeared to be used mainly for small group meetings, such as Sunday school.

The instructor was a white woman and appeared to be in her early fifties. Her short blond hair was styled in a bouffant, and she wore a skirt and flats. She introduced herself and I told her my name. There were two couples present, each sitting at a different table. All were white. One couple was older than the other, and the latter had just been married for a year. The instructor brought me a Christian PREP workbook, and said, 'We provide one of these per couple. Do you have another person joining you?' This seemed a polite way of asking if I were taking the class alone. I told her, 'No.' And, she said, 'That's fine.' She returned to her table to prepare, and I thought this would be a good time to ask permission to attend the class. I approached her and gave a brief introduction to my project, specifying that one of the PREP employees had said it was fine to attend the class if it was okay with her. She responded, 'Oh, you are a trained observer.' [I immediately sensed her discomfort.] I shook my head in affirmation. [Also feeling discomfort.] She gave permission but seemed annoyed, saying something about forgetting a portion of her workbook and feeling unprepared.

You will want to create a system to distinguish the different types of notes you record. There are five potential kinds of field notes: jottings, descriptive, methodological, analytic and personal (see [Table 7.4](#)). Most of your notes will be descriptive based on what you see and hear in the field, providing a straightforward and detailed account of what exactly took place. The emphasis is on describing what you observed rather than summarizing or making generalizations. In other words, provide vivid details about observations such as body language and behaviour (e.g. 'Laura slouched down on her desk, head in hands' instead of 'Laura appeared upset'). Make sure to elucidate the setting and the participants, including when they come and go and the spatial configurations of how people are placed. Your notes should detail the actions and interactions that occur, such as what is said, how it is said and the types of conversations that people have. Are you involved in these conversations? Are you listening in? Describe any physical responses that you notice. How do the participants themselves describe the meaning of the events and/or interactions?

Aspects of descriptive field notes may become redundant when you are documenting the same descriptions of individuals, locations and settings. You may find it better to decide on a referencing system to refer back to the detailed accounts of particular settings, items, events or people that reoccur frequently in your notes. Or this might be a place to summarize when you have recorded more detail in previous entries.

You may want to create a section to record methodological considerations. Do you find yourself speaking mostly to one group over another? What strategies might you use to gain access to another group? Horowitz (1986), for example, suggests that she took methodological notes on the change in her status during her interactions with gang members from 'lady reporter' to 'object of desire'. She describes seeking to stave off the undesirable transition, the challenges she faced and finally the point where she was no longer able to focus her research on these members. Eventually, she published a methodological paper on the challenges inherent to negotiating multiple identities in a research setting. Methodological field notes can thus allow you to grapple with the particular obstacles that you face in a fieldwork setting and can be generative to finding solutions and perhaps to publishing based on your methodological experiences.

You will probably write fewer analytic notes than any other type of field note, but this aspect of your research is very important. This is the place where you begin to theorize the concepts that emerge out of your observations and link them back to your research question. What themes can you begin to identify? What questions will help focus your observation on subsequent visits? Can you begin to draw preliminary connections or potential conclusions based on what you observed? These notes are important for the process of coding, as you will begin to identify themes and concepts that you will want to code more systematically.

Finally, you will want to record the impressions and feelings that you experienced while in the field. This will include your interpretations of what happened and your reactions in contrast to those of the participants. For example, did others share the righteous indignation that you felt at an injustice that became apparent in your fieldwork? It is also important to record your place in the setting and your relationship with participants. Is there evidence that you have established trust? Are there aspects of your fieldwork that make you an insider? How do you negotiate your outsider status? See C. J. Pascoe's reflections earlier in this chapter for thinking about how others are assessing you during fieldwork.

You will want to mark your personal experiences separately from other field notes. This can be done in many different ways, and it will be up to you to decide what works best for your organizational process. The strategy that Heath (2012) used was a system of brackets and italics interspersed in the descriptions and methodological writings (see the Example above). Matt Rafalow (featured in [Chapter 9](#)) used a similar strategy to 'separate out' what he observed from his flashbacks and anxieties. You might use the 'Comments' function in a word processing program or a system of columns. You might also want to keep your personal writings in a separate log or diary. These personal reflections are extremely important for revealing things like personal biases. They may also become aids in analysing your data. And sometimes they are just a way to let off steam or celebrate a particular experience.

Table 7.4 Field notes options

| Type | Example |
|--|---|
| <p>Jottings: Brief words or phrases written quickly while in the field or after to help jog your memory for writing more complete field notes. Try to record direct quotes as much as possible.</p> | <p>Lesson on 'oneness'.</p> <p>Example of name change.</p> <p>Quote: 'Ladies, we change our names. This is an outward manifestation that we have become one with our partner. Men have to do this internally. We give our name away'.</p> |

| Type | Example |
|--|--|
| <p>Descriptive: The meat and potatoes of fieldwork. Descriptive field notes record what you have observed and heard in the field as carefully and in the most detail possible. They will constitute the majority of your field notes. Descriptive field notes should describe <i>not</i> summarize the data.</p> | <p>The instructor delved into the lesson about how two people are made into 'one' in marriage. She stated, 'Ladies, we change our names. This is an outward manifestation that we have become one with our partner. Men have to do this internally. We give our name away.' The two couples listen attentively. She gives an example of the compromises necessary to make a relationship work. She tells us that her husband loves golf. When they got together, she thought she would learn, but it turns out she has very little interest. She says, 'I will never catch up'. Though not stated directly, her example suggests that the compromise for her was to try golf and for him to let her give up.</p> |
| <p>Methodological: Concerns the technique of collecting data. These can be helpful to separate as a way to reflect on the methodological challenges while in the field. These reflections will be important in writing up your methods section in a thesis, dissertation, article, or book, and as a possible journal article on methodology.</p> | <p>The undertone of discomfort that the instructor sought to hide when I asked permission to attend the class has occurred in other instances. Gaining permission is problematic when I am not able to get approval beforehand (and this has been in most cases so far). Some instructors seem happy to let me attend, but others seem a bit put off. Comments have pointed towards a fear that I will be evaluating them. I have learned to emphasize in my introduction that I am not conducting evaluative research, but that I am simply observing to learn what takes place in the classroom.</p> |
| <p>Analytic: Articulate your ideas about how the culture/organization/activity is organized. Start to identify dominant themes and connect these back to theoretical frameworks. Questions to ask yourself: What themes can I begin to identify? What questions will help focus my observations on subsequent visits? Are there preliminary connections or potential conclusions based on what I have observed?</p> | <p>The discussion of 'oneness' teaches about the need to accept the patriarchal model where the wife submits to the husband's leadership. This is emphasized over and over in the examples offered, such as the fact that the wife demonstrates that she becomes one with her husband by taking his name. It is not 'oneness' of each giving an equal share but oneness where the wife becomes part of the husband. This fits with the biblical story where God uses Adam's rib to create Eve.</p> |

| Type | Example |
|---|---|
| <p>Personal: Record your experiences, impressions, and feelings separately from other field notes. Think about your reactions in comparison to those of the participants' reactions (are others similarly angered, pleased, etc.?)</p> | <p>While making comments on 'oneness', the instructor talked about how amazed she was that homosexuals were getting married in San Francisco. I had a hard time hiding my emotions as she made fun of the idea that same-sex couples could marry.</p> |

Ruth Behar (2003) offers a poignant summary of the important contribution fieldwork can make to understandings of the social and cultural context in which human behaviour occurs: 'The beauty and mystery of the ethnographer's quest is to find the unexpected stories, the stories that challenge our theories' (p. 16). In this chapter, we have not engaged debates over the role of sociological theory, or the lack thereof, in various traditions of field research, such as grounded theory. (However, for an interesting perspective on these debates, see Wacquant, 2002.) Instead, we draw on the typology offered by Snow et al. (2003) as a useful device for generating theoretical development. They emphasize the need for a systematic approach to conducting fieldwork and analysing data that 'promotes the linkage of field data to relevant theoretical traditions' (p. 194). We believe that it is important to familiarize yourself with numerous theoretical perspectives as an aid to conducting rich ethnographic field research.

Deciding to conduct fieldwork is a quest that requires self-knowledge. You must be able to recognize both the strengths and the limits of your data, and to identify how your presence in the field impacts those you are studying. To conclude, we quote the words of Gary Alan Fine (1993) who discusses the compromises we must make when conducting fieldwork:

We contextualize events in a social system, within a web of meaning, and provide a nameable causation. We transform them into meaningful patterns, and in so doing, we exclude other patterns, meanings, or causes ... We ethnographers cannot help but lie, but in lying, we reveal truths that escape those who are not so bold. (p. 290)

Our final words for this chapter: Be bold and be careful!

The trials of Alice Goffman

How do researchers balance ethical obligations with demands for methodological rigour, credibility and trustworthiness? Alice Goffman is an American sociologist who wrote a best-selling book about the policing of young Black men in Philadelphia. Her six-year ethnography began when she was an undergraduate student, and eventually became the focus of her doctoral work at Princeton. To immerse herself in the community, Goffman moved into the neighbourhood and wrote hundreds of pages of detailed notes about what she saw, heard, or experienced. Initially, the book was praised as an 'ethnographic classic' by academic superstars like Cornel West, Howard Becker and Elijah Anderson. Her TED Talk now has over two million views and counting. However, as her fame soared, so did the criticism of her work. Colleagues questioned the authenticity of her claims, calling several of them 'outlandish' (e.g. Lubet, 2014). However, much of the criticism stems from Goffman's attempt to de-identify her participants – mixing up ages, changing

dates and altering details – that defies straightforward fact checking. After the work was published, Goffman also destroyed her field notes to protect her informants from legal retribution (some researchers have had their data subpoenaed – see Khan, 2018). A journalist, Jesse Singal, decided to follow up on these claims and spent time looking for some of the key participants from Goffman’s study. And he eventually found them. The mother of one of Goffman’s main participants, Chuck, verified her involvement in the community; she spoke fondly of her, describing her as a ‘good friend to everybody’ and ‘very supportive’. Another participant from the neighbourhood, Josh, described the book as ‘real’ and ‘open with the truth’. He lamented that Goffman’s depictions were *too raw and honest* (Singal, 2015).

CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined concrete strategies for developing a field research study. We reviewed the main types of approaches, including adopting a non-participant, passive participant or full participant role, natural versus contrived observations, and engaging in non-covert and covert research. As we noted in the introduction, you should return to the guidelines outlined in [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#) to critically evaluate every dimension of your project including your research design, selecting an appropriate field sample, and whether you have reached ‘saturation’ or require more field research or other types of data to answer your research question. Now that you have the tools you need to conduct field research, the [next chapter](#) turns to unobtrusive methods. Unobtrusive methods are a useful to collect standalone or complementary data.

FURTHER SUGGESTED READING

Fine, Gary Allen. (1993). ‘Ten Lies of Ethnography: Moral Dilemmas of Field Research.’ *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 22(3), 267–294.

A classic article, ‘Ten Lies’ stands the test of time. Fine argues that ethnographers routinely encounter ‘dilemmas’ that force them to diverge from their idealized ethical standards including their ‘virtues’ (e.g. appearing to be overly ‘friendly’ and sympathetic to their subjects), their skills (e.g. the ‘precise’ researcher that records everything in the field as ‘it really happened’) and their qualities as a researcher (e.g. the ‘fair’ researcher that does not have a particular agenda beyond ‘telling the truth’).

Humphreys, M., Brown, A., & Hatch, M. (2003). Is ethnography jazz? *Organization*, 10(1), 5–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508403010001369>

Van Maanen (1988) observed that ‘What a field worker learns over time is an interpretive skill relative to the culture of interest. It is perhaps more akin to learning to play a musical instrument than to solving a puzzle’ (p. 118). The authors apply these insights to jazz to examine some of the main challenges faced by ethnographers including balancing their role in the field and formulating a standard by which to judge the quality of the work.

Jerolmack, C., & Khan, S. (2017). The analytic lenses of ethnography. *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 3, 237802311773525–. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023117735256>

It is often impossible for a researcher to capture every single dimension of what constitutes the ‘field’. How do researchers make decisions about what to observe and record? This article categorizes potential sources along three broad dimensions: levels of explanation (e.g. meso-level), the subject or particular types of people, and the location itself. They also discuss the limits and possibilities of these choices for examining and explaining the social world.

Lester, J. (2020). Going digital in ethnography: Navigating the ethical tensions and productive possibilities. *Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies*, 20(5), 414–424. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708620936995>

Digital options provide researchers with both a *tool for data collection* (e.g. conducting online focus groups) as well as a *source of data* (e.g. analysing webpages). This article reviews some of the potential ethical considerations when researchers enter digital spaces.

[Multiple Authors] How to do ethnography right. (2016). *Contexts*, 15(2), 10–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504216648145>

This citation directs readers to selected essays from *Contexts*, an academic magazine. These essays cover a wide range of key topics including ethics, transparency and challenges related to access.

SAGE CASE STUDIES

Ahern, K. (2014). Gatekeepers: People who can (and do) stop your research in its tracks. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. www.doi.org/10.4135/978144627305014536673

Falkenberg, H. (2017). Analyzing field notes of fieldwork in lower secondary schools. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. www.doi.org/10.4135/9781526407252

Kervin, L., Mantei, J., & Lipscombe, K. (2017). The intricacies of classroom-based ethnography. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. www.doi.org/10.4135/9781473969766

Martyn, D. (2017). Researching the perceived health concerns of African American and Sierra Leonean women: Using hair salons as a focused ethnography research site. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. www.doi.org/10.4135/9781473980174

Santin, M., & Kelly, B. (2018). Participant observation at 30,000 ft.: The highs and lows of studying flight attendants post 9/11. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. www.doi.org/10.4135/9781526429889

KEY TERMS

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| <u>Breaching Experiment</u> | <u>Gaining Access</u> | <u>Rapport</u> |
| <u>Contrived Observations</u> | <u>Gatekeeper</u> | <u>Saturation</u> |
| <u>Covert Observations/Research</u> | <u>Insider</u> | <u>Symbolic Interactionism</u> |
| <u>Ethnography</u> | <u>Natural Observations</u> | <u>Theoretical Discovery</u> |
| <u>Ethnomethodology</u> | <u>Non-Covert Observations/Research</u> | <u>Theoretical Extension</u> |
| <u>Field</u> | <u>Outsider</u> | <u>Theoretical</u> |

| | | |
|--------------------|--|-------------------|
| | | <u>Refinement</u> |
| <u>Field Notes</u> | | |

8 HOW TO USE UNOBTUSIVE METHODS: THE BEAUTY OF SOCIAL, PHYSICAL, AND VISUAL ARTEFACTS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter you will have the tools to:

- Understand a variety of types of unobtrusive data, including systematic and non-systematic social observation and the use of physical traces
- Develop the tools needed to design a study using unobtrusive methods

Chapter summary

This chapter outlines the steps for conducting a study that uses unobtrusive methods. Data collection that does not directly engage participants often falls under the umbrella of 'unobtrusive' research methods. Data includes everything from gathering social artefacts that people leave behind (e.g. garbage), create (e.g. graffiti, blog posts) and use (e.g. wear patterns). This chapter discusses some sources of unobtrusive methods and provides you with the tools you need to collect this kind of data.

INTRODUCTION

Unobtrusive methods refer to data collection and analysis that does not directly engage participants. The type of data collected may include observing people and or gathering social artefacts (e.g. digital media, newspapers, periodicals, legal documents, and film). Researchers use unobtrusive methods to capture the human experience, provide insight into the people, groups or institutions of interest, and access difficult to reach segments of the population (e.g. young children). The nature of unobtrusive methods may seem odd; qualitative research usually demands frequent and intense interaction with the subjects under study. Yet, there are four good reasons for using unobtrusive methods as standalone or complementary sources of data.

- First, unobtrusive data collection may avoid reactivity. Many qualitative methods introduce what Webb et al. (1966) termed a 'foreign element' (p. 1). In such studies, you not only create the data collection materials – interview schedules,

questionnaires, or other instruments – but you often participate in the very creation of data.

- Second, it may reduce or eliminate sampling bias. The reliance on volunteer participants in other types of qualitative projects (e.g. focus groups) introduces bias if there is a tendency for certain people to participate.
- Third, unobtrusive methods may inspire you to see the social world in a new and exciting way. We are surrounded by visual, physical, and audio traces of human behaviour, culture, and consumption. Historical documents, graffiti, music, and images produced by Google Street View are just a few viable sources of data (for an example see Odgers et al., 2012).
- Finally, text from sources such as Twitter conversations, email correspondence, or letters can allow the researcher to access situations that could be dangerous. Deena Abul-Fottouh's research (featured in this chapter) is one such example. When it became too risky to interview Egyptian revolution activists, she turned to Twitter and studied their social networks instead.

As in other chapters, we emphasize that any benefit or challenge associated with this method is highly contingent. The researcher's skill (and integrity), the range of materials that are available, and the nature of the research influence the quality of the study.

1. *Step One: Types of Unobtrusive Data:* We review two potential sources of unobtrusive behaviour: social behaviour and physical traces.
2. *Step Two: Collecting Unobtrusive Data: Key Considerations and Tools:* This section will outline practical tools needed to collect various kinds of unobtrusive data, including systematic social observation studies.

This chapter builds on earlier discussions (e.g. see [Chapter 2](#)) and provides the next steps for conducting a study that uses unobtrusive methods. You should have already identified your research problem, designed your project and determined that unobtrusive methods are (one of) the best ways to answer your research questions.

STEP ONE: TYPES OF UNOBTRUSIVE DATA

Key takeaway



- The craft of unobtrusive observation involves the rigorous examination and analysis of **social behaviour and physical traces**

Perhaps the most obvious choice of unobtrusive research is observing [social behaviour](#) – what people do, how they behave and how they interact in various social settings. This type of research is only unobtrusive if the researcher is not

participating in activities or interacting with the people they observe. Another option is to examine **physical traces** or remnants of human behaviour, including documents, archival materials and even garbage ([Table 8.1](#)). We will explore these types of unobtrusive research further below.

In *The Unobtrusive Researcher*, Allan Kellehear (2020) outlines the potential advantages and drawbacks of unobtrusive research. First, the researcher is not reliant on participants' reporting (our memory and interpretations are not perfect!). Second, unobtrusive measures are generally safer than other methods; there is limited interaction with other people. Third, these measures may be more financially accessible (e.g. data available at a library) and can minimize other costs (e.g. travel). Finally, they lend themselves well to longitudinal research, especially since they are inexpensive, safe and do not require long-term commitment from others.

Like all methods, there are drawbacks. As an outsider, you may miss or misinterpret the data. Second, you are limited by what is recorded or left behind (for example, people tend to take photographs of happy moments and not sad ones). Third, you may not fully understand or be aware of data that has been removed or changed. Fourth, as with many other types of data collection, **researcher bias** and positionality could limit the interpretation of the materials (Kellehear, 2020).

Table 8.1 Examples of unobtrusive research

| Type | Description | Examples/approaches | Potential Benefits/Challenges |
|------------------|--|--|--|
| Social behaviour | How and what people do, how they interact | Covert and non-covert Systematic and non-systematic social observations | Researcher can assess actual, as opposed to reported, actions Replicable |
| Physical traces | <i>Remnants of human behaviour</i> produced by erosion or accretion <i>Erosion</i> , or wear and tear, of a physical space. Erosion indicates frequency of use <i>Accretion</i> is additions or changes to physical space and what people leave behind | Documents, pictures, historical or archival materials The condition of tiles or carpeting Litter, graffiti, blog postings, Twitter | Increased potential for longitudinal research Increased safety in certain settings Less expensive than other methods May be distorted or difficult to access Potential intervening variables |

Social behaviour

While nearly everyone who goes to a zoo sees the animals there, and many even watch some of those animals, very few can be said to observe their behavior. (McCall, 1984, p. 264)

Non-participant observation is a popular method for unobtrusively examining social behaviour. Non-participant observation is 'focused on situations in which the observer has no control over the behaviour or sign in question, and plays an unobserved, passive and nonintrusive role in the research situation' (Webb et al., 1966, p. 112). However, just like the quote above implies, observation in the context of research involves much more than passively watching social behaviour; instead, it involves the rigorous examination of what people do, how they do it, and how they interact with people and objects.

Webb and co-authors (1966) discuss four types of data gathered when examining social behaviour:

- *Exterior physical signs*: Personal appearance and items such as hair, tattoos, dress and shoes. These symbols may indicate personal and group identity, consumer culture, religion and even social hierarchy or organizational affiliations.
- *Expressive movement*: Expressive movement includes non-verbal cues such as eye movement, touching, and body language.
- *Physical location*: Physical location includes how people use and maintain space in social interaction. It also includes culturally sanctioned rules about the physical location and personal space. Researchers can also examine how a setting is spatially organized (Hall, 1966).
- *Conversations*: Researchers also may record conversations in public spaces, either in person or online.

Remember that even though you may be engaged in non-participant observation, you still may need approval from your institution's research ethics board.

Physical traces

Physical traces include a wide range of remnants of human behaviour, attitudes, culture, likes and dislikes, and social interactions. You can tell a lot about a person, group, or neighbourhood just by how people wear down parts of their environment and all the 'stuff' people create.

There are endless sources of data. For example, the music people download, the types of books taken out at a library and what people post online.

There are two main types of physical trace data:

- **Erosion measures** are evidence of what people use, how they use it and how they utilize a physical space. These measures include:
 - Wear and tear of the floor or furniture.
 - The depletion or theft of items.
 - The size, shape and movement of material objects and people (e.g. streetcar transfers as an indicator of physical mobility (see Lee, 2000, pp. 19–20).

- **Accretion measures** are additions or changes to physical spaces and what people leave behind. Accretion is the build-up or layering of social activity, including:
 - *Current or historical art*: photographs, paintings, advertisements, film, and television from government and non-government sources (Banks, 2001; Pink, 2001).
 - *Current or historical documents*: Documents may be from government and non-government sources. You can gather records that can be observed over a long time such as marriages, births and deaths, and job advertisements; and researchers can gather personal documents, photos and diaries or newspapers and official reports.
 - *Internet research*: Data generated from blogs, email exchanges, message boards, Twitter, social networking sites, and so forth.

Abul-Fottouh's research illustrates how unobtrusive methods can be an excellent source of data. To examine activists who were part of the Egyptian revolution, she turned to social media and used the structure of Twitter networks to examine how activists mobilized, how internal schisms developed, how specific ideologies influenced people's relationships, and how indirect and direct networks were created.

Studying people through their digital traces: A case study from Egypt

Deena Abul-Fottouh

The regular qualitative techniques such as interviews or focus groups become sometimes challenging or hard to realize in research. In my research about the Egyptian revolution of 2011, I originally planned to interview activists to study a revolutionary movement that started as a united movement in 2011 then faced ideological schism later on. As political conditions changed in Egypt and any type of activism became high-risk activism, it became challenging to interview activists. In such situations, resorting to unobtrusive methods of research becomes helpful. I decided to study the networks of activists through their online digital traces.

My research builds on social movements' theories of networks and coalition building, theories of digital activism and social networks' theories of organizations to study online mobilization for the 2011 Egyptian revolution. I used the analytical tools of social network analysis to study Twitter networks of activists of the Egyptian revolution in early 2011, when solidarity characterized the movement, and late 2014, when schism spread it apart. In this, I investigated how the repertoire of online activism related to the on-the-ground movement. This methodological approach revealed new findings that could not have been studied through other methods of research.

Many studies on the role of social media in the Egyptian revolution have taken a theoretical approach (Castells, 2012) or have based their methodological approach on interviews with activists and their use of social media in mobilization (Attia et al., 2011; Brym et al., 2014; Faris, 2013; Gerbaudo, 2012). Other studies used quantitative techniques to analyse Egyptian tweets (Oh, Eom, and Rao, 2012; Starbird and Palen, 2012). While social media is all based on networks between people, very few studies have used the analytical tools of network analysis to examine this case.

In my research, I used network analysis to study the structure of the Twitter networks of Egyptian activists during periods of solidarity and schism and to identify brokerage roles prominent actors played. The data the study analysed is a collection of tweets gathered from Twitter accounts of Egyptian activists, political parties and groups involved in the revolution. To make the list of activists, I began by searching Google for Egyptian bloggers using the keywords 'Twitter accounts of Egyptian bloggers'. I complemented this list using the literature review and crowdsourcing on Facebook. For each Twitter handle on the list of activists, political parties or groups that I compiled, I collected all tweets that were posted during the two different time periods studied: a period of movement solidarity in 2011 and a later period of schism in 2014. As the Twitter Application Program Interface (API) only gives free access to the last 3,200 tweets for any account, I purchased historical tweets for the first time period from an official provider of historical Twitter data. I used the Twitter search API to collect data for the second time period.

In order to answer the question of whether ideology, in my case Islamism, socialism and liberalism, affects how people relate to each other on Twitter and to identify brokerage roles, I focused on the Twitter mentions network, as it represents a more direct type of conversation than following, retweeting or hashtag discussions. The mentions network is a directed network where the nodes represent the activists, and the directed ties are links of who mentions whom. It is also a valued network, as the strength of ties represents how many times one actor mentions another. The more one mentions the other, the stronger the communication between them. I used ORA network analysis software (Carley, 2014) to import tweets that were originally in the Java Script Object Notation (Json) file format. ORA software transforms the imported tweets into a 'meta-network', or a network of sub-networks. Among these sub-networks is the mentions network, which my research investigates. I then used the various tools of UCINET network analysis software (Borgatti, Everett, and Freeman, 2002) to analyse the structures of the imported mentions network.

To study ideological congruence in Twitter networks during both time periods, I used community detection algorithms to identify how activists cluster into cliques based on their ideologies and whether this clustering differs between periods of solidarity and schism. I also used network specific regression and

analysis of variance to test the effect of ideological homophily during the two time periods. The findings show that at the beginning of the revolution and nearly four years later, the Twitter networks mirror both the solidarity of 2011 and the ideological schism of 2014. At the beginning of the revolution, activists who hold disparate ideologies deliberated freely online, forming a common counterculture that facilitated mobilization for the revolution. As activists from various ideologies camped together in Tahrir Square, they freely deliberated on Twitter. Discussion cliques were large and tightly knit in the sense that all members mentioned each other. Ideology was no barrier to discussion – that is, ideological homophily was absent. Almost four years later in 2014, Twitter networks were more ideologically polarized. The solidarity of 2011 had been dismantled by differences over strategy and the difficulties of determining what should follow a 30-year authoritarian regime. Online discussion cliques were small and scattered. Ideology played a major role in online interactions; ideological homophily was highly manifested. Twitter was a good barometer of changing relations among the activists.

Network analysis of Twitter also allowed me to study the presence of bridge builders among groups allied with different ideologies, especially during the period of schism. Following four theoretical definitions of brokers, my research identifies brokers as the activists who span structural holes in the network and who have access to non-redundant information (Burt, 1992, 2000, 2005, 2015). They can be activists who appear on the shortest paths between all other activists in the network (Freeman, 1977, 1979). Brokers can also be identified by their functional role in connecting similar or different ideologies (Gould and Fernandez, 1989) or in terms of their influence in causing network fragmentation (Borgatti, 2006). For each of the above conceptual definitions of brokers, I used a corresponding network analysis tool to identify a broker. I then measured the correlation between online and offline brokers to determine the connection between brokerage online and on the ground. Findings show that online brokers who connect different ideological backgrounds are more prevalent during times of solidarity than times of schism. Similarly, within-group brokerage was more prevalent during the period of schism. In this, the social movements theory of networks applies to online networks. Findings also show that online brokers are not the same as on-the-ground brokers suggesting that the way brokerage occurs online, through bloggers and celebrity accounts, is different than brokerage on-the-ground, which manifests into the formation of real coalitions where social movements groups or individual activists collaborate. Twitter and the streets complement each other: online brokers connect scattered people looking for sources of online news while on-the-ground brokers bring different ideological backgrounds together to form actual revolutionary coalitions.

This methodology bears a lot of benefits and challenges. It is an unobtrusive method that allows the study of people in their natural environment. It saves money and energy in interviewing activists, especially if the respondents are not easy to reach, as the case is in a context of high-risk activism. Studying digital traces permits the highlighting of key players precisely and calculate their brokerage capacities, which is sometimes hard to identify through regular qualitative techniques. It also allows studying large-scale groups and facilitates longitudinal studies, as I did through collecting tweets of two different time periods. The methodology allows the discovery of lines of cleavage across networks in an unobtrusive way as this research shows community clusters and the grouping of activists based on ideology without having to interview them or conducting focus groups. One of the major benefits of this methodology is allowing the study of hard to reach

communities if people are not willing to participate in interviews or focus groups. Studying their digital traces and online profiles has proven to tell a lot about them and their communities.

On the other hand, these methods bear their own challenges. Loss of context is one of the major problems in studying online profiles. Structural network analysis only highlights networks of people and tells nothing about the content of the text that bring people together. Automated text analysis helps with large-scale data but suffers a loss of context that can only be addressed through further investigation, including conducting in-person interviews. Because of the large volumes of data, many studies resort to automated sentiment analysis of online social media text. These methods usually have 70 per cent accuracy and can never replace the richness of exploring sentiments through interviewing people. Studying people through looking at their online footprints has a lot of benefits and brings rich insights. However, these methods do not fully replace traditional qualitative techniques but rather complement them.

Questions for reflection

1. What are the key 'takeaway' lessons?
2. How can researchers use digital traces to examine social networks and interactions?
3. What are some of the methodological benefits and challenges or limitations of this approach?

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STEP TWO: COLLECTING UNOBTRUSIVE DATA: KEY CONSIDERATIONS AND TOOLS

Key takeaways



- After deciding on whether you will conduct a project ‘naturally’ (or contrived) and openly (or covertly) (see [Chapter 7](#)), you will need to make an informed decision about how you will collect your data

- **Systematic observations** specify what and how you will observe and record the data, while **non-systematic observations** do not specify or systematize observation parameters
- Manifest approaches specify identifiable and countable elements like a particular word while latent approaches examine meaning(s)

Before embarking on a project using unobtrusive data, you will need to consider a variety of factors, including whether to observe the social setting in its natural state or whether you will examine people or settings covertly (for a discussion, see [Chapter 7](#)). Beyond these initial considerations, if you observe people, you will also need to decide whether you will systematize what you plan to observe or whether you will approach your project more inductively. And finally, if you are observing things (e.g. documents) you will have to decide between manifest, latent or a combination of both approaches.

Systematic and non-systematic observations: people

Suppose you are planning on observing people and their environment. How will you record behaviours, social interactions, physical artefacts and events? To simplify our discussion, we will outline two approaches: **systematic social observation (SSO)** and **non-systematic social observation (NSSO)** approaches.

Systematic social observation

Systematic social observation approaches specify from the outset what and how observations will be recorded. SSO studies allow for replication since rules are decided on in advance (see Reiss, 1971). The observations, recording and even some analysis occur simultaneously. SSO projects are used to revise or evaluate theories, test hypotheses and examine patterns. SSO projects are also highly amenable to quantitative and mixed-method research. Standardization allows for comparability across individuals and settings, and the approach is suitable for multi-site and multi-researcher projects since it specifies what and how data will be collected (see Maxwell, 2013, p. 87–88).

The primary data collection tools for SSO projects include using a sign-code system. For qualitative researchers, a sign-code design may complement other data collection methods, including interviews, pictures, other artefacts and non-systematic social observations.

Sign-code system

The sign-code system of observation specifies a list of physical artefacts, social interactions or events that have been determined in advance to be methodologically or theoretically important. You can document in real-time using a checklist, or retrospectively by recording the people and the environment of interest with video-recording equipment and coding the physical and social environment afterwards with the pre-scripted checklist.

Robert Sampson and Stephen Raudenbush have written extensively on social and physical disorder using systematic social observation (see www.norc.org/Pages/default.aspx). In total 23,816 Face Blocks (the block segment on one side of a street) in 196 Chicago census tracts were recorded. A stratified probability sample was used to sample census tracts. Face Blocks were observed by four observers in an SUV: a driver, a videographer, and two observers who were taking notes.

As the SUV was driven down the street, a pair of video recorders, one located on each side of the SUV, captured social activities and physical features of both face blocks simultaneously. At the same time, two trained observers, one on each side of the SUV, recorded their observations onto an observer log for each block face. The observers added commentary when relevant (e.g. about unusual events such as an accident or drug bust) by speaking into the videotape audio. (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999, p. 616)

Although Sampson and Raudenbush quantify their results (not to mention that their project was elaborate and costly by most standards of research), their work is exemplary of SSO. Adopting a similar approach, you could easily use SSO principles to craft a qualitative or mixed-method project by using additional research tools (see Researcher profile below).

Given the standardization and ease of the checklist, researchers can include a long list of descriptive categories to capture the physical space (e.g. presence of garbage, signs), social activities (e.g. loitering), or behaviours (e.g. fighting). In the example in [Table 8.2](#), you will notice that this checklist includes social behaviour (e.g. loitering), **erosion** (e.g. sign of disrepair) and **accretion** (e.g. litter). Before you begin, you should specify or operationalize your measures to ensure that your observations are consistent. ‘Disrepair’, for example, can mean many different things. Operationalizing each measure in advance will improve the reliability of the study (see also Odgers et al., 2012).

Table 8.2 Example of a sign-code system checklist

| | | | |
|---|---|-----|--------------------|
| Project: Examining Neighbourhood Disorder | | | |
| Date: Time: | | | |
| Location: Block (circle): North South East West | | | |
| Physical disorder | | | Extra notes |
| 1 | Is the lawn maintained? | Yes | No |
| 2 | Are there signs of disrepair on the building? | Yes | No |
| 3 | Is there graffiti on the building? | Yes | No |

| | | | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----|----|--|
| 4 | Is there litter on the ground? | Yes | No | |
| Social disorder | | | | |
| 1 | Is there loitering? | Yes | No | |
| 2 | Are adults fighting or arguing? | Yes | No | |
| 3 | Are there adults drinking alcohol? | Yes | No | |
| 4 | Are there prostitutes on the street? | Yes | No | |

Researcher profile

Darren Cyr (2014) was interested in examining neighbourhood disorder and its impact on student achievement. Lacking Sampson's monster budget (see Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999), Cyr conducted a W-SSO, or Walking-Systematic Social Observation, of neighbourhoods surrounding 168 schools in Hamilton, Ontario, to examine neighbourhood disorder around schools and its influence on educational outcomes. Cyr spent a summer walking along a set number of blocks surrounding each school and recorded signs of physical and social disorder on his sign-code checklist.

Cyr then placed a small sample of four schools into high, medium, and low disorder categories based on the results of the W-SSO. At these four schools and the surrounding communities, he conducted interviews with teachers, students, business owners, police officers, news reporters and real estate agents to examine their perceptions of physical and social disorder and its relationship to student behaviour and achievement. He also visited these four schools at 3 pm for three weeks to examine patterns of disorder (e.g. whether litter found one day was cleaned up the next day). Cyr found that low-disorder schools always appeared 'orderly', whereas the high-disorder schools always showed signs of disrepair and strewn garbage. However, based on his interviews, the presence of disorder did not trigger student deviance or poor achievement. Instead, other factors such as lack of parent and student engagement were associated with poor student outcomes.

Quick tip: Event-sampling and time-sampling

Researchers can also build in event-sampling and time-sampling into their sign-code checklist. Event-sampling is when the researcher records a behaviour or event every time it happens (e.g. documenting every time a child interrupts a parent). Time-sampling is the designation of periods in which

observations will take place. Researchers can designate the number of days, the time of day and the interval of observations (e.g. ten-minute intervals). Below is an example of a simple time-sampling sheet.

Category: students talking to peers

Description: Students talking when teacher is delivering a lesson or providing instruction to the class

X = Occurrence: O = Non-Occurrence

| DATE | TIME | 9:00 | 9:10 | 9:20 | 9:30 | TOTAL |
|--------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|
| May 1 | | X | O | O | X | 2 |
| May 7 | | X | X | X | O | 3 |
| May 14 | | X | X | O | X | 3 |
| May 21 | | X | X | X | X | 4 |
| May 28 | | X | O | X | O | 2 |

Non-systematic social observation

Non-Systematic Social Observations (NSSO) are usually designed more inductively and do not specify or systematize observation parameters. Descriptive and theoretical categories emerge after at least some data collection has been completed, rather than specified at the beginning of the project.

If your data collection involves observing social behaviour, you will typically write field notes during or after the observation. You are encouraged to use 'thick description' when describing the people, the settings, the interactions, and the events (see [Chapter 7](#)). Denzin (1989a) and others (Ponterotto, 2006) have noted that thick description has the following characteristics:

- *Biographical information:* The researcher includes detailed information about the people and their circumstances.
- *Historical information:* The researcher places people, issues and events into historical context.

- *Situational*: The researcher paints a vivid picture of what happened and how it happened.
- *Interactional*: The researcher embeds the people, issues, and events into the fabric of social relationships.

Manifest and latent approaches: things

If you are planning on analysing things, you will also need to decide on the degree to which the recording of artefacts is more systematic and pre-specified or whether your project demands a more inductive and subjective approach to data collection. By 'things' we mean any erosion or accretion measures such as diaries, government documents, pictures or Twitter feeds. To simplify our discussion, we will differentiate two approaches: **manifest** and **latent approaches**. Manifest approaches are amenable to quantitative data analysis, while latent approaches focus on subjective meanings. A researcher, for example, may record the frequency of words, themes and items in a document (manifest), and then re-analyse the entire document for the implicit meanings embedded in the text (latent).

What insurance claims tell us about the value of children

Viviana Zelizer used a latent approach to examine the economic and social value of children. Analysing hundreds of historical documents, including insurance claims and newspaper articles, Zelizer illustrated how our economic system tells us a lot about our cultural values. One of her most famous books is *Pricing the Priceless Child* (1994). In the past, children were valued for their ability to contribute to the family's economic wellbeing. Insurance claims in wrongful death cases, for example, were a straightforward calculation of the lost revenue that the child would have generated. However, early in the twentieth century, children were no longer valued for their economic utility but instead seen as economically useless and emotionally priceless. Strangely, economically useless children became more valuable, evidenced by skyrocketing wrongful death settlements and the introduction of strict child labour laws.

Manifest approaches

Systematic approaches specify identifiable and countable elements like a particular word, shape, or item. A systematic document analysis, for example, may include counting the number of times a word appears, the number of pictures, and the number of pages. There is an infinite number of items that you could record, and the categories will depend on the nature of the study ([Table 8.3](#)). A project examining photographs will generate different categories than a project examining job advertisements, for example. Given the standardization and ease of **manifest approaches**, you can include a long list of predetermined items or things to look for.

Table 8.3 Example of manifest coding categories

| |
|--|
| |
|--|

| Content | Examples |
|----------------------|---|
| Words | The frequency or placement of a particular word |
| People | Who is included and their characteristics (e.g. nurses, children) The frequency or placement of a particular person May also include the groupings of people (e.g. mom is always with baby) |
| Size and composition | Shape, size, and colour of content Amount of space occupied (e.g. size of advertisement) |
| Things | The frequency or placement of things Groupings of things (e.g. pictures of mom with a vacuum cleaner, pictures of dad with sporting equipment) |
| Action | What people, animals or things (e.g. car racing down a track) are doing |
| Visual content | The content of the images presented in mediums such as art, film, and online |
| Physical layout | How people, animals, or items are positioned in the text or visual representation The social distance between people, animals, or things The physical layout of the space |
| Themes | The frequency of themes (e.g. mom frustrated that child does not help with housework) |

Latent approaches

Latent approaches look for underlying meaning. Rather than search for specific words, themes, or other characteristics (e.g. colour, shape), they rely on a set of interpretative guidelines. You should review the content more holistically, looking

more broadly for the meaning or essence of the object (e.g. diary) under study. Latent approaches usually demand that you have a substantial stock of knowledge about the context, people, or events surrounding the materials so that you can interpret them in historically, culturally, and institutionally sensitive ways.

John McLevey outlines how open source software can be used to find topics that are frequently utilised in text-based document analyses. In the example below, McLevey demonstrates how this can be used as a starting point to find common themes among the documents, but he also underscores the need for the researcher to engage in careful qualitative analysis and interpretation to make sense of the results.

Generative Topic Models for Qualitative, Comparative and Historical Researchers

John McLevey

The recent explosion of digital data, dramatic increases in computing power and the continued improvement of open source software for research computing have revolutionized the social sciences. These developments have many obvious benefits for quantitative social science, but the potential benefits to qualitative, comparative and historical social science are less widely appreciated. Text analysis, in all its theoretical and methodological diversity, is one of several areas where qualitative and computational researchers have much to offer one another (Nelson, 2020; McLevey, 2021). The uptake (and development) of generative topic models in fields like cultural and political sociology are an excellent example of this exciting combination.

Generative topic models come in a wide variety of forms, but the most foundational and widely used is Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) (Blei, Ng, & Jordan, 2003). In a nutshell, LDA is a probabilistic model that attempts to find latent themes (i.e. topics) in large text datasets. Since computers don't actually understand language, we have to represent our text data numerically. This is *typically* done by using a 'bag-of-words' approach, where words in each document are counted or weighted, but information about the order in which they appear is discarded. The result is a 'document-term matrix' (DTM), where each text document is a row and each unique word across the entire corpus is a column. If there are 874,239 unique words in your entire dataset, then there will be 874,239 columns in your DTM. The cells in the DTM usually indicate the presence or absence of each word in each document, a count of the number of times the word appears, or a computed weight that incorporates information from other documents in the dataset.

This way of representing text throws away an enormous amount of information that might seem entirely indefensible from the perspective of painstaking qualitative analysis, but it is *not a replacement* for such work. It's the starting point for one component of a mixed-method and iterative approach to text analysis that allows researchers to balance interpretive depth (via qualitative methods) with quantitative breadth (via computational methods).

Generative topic models use these and other simplified numerical representations of text data to compute the probability of words co-occurring within documents. LDA models are designed to reverse engineer the *latent*

topics that could plausibly have *generated* the particular combinations of words that are observed in the data. For example, if the words ‘doctor’, ‘physician’, ‘health’ and ‘hospital’ tend to co-occur in many documents, it could be because those documents are about healthcare, whereas combinations of words such as ‘doctor’, ‘professor’, ‘research’ and ‘student’ are likely about higher education.

This simple example illustrates one of the core assumptions of LDA models: that words tend to co-occur in documents because they are about the same kind of thing. In other words, they share a *latent topic*. The latent topic makes some combinations of words, such as ‘doctor’ and ‘health’ or ‘doctor’ and ‘research’ more likely than other combinations of words, such as ‘doctor’ and ‘helicopter’. The trick is to figure out what the latent topics are that *most likely* account for what we observe in our data. The statistical machine learning that enables us to figure that out is fairly involved, but you can find relatively accessible explanations in Blei (2012) or McLevey (2021) if you are interested.

LDA makes two other very important assumptions. One is that text documents contain multiple themes in different proportions. For example, a news story about transitions to renewable energy is not *just* about renewable energy. It might also contain topics about science and engineering, the social and political challenges associated with transitions, potential impacts on climate change, and so on, but it’s unlikely to contain topics related to music reviews or how professional sports leagues adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic. It’s *possible*, but highly unlikely. The final core assumption is that every unique word *could* appear in any topic, but again with a different probability. This enables LDA topic models to model polysemy in a way that is not true for many other types of text analysis.

So, what does the output from a topic model look like? In almost all cases what you get back from a topic model is a lot of numbers that have to be connected back to the original texts in some way. Those numbers represent (1) the distribution of discovered topics across all documents, and (2) the distributions of words across all topics, which provide some initial insight into what those topics are. At this point, you interpret the topics, usually by looking at the words that are most strongly associated with each and by reading and interpreting the original documents that are strongly associated with each topic. There are quantitative approaches to evaluating the quality of these models (Wallach et al., 2009), but the most common way to evaluate them is to assess their face validity qualitatively.

To make this a bit less abstract, consider a brief example. My student Tyler Crick and I developed a topic model of roughly a million parliamentary speeches by Canadian politicians from the Canadian Commons Hansard. Our model (which was not an LDA model, but rather a more recently developed type of generative topic model proposed by Gerlach et al., 2018) discovered more than 200 coherent topics, six of which are summarized in the table below. Each of these topics assigns a probability to every unique word in the dataset (not shown in this example). Take a look at the table and hazard a guess as to what these latent topics are about!

| Topic A Words | Topic B Words | Topic C Words | Topic D Words | Topic E Words | Topic F Words |
|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|

| Topic A Words | Topic B Words | Topic C Words | Topic D Words | Topic E Words | Topic F Words |
|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| gas | regime | infrastructure | emergency | social | society |
| climate | violation | municipality | vaccine | poverty | principle |
| carbon | Iran | road | virus | poor | value |
| emission | torture | building | outbreak | rich | institution |
| clean | protest | municipal | SARS | living | fundamental |
| greenhouse | Iranian | construction | pandemic | welfare | basic |
| fuel | Cuba | transit | spread | wealth | equal |
| pollution | activist | mayor | epidemic | decent | voice |
| green | brutal | bus | preparedness | inequality | concept |
| ethanol | Egypt | design | Ebola | disadvantaged | powerful |
| heating | dictator | stream | dose | load | ideal |
| warming | systematic | councillor | H1N1 | hungry | characteristic |
| fossil | Venezuela | Municipalities | flu | disparity | like |
| temperature | Khadr | sewer | influenza | needy | cornerstone |
| Climate | execution | Mayor | quarantine | steady | noble |

| Topic A Words | Topic B Words | Topic C Words | Topic D Words | Topic E Words | Topic F Words |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| polluter | embargo | pass | infectious | kitchen | Coalition |
| Change | Omar | upgrade | kit | pie | institutional |
| pollutant | Amnesty | shovel | mask | clothe | philosophical |
| dioxide | Burma | subway | containment | tory | motivated |
| diesel | Myanmar | Road | avian | soup | hallmark |

Hopefully, this brief introduction makes it clear that topic modelling requires careful *qualitative interpretation* paired with probabilistic thinking and modelling. If you are interested in learning more about how to combine these two things, I recommend reading Laura Nelson's (2020) 'Computational Grounded Theory'. You can also find a beginner-friendly introduction in McLevey (2021).

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Blei, D. (2012). Probabilistic topic models. *Communications of the ACM*, 55(4), 77–84.

DiMaggio, P., Nag, M., & Blei, D. (2013). Exploiting affinities between topic modeling and the sociological perspective on culture: Application to newspaper coverage of US government arts funding. *Poetics*, 41(6), 570–606.

McLevey, J. (2021). *Doing computational social science*. Sage.

Nelson, L. (2020). Computational grounded theory: A methodological framework. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 49(1), 3–42.

Gerlach, M., Peixoto, T., & Altmann, E. (2018). A network approach to topic models *Science Advances*, 4(7).

Wallach, H., Murray, I., Salakhutdinov, R., & Mimno, D. (2009). Evaluation methods for topic models. *Proceedings of the 26th annual international conference on machine learning*.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined concrete tools for using unobtrusive methods. To review, we first discussed types of unobtrusive methods, including examining social behaviour and physical traces. Next, we outlined considerations and techniques, including systematic and non-systematic approaches. As we detailed in this chapter, unobtrusive methods provide almost a limitless range of data.

FURTHER SUGGESTED READING

Burles, M., & Bally, J. (2018). Ethical, practical, and methodological considerations for unobtrusive qualitative research about personal narratives shared on the internet. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17(1), 160940691878820–. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918788203>

The internet provides researchers with a treasure trove of data on about every topic under the sun. Some of this data includes individuals sharing personal stories, sometimes in real time. While the unsolicited nature of these stories can provide researchers with authentic ‘raw’ accounts, they are usually not created for research purposes. What are our ethical obligations when using these accounts?

Tunnell, K. (2012). Reflections on visual field research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11(4), 340–351. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691201100403>

Tunnell describes his reflections, experiences, and encounters taking photographs in the field. He describes encountering hostility, suspicion, and threats. Published in 2012, readers can reflect on how years later the widespread use of smartphones and normalization of selfies and photographing ‘everything’ have likely lessened the potential ‘threat’ of camera-happy researchers!

Ørmen, J., & Thorhauge, A. (2015). Smartphone log data in a qualitative perspective. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 3(3), 335–350. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157914565845>

Log data from smartphones can also be used in the context of qualitative research including using it to elicit responses in the context of an interview. It can also help researchers contextualize their qualitative data and situate participants’ routines.

SAGE CASE STUDIES

Heyes, K. (2017). Using virtual ethnography to research vulnerable participants online: A case study of mental health online community support forums. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. www.doi.org/10.4135/9781526403605

Kilbane, S. (2018). Using unobtrusive data to study criminal behavior: Understanding malicious contamination incidents. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. www.doi.org/10.4135/9781526440556

Robitaille, C. (2020). Understanding contemporary drug use using a web-based ethnographic approach. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. www.doi.org/10.4135/9781529717600

KEY TERMS

| | | |
|----------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| <u>Accretion Measures</u> | <u>Manifest Approaches</u> | <u>Social Behaviour</u> |
| <u>Covert Observations</u> | <u>Non-Covert Observations</u> | <u>Systematic Social Observations</u> |
| <u>Erosion Measures</u> | <u>Non-Systematic Social Observations</u> | <u>Unobtrusive Methods</u> |
| <u>Latent Approaches</u> | <u>Physical Traces</u> | |

PART III ANALYSING AND WRITING UP YOUR RESEARCH

9 HOW TO DO DATA ANALYSIS: THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO CODING

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter you will have the tools to:

- Prepare your data for [coding](#)
- Develop a [codebook](#)
- Understand the basic structure of coding, including [codes](#), [categories](#), and [themes](#)
- Conduct [pre-coding](#), [first-cycle](#), and [second-cycle coding](#)

Chapter summary

We often start a project seeking that perfect ah-ha moment. Yet, as Richards (2009) notes, these insights do not arrive out of thin air. Instead, most discoveries are the product of good research design and ongoing analysis. In this chapter, we present one of the main ways researchers bring order to qualitative data: coding. We take you from the early stages of preparing your data to first- and second-cycle coding.

INTRODUCTION

The majority of projects arrive at a good conclusion through analysis processes rather than a grand moment of discovery. Arrival will be confirmed by growing confidence that you really know what is going on. It happens, in other words, over time, through thinking and working with the data. (Richards, 2009, p. 143)

We have written this chapter for qualitative researchers who are relatively new to the process of data analysis. Qualitative data analysis can be daunting and confusing, so we have avoided the 'everything and the kitchen sink' approach. Our goal is to offer concrete strategies for bringing order to qualitative data by coding. We recognize other ways to analyse qualitative data, and coding is inappropriate for some projects and approaches to qualitative methods (Saldana, 2013). Our discussion is also primarily focused on analysing texts such as transcripts, field notes, documents and online materials. Once you have a good understanding of at least one of the primary methods for analysing qualitative data, you can expand your toolkit.

In addition to understanding the mechanics of coding, Matt Rafalow (featured in this chapter) reminds us of two important lessons. First, Rafalow's example illustrates the role of ongoing reflection throughout the research process. Good researchers do not just 'decide' and 'move on'; they continuously question whether a particular decision or approach honours the data. They ask: 'Am I getting it? Does my analysis reflect

what is going on?’ Second, Rafalow provides a poignant example of how our personal feelings can be an important data source. By carefully ‘separating out’ observed data from our reflections, we can evaluate both others and ourselves in the pursuit of knowledge.

Below we detail the generic timeline of qualitative data analysis discussed in this chapter. Some of these steps, such as developing a codebook, start early and continue throughout the project’s data collection and analysis phases. Others, such as deciding on the tool you will use to analyse your data, occur only once. More experienced researchers will likely come into a project knowing that they intend to use a particular [computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software \(CAQDAS\)](#) program, for example.

This chapter outlines the steps to prepare your data, create a codebook, write memos, and choose the appropriate coding tools. We provide you with the tools to develop a codebook, engage in various coding approaches, and the steps of pre-coding, first-cycle coding and second-cycle coding.

1. *Step One: Getting Prepared:* We will outline how you should prepare your data, including developing a codebook and selecting the tool(s) you will use to analyse your data.
2. *Step Two: Pre-Coding, First-Cycle and Second-Cycle Coding:* We will explain how you should approach data collection, including pre-coding your data while collecting it and are still in the early phases of data analysis. Next, we will show you how to conduct first-cycle and second-cycle coding.

STEP ONE: GETTING PREPARED

Key takeaways



- Preparing, labelling and organizing data early will help you keep the project organized
- Develop themes and codes early on and continue to develop them as you engage in the coding process
- There are many types of coding, from manual coding to using computer-assisted software
- Data analysis is an ongoing process

In this section, we discuss preparing your data, creating a [codebook](#), writing [memos](#) and selecting the tools you will use to code (e.g. [CAQDAS](#)). You should not leave these tasks until the end of data collection. Treating your data analysis as an ongoing process will allow you to gain a deeper familiarity with your materials and likely generate more meaningful insights.

Preparing your data: early considerations and tasks

As you collect your data, you must prepare your data for analysis.

- *Labelling*: Organize and label all transcripts, field notes, pictures, or other qualitative materials. A label should include all the information you need to readily retrieve and identify the data, such as the name, location, contact information and date of data collection. You may think that you will remember, but as you collect more data or engage in larger projects, labelling, and organization are crucial to success.
- *Making decisions about what to code*: In all likelihood, you will not be able to code all the data you have collected. In the process of selecting a community group, for example, you may have collected information about many other community groups. Depending on your research question, these data may be relegated to a paragraph in your methods section about how you ended up selecting group 'A' over groups 'B' or 'C'. It is also not uncommon for researchers to decide whether they want, at least initially, to code the entire transcript or sections of the transcript. Your interview schedule, for example, may have been divided into several sections to capture a reasonably wide range of topics, with only one or two being pertinent to the research question you plan on answering in your thesis or a particular paper. In collaborative projects, decisions may have been made early about which part of the interview each person 'owns'.
- *Preparing documents*: If you have transcripts or field notes, Saldana (2013) recommends double spacing text or creating 'stanzas' (Gee et al., 1992). Stanza is a term used to describe grouping texts that represents a particular topic or line of discussion. Line spaces are used to separate stanzas to define a new topic or direction. In the example below, we divided the text into three separate stanzas to differentiate the discussion about parent engagement, worries about friends and friends as bad influences. Each stanza is separated by a researcher question.

Example: Preparing Your Documents – the Role of Stanzas

QUESTION: What does the term parent engagement mean to you?

PARTICIPANT 1: Well it's like being there, you know. Being supportive.

QUESTION: Can you elaborate on what you mean by 'being there' and 'supportive'?

PARTICIPANT 1: Being engaged means that I take responsibility for raising my kid, not the school or anyone else. I make it a point to know what is happening at school, you know in terms of the curriculum, deadlines, homework, what teachers expect, what Sara should be working on to succeed. We work with Sara every night on her homework. We check it. But beyond school stuff, being engaged also means knowing your kid's friends, and what your child is doing. I guess for me it's hard to articulate because it's so pervasive. There's no one thing, it's really everything. School, after-school, what they're watching on TV, who they're texting, what's on their phone ... monitoring their friends. Wow, that's a big one.

QUESTION: How so?

PARTICIPANT 1: The friend thing is so huge now. All this texting and hanging out. Kids coming over to the house. As a parent you're always wondering, who is this kid, do I want them hanging around my house? Who are their parents? What are they up to? You wouldn't believe the stuff that I've heard.

QUESTION: Like what?

PARTICIPANT 1: Well, there are so many kids that are just bad influences. One kid, I thought I knew her, seemed so sweet. Well, she was selling drugs out of her mom's car no less. And I heard about another one, I can't recall his

name. But anyway, another bad egg. He stole a case of wine from his job, he was bussing tables. Of course, he got caught. These kids, they think they're so clever sometimes. But anyway, you just have to be so careful. Here's this kid, who looks sweet, has good grades and is all 'yes, sir, please and thank you', when they come to your house, and next thing you know they're busted for selling drugs. Really scary stuff.

- *Formatting*: If you import your data into CAQDAS, format it to the software program specifications (e.g. .docx, pdf). The variation of the programs and ongoing program upgrades makes it impractical to list all the formats. Consult the specifications of the software program.
- *To hard copy or not*: Even if you plan on importing materials into CAQDAS, some researchers find it helpful to have a hard copy handy as a reference guide. If you have [accretion measures](#) (e.g. photos), you can lay out your materials on the floor or use a corkboard to display them. Some researchers find it helpful to physically see, touch, and arrange their materials before and during data analysis.

The codebook

A [codebook](#) 'is a set of Codes, definitions, and examples used as a guide to help analyze data' (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011, p. 138). Starting a codebook should be part of the planning process, but it is an ongoing task that gets modified along the way as you refine your analysis. The point of the codebook is to formally operationalize your [codes](#), and maintain consistency across [coding](#) and, in some cases, across coders. A very elaborate and multi-person project may require a lot more detail, while a researcher working alone may require short and simple descriptions to stay on track.

Specify each code, define what each code means, and the limits or exclusions of each code. You should also include a representative quote to remind you of the essence of a particular code. Modifying MacQueen et al. (1998) and others (Saldana, 2013), a codebook usually includes the following information:

Code name: The label that you have assigned to the code

Code definition: A short description of the code

Inclusion and exclusion criteria: The criteria or central characteristic that justifies the material's inclusion or exclusion from a particular code

Examples: One or two examples (e.g. interview quote) that best represent the code

There are other categories that you may include in your codebook. Saldana (2013) suggests including a 'close, but no' category to specify material that could be mistaken for a particular code (in other words, the 'close but no cigar' example). Some researchers also suggest separating the 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' criteria into separate categories. If a particular code is related closely to one of your interview questions, you may also want to include an 'Interview Question' column.

While it sounds very technical, a codebook can be developed using a simple Word document or Excel file. Some CAQDAS will populate a codebook for you after you create codes with the descriptions and information. Rather than be too prescriptive about the codebook format, we have provided you with a simple template that is easily modified to suit a range of topics and organizational preferences ([Table 9.1](#)). Some researchers may want to organize codes alphabetically; others may prefer to organize their codebook by topic, concept, or theory.

Table 9.1 Codebook template

| Code | Description | Inclusion/exclusion | Example |
|------|-------------|---------------------|---------|
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |

Data analysis tools: from manual to CAQDAS options

Finally, you will need to decide on the tools you will use for data analysis. There are options: a) Manual; b) Word or Excel; and c) CAQDAS.

Manual options

The most low-tech option is to code manually. There are two basic strategies for manual coding (see [Table 9.2](#) for a summary). The first strategy is to use a hard copy of the data – transcript, field notes, and so forth. Some researchers like to colour-code text with a highlighter or marker, using different colours to signify a particular code or category (e.g. green for 'hate school' and yellow for 'love school'). You can use sticky notes to add notes or memos on the side.

Other researchers prefer to write the main text on recipe cards, with each recipe card containing one passage of text. Similarly, some researchers prefer to cut text directly out of the transcript, with each strip of paper containing one passage of text. Researchers arrange and rearrange the cards or strips of paper into different piles that correspond to a particular code or category (e.g. pile 1 = hate school; pile 2 = love school). Regardless of the method, researchers eventually arrange codes and categories into more prominent **categories** and **themes**.

Manual coding is not without its drawbacks. If you think this is an easier or quicker option – think again. Manual coding is very labour intensive and can become unmanageable if the project involves a lot of qualitative data or multiple researchers. However, for a (very) small pilot project, manual coding is a reasonable option. For newer and less experienced researchers, manual coding may help them feel closer to the data and gain a deeper understanding of the process of coding. And some researchers prefer to code manually for personal or methodological reasons.

Table 9.2 Coding manually

| | Possible tools |
|--|---|
| <p>Researchers use a colour-coding system to differentiate codes, patterns, or themes</p> <p>Researchers often write in the margins</p> <p>Some researchers write chunks of text on recipe cards or cut transcripts up by text passages. Each card or strip of paper serves as one code, and researchers organize the cards or strips into broader categories and themes</p> | <p>Printed transcripts, memos, or unobtrusive data</p> <p>Pens, highlighters, recipe cards, Post-it notes, scissors</p> |

Word or Excel

The middle-ground option is to code data using a Word or Excel file (see [Table 9.3](#) for a summary). However, like the manual option, using Word or Excel can become unmanageable very quickly. In a Word document, you can colour-code text, copy and paste sections of text into different codes, categories or themes, or do both. Like manual coding, each section of text or colour represents another code, category or theme. Additionally, you can copy and paste into new Word files, with each file being a different code, category or theme. You can also use tools such as textboxes to make notes or comments, such as through track-changes, to act like sticky notes along the side of the document.

In Excel, you can organize columns and rows in various ways to separate your data into different codes, categories or themes. The most straightforward option is to place each interviewee or set of field notes into a separate row and then create columns that correspond to a particular code, category, or theme.

Table 9.3 Coding using Word or Excel

| | Possible tools |
|---|--|
| <p>In a Word document, researchers can do one or more of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlight text and use a colour-coding system to differentiate codes, categories or themes • Cut and paste sections of text, grouping text by codes, categories, or themes • In the 'Review' toolbar, use the 'New Comment' function to add memos or comments on the side • In the 'Insert' toolbar, use the 'Text Box' function to add memos or comments within the body of the document <p>In an Excel document, researchers can:</p> <p>Create columns relating to codes, categories, or themes. Create rows that relate to each individual piece of data or person</p> | <p>Word:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlighting • Copy and paste function • New Comment function <p>Excel:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copy and paste function |

CAQDAS options

CAQDAS programs are excellent organizational tools for storing, organizing, and coding qualitative data (see [Table 9.4](#) for a summary). Qualitative research projects tend to generate mountains of data that can become unmanageable, even for the most experienced researcher. It is not surprising that many share Saldana's sentiment about CAQDAS programs: when one considers the ability to quickly move back and forth between analytical tasks and 'recode, code, uncode, rename, delete, move, merge, group, and assign different codes to shorter and longer passages of text with a few mouse clicks and keystrokes ... the advantages of CAQDAS over paper and pencil soon become apparent' (Saldana, 2013, pp. 33–34).

While CAQDAS programs include various advanced features, you can learn everything you need to know to perform basic coding in about three hours. Your university or college may offer workshops, and there are many videos, tutorials, and other resources online (e.g. manuals).

Table 9.4 Coding using CAQDAS

| | Possible tools |
|---|--|
| <p>Once the materials are imported into the selected program (see software specifications for formatting), most CAQDAS software allows researchers to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize and store a large amount of data. Researchers can import a variety of data including documents, jpegs, videos, mp3 files, and pdfs • Assign data to codes and develop broader umbrella categories and themes • Organize codes separately or into a family-tree-like structure to signify a pattern, relationship, or hierarchy • Assign a passage of text, picture, or other to more than one code • Create, add, delete, merge, or modify codes and their content as the project develops • Review materials line by line, picture by picture, and so forth • Search for key words or phrases • Link one piece of data with another • Write memos • Conduct a content analysis • Create various kinds of displays (e.g. matrix) or data maps | <p>ATLAS.ti Dedoose MAXQDA NVivo</p> |

Programs will vary, but many of the most popular brands allow researchers to import a variety of data, including documents, jpegs, videos, mp3 or other audio files and pdfs. Once the data are imported, CAQDAS programs will allow you to create codes. The coding structure may vary slightly, but most will allow you to develop standalone codes (e.g. Free Nodes) or codes that are structured like a family tree (e.g. Tree Nodes).

Family-tree-like codes are usually organized hierarchically, with the master or parent code first, followed by 'child' codes and even 'grandchild' and 'great-grandchild' codes following it. NVivo, for example, offers researchers a lot of flexibility. Standalone Free Nodes can be left as is or developed into more elaborate Tree Nodes as the project develops; conversely, a Tree Node may be broken apart into many different Free Nodes. And you may decide that a 'child' node should become a 'parent' node at some point. The programs allow you to move around, arrange, and rearrange your coding as you move from first-cycle to second-cycle coding.

[Figure 9.1](#) is an example of Janice Aurini's project on parent engagement using NVivo. You can assign data to more than one code at a time and make changes to the codes, assignments or the data itself at any point. The beauty of these programs is that while only segments of data are assigned to a code (e.g. a passage of text), you will be able to see where the data came from readily. So, if you are working with transcripts, each small coded passage of text will include the label you have assigned to it (e.g. Mary Smith, Parent, East End School, 1 July 2014). You will also be able to readily access the entire transcript with a click of a button if you want to re-read the whole transcript again or see the text just before or after the passage ([Figure 9.2](#)).

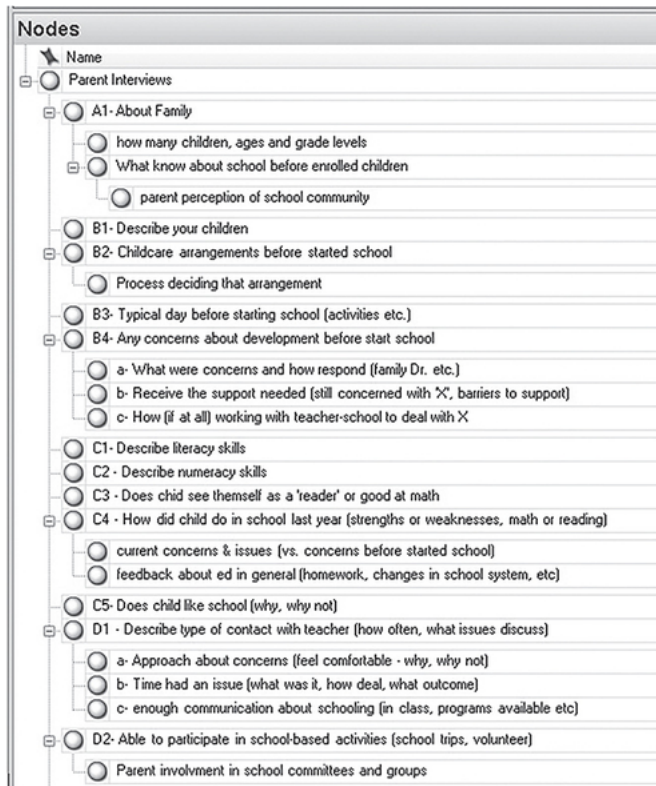


Figure 9.1 Coding example using NVivo (NVivo 10–2012)

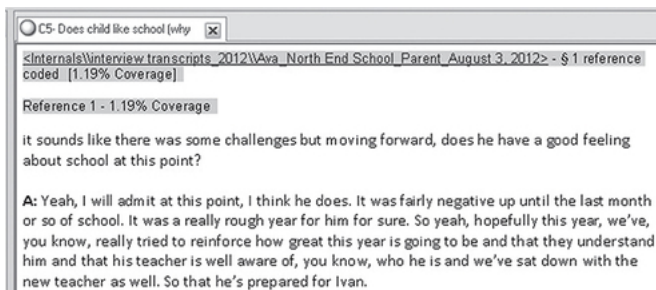


Figure 9.2 Access to interview transcripts using NVivo (NVivo 10–2012)

What is the 'best' qualitative software? Many programs will get the job done. If you are new to qualitative data analysis, speak to colleagues who have some familiarity with CAQDAS about your project and anticipated coding needs.

It is also not practical to provide you with instructions for using CAQDAS software as the specifications change with each update. Once you have selected your software, most brands provide detailed and easy-to-follow instructions (e.g. how to import documents, how to create codes). Your post-secondary institution may even sponsor information or training workshops.

There is a lingering misconception that CAQDAS programs code for you. Fortunately, the field has matured. Most qualitative researchers appreciate that while many programs allow you to search for words (e.g. auto code), it is ultimately your responsibility to verify the accuracy and authenticity of the code by manually going through each coded passage to ensure that it belongs. In short, coding that is sloppy, selective, or distanced from the data can occur whether one codes manually or with a

CAQDAS program. Responsible and ethical coding that captures the essence of your data results from careful and thoughtful data analysis, not the specific tool or program you use to code.

STEP TWO: PRE-CODING, FIRST-CYCLE AND SECOND-CYCLE CODING

Key takeaways



- Coding evolves throughout the data analysis, from very tentative pre-coding to more descriptive first-cycle coding, to more thematic second-cycle coding
- When engaging in data analysis, return to your codebook and the data. New themes, and therefore new codes, may emerge throughout the process

The terms **pre-coding**, **first-cycle**, and **second-cycle coding** generate an image of a neat and orderly process that occurs in distinct and compartmentalized stages. More experienced researchers know that coding is an iterative process that evolves as the data collection and analysis progresses. Importantly as we and others (e.g. Miles et al., 2014; Saldana, 2013) recommend, data analysis and coding should occur throughout the data collection phase.

This section outlines a condensed version of what Saldana (2013) refers to as 'generic coding' (p. 64). This approach spans several qualitative methods and is quite amenable to grounded theory, one of the most widely used methods of analysing qualitative data. As Miles et al. (2014) observe, most approaches to qualitative coding share the same basic steps. Below, we present a condensed and slightly modified version of their list that we will expand on in the remainder of the chapter.

- **Pre-coding**: Assign preliminary codes to collected text (e.g. transcripts, field notes, websites) as you collect your data. You can do this manually, in a Word document, or start a project in your selected CAQDAS program.
- **First-cycle coding**: Review pre-coding and make changes as needed. Continue to assign codes to collected text (e.g. transcripts, field notes, websites). First-cycle coding tends to be more descriptive and captures the central characteristics embedded in the data. You should begin to develop tentative propositions about what you think is going on, patterns, and even some possible categories and themes.
- **Second-cycle coding**:
 - Early stages: Review first-cycle codes and start to reorganize and subsume, where appropriate, first-cycle codes into broader categories. You should start to isolate patterns. If required, you can use these insights to inform the next wave of data collection.
 - Later stages: Again, review categories and revise or add categories as needed. Compare and contrast emerging propositions with established

concepts, theories and findings. Start to develop master themes that capture the overarching essence of the data. Themes each subsume, where appropriate, several categories, which comprise a collection of codes.

Even at the early stages of second-cycle coding, start to develop a set of propositions about what you think is going on. Your propositions will later inform the themes that develop at later stages of data analysis.

Getting started: pre-coding

Saldana (2013) and others (e.g. Layder, 1998) recommend **pre-coding** your data. As you collect your data, review your materials, make notes, highlight key passages, and start to craft preliminary codes and memos.

Preliminary codes that can be created in advance, even during the early stages of your data collection and analysis, include (see also Miles et al., 2014, p. 81):

- *Description or attribute codes*: Attribute codes capture the basic characteristics of the people, places, or things in your study.
- *Deductive codes*: Deductive codes are generated from your research questions, key concepts, theories that you have drawn on to design your study, and your literature review.
- *Interview schedule*: You can also use the questions posed in your interview schedule to create an initial list of codes.
- *'Potpourri'*: Given the infancy of data collection and analysis, you should feel free to follow your gut instinct. These codes may or may not initially fit with your larger framework but instead strike you as important for their potential empirical or theoretical utility.

Write 'memos' – your thoughts, hunches, theoretical musing, questions about the data, problems with the analysis, relationships with the participants, your own emotions, questions about your coding decisions – throughout the pre-coding and coding process.

In [Chapter 5](#), we discussed four types of memos:

- **Summative memos** are a basic description of the participants and a general overview of what happened during data collection.
- **Theoretical memos** are conceptual ideas that emerged during data collection, in the field or while reviewing your data.
- **Methodological memos** relate to any methodological or data collection issues that emerged during data collection.
- **Personal memos** are all your reflections about issues that may have affected the quality of the data collection.

Memos can be simply written in the margins or created in a separate document. Most CAQDAS programs have some function that allows you to add memos either separately, or connected to a piece of data. Saldana (2013), on the other hand, dislikes using the 'memo' function in CAQDAS programs, and instead prefers to write analytical memos freely first, before determining how to label them or situating them within the larger project. Only you can decide what works for you – a simple pad of paper, notes in the margins of your documents or CAQDAS memo function.

Memos are an essential part of data analysis and should be written throughout the data collection process. Rafalow reflects on his use of brackets to add to his field notes. This technique is similar to creating memos; it is a handy way to remember everything that you are thinking and feeling along the way.

How to Relive, and Relearn, Middle School

Matt Rafalow, Google¹

Middle school was a horrific time for me. I was bullied and isolated in ways that affected me well into early adulthood. When I started the fieldwork that led to my book *Digital Divisions* (2020), I justified its focus on middle schools by explaining that middle school is important to study because it is a period that affects students' later life chances and opportunities, and that it is sorely under-researched. But this was not the full truth of what motivated my study. My own story motivated it, too.

¹ This chapter does not reflect the views or opinions of Google.

Part of why I wanted to 'go back' was to examine the unresolved. As an undergraduate, I remember reading Pascoe's *Dude You're a Fag* (2007) and feeling deeply seen. She unpacked how constructions of gender and sexuality, rooted in peer dynamics in high school, shaped troubling forms of harassment. But it wasn't enough. I needed to go to earlier grades, to the 'scene' of what I experienced, to understand why kids go through what they do – and why *I* went through what I did. Early on, I willfully ignored what felt like a cognitive dissonance of sociological and psychological motivations.

It didn't help that my training gave me mixed messages about the value and risk of honouring and using my own experiences in pursuing my fieldwork and analysing what I observed. How do you generate and code field observations into science, and not a report of your own subjective interpretations? There's been quite a lot written about this topic by ethnographers already (Flaherty et al., 2002). But what I'd like to offer is a template for how, through my process of observation and analysis, I both found some peace *and* produced science.

I did, indeed, relive some of the worst parts of middle school as I pursued this project. But fieldwork and ongoing analysis exposed me to a process of *relearning* middle school – in ways that helped me to more fully document school social structures. I realized that this process of relearning was not too different from how ethnographers carry with them into the field their assumptions from existing literatures and, through their iterations between observation and analysis, build on what we know in science. Further, and most importantly, if I had not been reflexive about my past, I would not have been able to uncover what I did.

One of the tactics that I was taught by my ethnographer-mentor David Snow was to take field notes in ways that differentiate what I *actually* observed from every other kind of thought I had by using brackets []. Here is an example from my field notes:

Walked out of a seventh grade class where we had just watched a video documentary that included a bit about the statue of Lincoln sitting in a chair at the capital. Six students who had just walked out of the class, too, gathered together by lockers in the hallway. They were making fun of another young man in the group by suggesting he would want to sit on Lincoln's lap. 'Oh, you'd love to sit on his lap. You'd totally love it, Eric!' Another student responds: 'Eew, he's gay I knew it!' Another young man in the group started to mimic sitting

down, and made a facial expression that resembled sexual enjoyment. Eric periodically says 'shut up' but does not otherwise respond. Ms. Leary, a teacher who had been present during the entire interaction, chuckled. She says, 'Eric, maybe if you paid attention in class you'd have a better comeback. You're letting your man Lincoln down!' The whole group laughs, and Eric is quiet.

[I wonder what Eric is thinking and feeling as this happens. This seems to be a clear example of what Pascoe observed in her work on harassment.]

[I'm not feeling well after observing this. I feel anxious. I think I had a flashback from my own experiences of being harassed like Eric and a teacher only making it worse. Are all middle schools like this? Are status hierarchies just a fact of life that will always lead to someone getting hurt?]

Notice I used brackets to differentiate observations from questions I have to myself. But I also used brackets to share the flashbacks and anxiety I felt, even linking these woes to existing work on status hierarchies that share similar conclusions I had at that time. This is a practice that is an attempt to 'separate out' the real from the subjective (Krieger, 2018). Bracketing made it easier to identify specific vignettes from the field in my later writing. But I later realized that my bracketed reflections, including my feelings, were valuable data, too.

My coding process was modelled from Emerson, Fretz and Shaw's (1995) work on field notes and analysis. I analysed field notes and interviews throughout my data collection process, generating codes as emergent themes came up; I identified how themes connected to existing scholarship; and then developed new questions I would then investigate back in the field. As the project continued, I expected I would whittle these codes down even further into more specific categories that might tell me something new about the literatures they speak to.

Early on in my analysis, I considered coding only non-bracketed observations in the interest of producing the most scientific results. But I couldn't shake the feeling that ignoring my bracketed anxiety was somehow wrong. So, I coded my thoughts and feelings, too, ensuring that I knew which were bracketed excerpts and which were not. In analysing these sections, I found myself creating new codes, like 'anxiety' or 'flashback'. In a particularly dark period early on as I iteratively analysed this data, I wondered whether bullying truly is a fact of life (I even created a code to this effect), and suspected that maybe there will always be kids like me and Eric that will suffer from the brunt of harassment at school.

After this coding work, a process that specifically included mapping out my own feelings, I realized what I ended up with were more research questions that I needed to pursue in the field. Was bullying a fact of life at each of the three schools I studied? How did bullying *feel* to the students at the different schools? Did it feel like how I remembered it? Did teachers similarly participate in student harassment?

If I had not coded these feelings and flashbacks, I would not have known to seek out answers in the field. I did, in fact, observe bullying happen at each of the three schools I studied. I could have let both my memories ('bullying is always traumatizing', 'bullying is a fact of life') and existing work ('bullying can lead to life altering trauma', 'bullying is a durable feature of status hierarchies') lead me to move on and focus on other phenomena at school. But by testing these assumptions in the field I realized that they were quite wrong.

While bullying did indeed occur at the three schools I studied, I found that the meaning and structure of harassment varied quite significantly by school. The

school from the field notes I shared earlier was quite similar to the school I grew up attending: harassment was rampant, often targeted towards marginalized students based on gender, sexuality or race, and teachers participated in bullying. But because I analysed both what I observed *and* what I felt and used this to identify new questions, I learned that harassment worked differently at the other schools. Not only was the subject of bullying different at other schools – focusing, instead, on romantic dramas – but its life cycle was different, too. Students at the other schools told me how after bullying happened they would try to defuse the underlying cause, offering support to both the harasser and the bullied, to understand what was going on and how they could help. Further, I found out that teachers played a much, much more important role in student harassment than I realized. Had I only focused on observed bullying within peer student groups – what I initially felt compelled to focus on due to my own history – I would have missed that teachers at the school where bullying was the worst were being bullied by other teachers, too. They described to me a hostile workplace, where they learned to expect hostility from one another, and saw how this informed how they treated students with hostility as well. This didn't exist at the other schools.

For me, coding and analysing data is a process of evaluating both others and yourself in the pursuit of building on what we know about human behaviour. To ignore your past and current experiences, including how you feel as you collect data, is to ignore the full range of the social structures you seek to understand. Armed with perspectives from scholars past, I analysed my own experiences in the field – and in doing so, I was able to gain a more complete picture of the structure of school experience, too.

Questions for reflection

1. What are the key 'takeaway' lessons?
2. What does Rafalow mean by 'separating out' the 'real from the subjective'? How is this accomplished at the data collection phase? How is it accomplished at the data analysis and write-up phase?
3. What are the benefits and challenges of mapping out and incorporating personal feelings and experiences?

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Quick tip: How to start coding

As we have repeated throughout the chapter, you should code throughout the data collection phase.

- If you are using CAQDAS, refer to your codebook and create your initial codes in the program.
- Start slowly and with one transcript, one day's worth of field notes, one internet post, and so forth.
- First, read over the data in its entirety. Review any memos that you have written related to that data during the pre-coding phase.
- Start at the beginning of the document, and code small sections of text at a time, while keeping in mind the text in its entirety.
- When appropriate, assign pre-existing codes to sections of text.
- Develop new codes as they emerge or make changes and update the codebook.

While you should be thoughtful, do not get too bogged down with creating the 'perfect' code. Throughout the coding process, you will have ample opportunity to modify or discard codes, add additional examples or clarifications, merge multiple codes into larger ones, and so forth.

Developing codes: first-cycle codes

First-cycle coding is when codes are 'initially assigned to data chunks' (Miles et al., 2014, p. 73). In the literature, this stage is also referred to as 'open coding' (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Saldana, 2013). A 'code' is the term used to describe the word or short phrase that captures the main essence of one small dimension of your data. As Charmaz (1983) describes, codes can 'serve as shorthand devices to *label, separate, compile, and organize data*' (p. 186). It is not uncommon for parts of an interview, pictures, videos, and so forth to be assigned to more than one code, something that is particularly easy to do with CAQDAS.

[Table 9.5](#) is an example of a parent describing her contact with her daughter's school and how she organizes her daughter's after-school time. The first quote was assigned to four codes, while the second quote was assigned to three other codes. As the coding progresses, we further refined the analysis to differentiate the responses (e.g. 'poor' and 'good' communication). For now, we will keep our example simple.

Table 9.5 Coding example

| Data | Codes |
|------|-------|
| | |

| Data | Codes |
|---|--|
| <p>'As a parent it's my job to figure out what is going on with my kid. I'm in constant contact with the school, you know, "How's everything going, how was her day at school, what should I be working on at home, you know in terms of homework?". We expect Sara to do well at school, and our job is to make sure she does well. And if I see a problem, it's my job to intervene, find out what is going on and to be part of the solution.'</p> <p>'We do a lot of things after school. I think you can get from our discussion that I'm one of "those" kinds of parents! Sara certainly has free time, but we make it a point to enrol her in a lot of after-school activities like soccer and music classes. Homework seems to eat up a lot of time nowadays, now that Sara is in Grade 6.'</p> | <p>Code 1: Communication</p> <p>Code 2: Intervention</p> <p>Code 3: Parent expectations</p> <p>Code 4: Sports</p> <p>Code 5: Music</p> <p>Code 6: Homework</p> |

Since a code represents an individual segment of data, you may develop 100–200 or more codes; however, there are no hard and fast rules about how many codes you should have. The number of codes depends on the size of the project and your approach to coding. Bernard (2011) explains the difference between a 'splitter' and 'lumper' approach. Splitters break down text into small segments to differentiate each idea expressed in the text, while lumpers create more summative codes that capture the essence of a segment of text. Splitters will end up with many more descriptive codes, while lumpers will end up with fewer codes that are broader and contain more contextual information. As Saldana (2013) observes, there are benefits and drawbacks with each approach. Splitting may produce more superficial codes, while lumping may gloss over important nuances in the data. Early in the data analysis, you may want to try both approaches to see which one helps you understand your data.

While you are creating these codes, do not get too bogged down about whether they are 'right' or not. You want your codes to be thoughtful and true to your data, but remember that most codes will be revised as your data analysis progresses. Our list of first-cycle coding options ([Table 9.6](#)) is not as exhaustive as Saldana's (2013), but it will give you a good overview of what and how you may code your data.

Table 9.6 First-cycle coding options

| Type of Codes | Description | Sample Quotes | Sample Codes |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|--|--|
| Descriptive: Nouns | Captures who, what, and where | 'Our customers are really interested in clean eating. We have locations all over the country, but you tend to find us in more affluent neighbourhoods. We sell a lot of organic products, vitamins ... stuff like that...' | <p>Code 1: Customers</p> <p>Code 2: Products for Sale</p> <p>Code 3: Affluent Neighbourhoods</p> |

| Type of Codes | Description | Sample Quotes | Sample Codes |
|---------------------|---|---|--|
| Descriptive: Action | Captures actions, interactions, and processes as they are described by participants or observed by the researcher | 'I have a pretty good relationship with most of the customers. I really enjoy helping customers, you know selecting products. People who are just getting into clean eating often have a lot of questions.' | Code 4: Helping Customers Code 5: Answering Questions |
| <i>In Vivo</i> | <i>In Vivo</i> coding creates codes from participants' own words or phrases | 'The Market pays really fair wages too, especially compared to the last place I worked. As an employee, I feel valued ...' | Code 6: Fair Wages Code 7: Feel Valued |
| Interpretations | Captures how participants interpret situations or events | 'It was really wrong what happened to Steve. He shouldn't have been fired. It wasn't his fault' | Code 8: Wrongful Dismissal |
| Feelings | Captures participants' feelings and emotions | 'I was really angry that Steve got fired. I was so confused. It was so unlike the management ...' | Code 9: Angry Code 10: Confused |
| Belief systems | Questions that examine participants' values, morals, or standards | 'I just really question the fairness of it all. I just think it's wrong to fire someone without a full investigation.' | Code 11: Fairness |
| Assessment | Captures participants' assessments, estimations, or valuations | 'I think the impact was huge. I mean the firing just sent a chill through The Market' | Code 12: Impact |
| Frequency | Captures participants' understandings about duration, regularity, or commonality | 'It was so unlike the management ... it was really unusual. It just doesn't happen here' | Code 13: Unusual Firing |

| Type of Codes | Description | Sample Quotes | Sample Codes |
|-----------------|---|--|---------------------------|
| Local causation | Captures how participants understand why something occurred | 'I think the firing was really personal. Fred, the head guy, just never liked Steve. There was a lot of personal stuff. I bet he was just looking for any excuse to fire him.' | Code 14: Personal Reasons |

The emergence of categories: early and later stages of second-cycle coding

Second-cycle coding uses the resulting first-cycle codes to condense, integrate, and layer them into broader and more coherent categories and themes (Miles et al., 2014). Second-cycle coding is the act of 'pull[ing] together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis. They are a sort of meta-code' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69).

Second-cycle coding involves interpreting and making sense of the data by identifying patterns, relationships, and explanations. Part of this process includes structuring the codes hierarchically to identify categories. Your original codes may be relabelled, subsumed by other codes, rearranged, or eliminated. Second-cycle coding may also suggest that additional data collection is needed to develop an emerging theory (referred to as 'theoretical sampling').

Developing categories occurs after you have created several codes; it is part of what some researchers refer to as '[pattern coding](#)' (Saldana, 2013) and '[focused coding](#)' (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Categorization

[Categorization](#) is the process of grouping codes under more significant unifying classifications. As you start to develop codes, you will find yourself arranging and rearranging your data into broader classifications or typologies based on the patterns that begin to emerge or for some analytic, practical, methodological, or theoretical reason. The same codes may be used in more than one category. Since a category is a grouping of codes, the average project can include numerous categories; there is no magic number of categories a project 'should' include or number of codes each category 'should' contain.

In [Table 9.7](#), we demonstrate the creation of two categories: parent engagement and after-school. Category 1 captures four codes that relate to several dimensions of parent engagement. Category 2 captures the three codes that relate to how parents construct their children's after-school time. Note that both categories include the code 'homework' since it is related to parent engagement and after-school activities.

Table 9.7 Categorization example

| Representative quote | Categories |
|----------------------|------------|
| | |

| Representative quote | Categories |
|---|--|
| 'As a parent it's my job to figure out what is going on with my kid. I'm in constant contact with the school, you know, "How's everything going, how was her day at school, what should I be working on at home, you know in terms of homework". We expect Sara to do well at school, and our job is to make sure she does well. And if I see a problem, it's my job to intervene, find out what is going on and to be part of the solution.' | Category 1: Parent Engagement Code 1: Communication Code 2: Intervention Code 3: Parent Expectations Code 6: Homework |
| 'We do a lot of things after school. I think you can get from our discussion that I'm one of "those" kinds of parents! Sara certainly has free time, but we make it a point to enrol her in a lot of after-school activities like soccer and music classes. Homework seems to eat up a lot of time nowadays, now that Sara is in Grade 6.' | Category 2: After-School Code 4: Sports Code 5: Music Code 6: Homework |

Themes

As Saldana (2013) observes, a **theme** is an 'outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection, not something that is, in itself, coded' (p. 14). Specific definitions will vary, but for our purposes, think of a theme as the big ideas that emerge from your data. We suspect that you will have anywhere from two to five themes, but there is no magic number.

Whereas codes and even categories tend to be more descriptive, themes tend to be the outcome of interpretive processes (Rossman and Rallis, 2003); they may also relate to an established concept or theory. In short, themes emerge after some pretty significant analysis and reflection, and certainly after the pre-coding and first-cycle coding stages.

In [Table 9.8](#) we have expanded our example to three major themes: 'cultural capital', 'social capital' and 'economic capital'.

Table 9.8 Putting together codes, categories and themes

| Sample Codes | Sample Categories | Sample Themes |
|---------------|-------------------|---------------|
| 100–200 Codes | 15–25 Categories | 2–5 Themes |

| Sample Codes | Sample Categories | Sample Themes |
|---|---|--------------------------------|
| Code 1: Communication Code 2: Intervention Code 3: Parent Expectations Code 4: Sports Code 5: Music Code 6: Homework | PARENT ENGAGEMENT AFTER-SCHOOL | <i>CULTURAL CAPITAL</i> |
| Code 1: Communication Code 3: Parent Expectations Code 7: Good Relationship with Teacher Code 8: Access to Resources Code 9: Attend School Events | INFORMATION NETWORK CONNECTION TO SCHOOL | <i>SOCIAL CAPITAL</i> |
| Code 10: Private Pre-school Code 11: Saving for University Code 12: Tutoring | RESOURCES | <i>ECONOMIC CAPITAL</i> |
| First Stage Coding-----Early Second Stage Coding-----Later Second Stage Coding | | |

Moving from codes, to categories, to themes

You can think of the process of coding like a puzzle. First, start with the individual pieces (codes); next, you put together groupings of pieces that constitute smaller segments of the puzzle (categories); and after a lot of arranging and rearranging, you put large sections of the puzzle together (themes). The completed puzzle is the story you are eventually able to tell people about your study.

But how do you get there? We present four coding strategies for advancing your analysis from the more descriptive first-cycle to more explanatory second-cycle coding by developing the following: a) [pattern coding](#); b) [focused coding](#); c) [frequency coding](#); and d) [comparison coding](#).

Pattern coding

As your analysis develops, you may start to see reoccurring patterns in your data. Patterns emerge when you find that formally separate codes are connected, reoccur, or develop in similar ways. Such patterns may represent organizational, social-psychological or underlying processes about what is happening, how it is happening, and the assumptions that participants hold to be true about the nature of reality

(Charmaz, 1983). Miles et al. (2014) observes that pattern coding can be very useful when there are many cases or data. Once identified, a pattern code can serve as a category or even a theme that subsumes several other codes and even other categories.

Focused coding

There are various terms that describe the process by which researchers start to 'clump' together 'clusters' of data. As Miles et al. (2014) explain:

it might be called 'distilling', 'synthesizing', 'abstracting', 'transforming' and even the abhorrent 'reducing' the data. Even though these are different works and processes, they *kind of* mean the same thing ... In all instances, we're trying to understand a phenomenon better by *grouping* and then *conceptualizing* objects that have similar patterns and characteristics. (p. 279)

Unlike the initial stages of coding, focused coding is more selective and develops more significant categories. Focused coding requires the researcher to select the most salient or telling codes that best represent the data. While initial coding broadly asks, 'What do the data suggest?' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 47), focused codes are more iterative and represent more theoretically rich categories. When conducting focused coding, the researcher takes a limited set of codes crafted during the first-cycle coding phase. The goal is to develop more abstract and inclusive categories that capture a larger amount of data.

Figure 9.3 is an example taken from Emily Milne's PhD project. After carefully creating dozens of codes, Milne developed three broad categories: 'Interpreting policy reform', 'schooling organization' and 'educators'. These codes were eventually reorganized under the larger theme 'dynamics of policy implementation'.

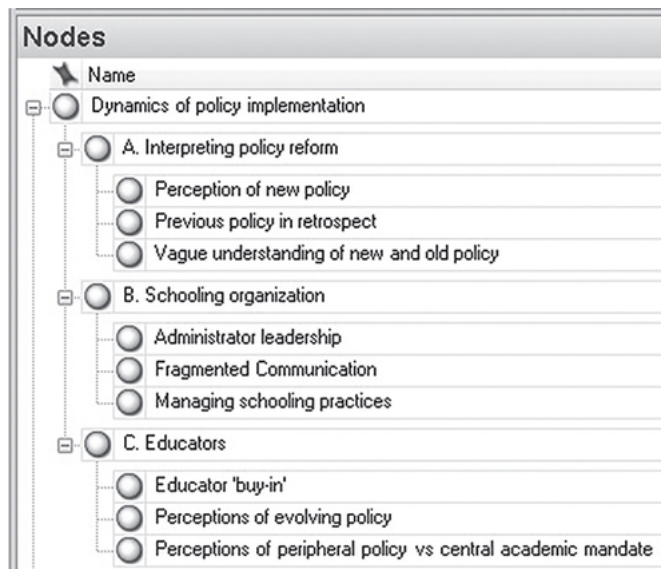


Figure 9.3 Focused coding example (NVivo 10-2012)

Frequency coding

Qualitative researchers tend not to think of themselves as 'numbers' people. After all, our interest is primarily about the quality, not the quantity, of whatever dimension of social life we are studying. However, as Miles et al. (2014) rightly point out, 'when we

identify a theme or a pattern, we are isolating something that (a) happens a number of times and (b) consistently happens in a specific way' (p. 282). You can count a variety of things, including words, phrases, and events. Counting can help you identify a category and even a theme and it can verify your initial propositions about what is going on in your data. Counting can also keep you 'analytically honest' (Miles et al., 2014, p. 282) by forcing you to verify your hunches about what is happening 'a lot'.

In her research on Canadian school shootings, Stephanie Howells conducted a framing analysis to determine how school shootings were discussed in the Canadian news media. Each article was coded to determine the major frame, or theme, of the article. As part of this research, she counted how many newspaper reports used each of the major frames that she identified through her analysis. Through [frequency coding](#), she was able to determine that most (over 60 per cent) of the newspaper articles focused primarily on three main frames: 'perpetrator', 'victims', and 'the school' (Howells, 2012b).

Depending on the search, CAQDAS programs make counting particularly easy. Most programs allow researchers to perform simple word searches, for example, that can be displayed by raw number of counts ([Figure 9.4](#)), Word Clouds ([Figure 9.5](#)) and Word Trees ([Figure 9.6](#)).

| Word | Length | Count | Weighted Percentage (%) |
|-----------|--------|-------|-------------------------|
| school | 6 | 11870 | 1.72 |
| think | 5 | 8674 | 1.26 |
| going | 5 | 6630 | 0.96 |
| parents | 7 | 6117 | 0.89 |
| really | 6 | 5943 | 0.86 |
| things | 6 | 4819 | 0.70 |
| right | 5 | 4439 | 0.64 |
| program | 7 | 4313 | 0.63 |
| teacher | 7 | 3969 | 0.58 |
| something | 9 | 3745 | 0.54 |
| teachers | 8 | 3235 | 0.47 |
| parent | 6 | 3216 | 0.47 |
| maybe | 5 | 2909 | 0.42 |
| different | 9 | 2866 | 0.42 |
| thing | 5 | 2826 | 0.41 |
| little | 6 | 2801 | 0.41 |
| people | 6 | 2733 | 0.40 |
| stuff | 5 | 2558 | 0.37 |
| child | 5 | 2537 | 0.37 |
| children | 8 | 2199 | 0.32 |

Figure 9.4 Word frequency result (NVivo 10–2012)



Figure 9.5 Word cloud

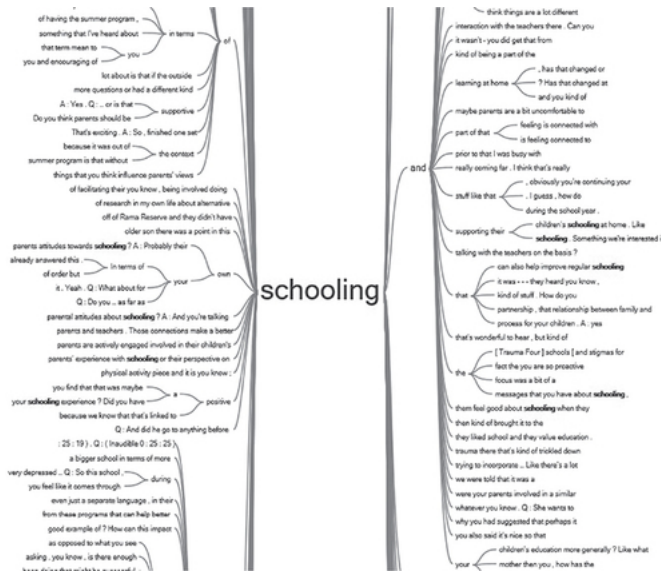


Figure 9.6 Word tree

Comparison coding

Comparison coding is a common analytical strategy employed by qualitative researchers. Comparisons can often be anticipated well in advance, either because it makes practical sense or based on prior knowledge. As you are creating initial codes, you may have also divided the data into logical comparison groups (e.g. teachers and students), allowing you to compare and contrast how each group responded. These analyses may also point to new ways to understand the data.

As we discussed in [Chapter 2](#), you can also look for internally driven comparisons. Internally driven comparisons occur when two or more units of interest (e.g.

communities, organizations) are similar or different on the key attribute of interest.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined concrete strategies for analysing qualitative data by coding. We first described preparing your data for analysis and starting a codebook. We also discussed three main data analysis tools: manual, Word or Excel, and CAQDAS options. The main part of the chapter detailed specific steps to move from standalone codes to the development of broader categories and themes.

The [next chapter](#) completes our journey by outlining how to write up qualitative data. While qualitative research is more accepted, researchers still struggle to publish qualitative data in peer-reviewed journals, books, and policy venues. Some granting agencies are also less receptive to qualitative data. Learning how to communicate qualitative research effectively is critical for overcoming these hurdles and disseminating your research.

FURTHER SUGGESTED READING

For a more detailed discussion of qualitative data analysis, we recommend two books. Each book provides an excellent in-depth examination of qualitative data analysis and coding. We refer to these books many times throughout the chapter. These books are suitable for novice and experienced qualitative researchers and are part of our library of 'must have' books.

Miles, Matthew B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2019). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (4th edn). Sage.

Saldana, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (4th edn). Sage.

SAGE CASE STUDIES

DeWeese, A., Jennings, P., Brown, J., Doyle, S., Davis, R., Rasheed, D., Frank, J., & Greenberg, M. (2017). Coding semi-structured interviews: Examining coaching calls within the care for teachers program. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. www.doi.org/10.4135/9781473958319

Heckemann, B., Thilo, F. J., & Wolf, A. (eds). (2020). Working via distance—using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, email, and teleconferencing in qualitative content analysis: Experiences, pitfalls, and practical tips. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. www.doi.org/10.4135/9781529714197

Orphanidou, M., & Kadianaki, I. (2020). A guide for developing and applying a coding scheme in qualitative media analysis: Representations of depression in the press. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. www.doi.org/10.4135/9781529715217

Swain, J. (2018). A hybrid approach to thematic analysis in qualitative research: Using a practical example. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. www.doi.org/10.4135/9781526435477

KEY TERMS

| | | |
|--|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| CAQDAS | Comparison Coding | Personal Memos |
| Categories or Categorization | First-Cycle Coding | Pre-Coding |

| | | |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| <u>Codebook</u> | <u>Focused Coding</u> | <u>Second-Cycle Coding</u> |
| <u>Codes</u> | <u>Frequency Coding</u> | <u>Summative Memos</u> |
| <u>Coding</u> | <u>Methodological Memos</u> | <u>Themes</u> |
| | <u>Pattern Coding</u> | <u>Theoretical Memos</u> |

10 HOW TO WRITE UP QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: MAKING YOUR WORDS COUNT

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter you will have the tools to:

- Organize a manuscript for a thesis proposal, peer-reviewed journal article, or policy report
- Develop a thorough methods section
- Effectively integrate quotations, excerpts, and tables
- Make changes to your manuscript based on reviewer feedback
- Communicate revisions to reviewers

Chapter summary

This chapter outlines specific strategies for writing up qualitative data. First, we outline how to target writing for a particular audience, such as a thesis committee or journal reviewer. Then we discuss tips for integrating data into your work, using charts, tables and quotations or excerpts. We also focus on effective writing skills. Finally, we discuss approaching and responding to reviewer comments.

INTRODUCTION

There is little point in conducting research if you do not write it up. Writing is one way to disseminate the findings from our research so others can use and learn from it, whether as the basis for future projects, to advance theory or knowledge in a particular field, or to improve current practices (Denzin & Giardina, 2010; Liamputtong, 2013; Tarling, 2006). As you read qualitative work – or any academic work, for that matter – you will become more familiar with the structure of the writing. Pay attention to how the research problem is set up, how the methods are presented, how the findings are described, and how qualitative data (e.g. quotes) are integrated. Over time you will begin to identify how and why some pieces of work are more successful than others. As Jessica Calarco (featured in this chapter) reminds us, qualitative research involves inductive reasoning that requires the writer to: 1) convince the reader that the study is important and methodologically sound; and 2) walk the reader through the arguments and the evidence.

1. *Step One: Writing Up Qualitative Research: Style and Substance:* Identify your target audience and craft your approach to writing accordingly.
2. *Step Two: Presenting Your Data:* Qualitative data can be integrated in a variety of ways, including quotes, vignettes, and tables. All presented data should be referred to in the body of the paper and integrated into the discussion.
3. *Step Three: Tips for Good Writing:* Our best advice? Edit, edit, edit.
4. *Step Four: Effectively Responding to Reviewer Comments:* Address all the reviewers' comments. Be thorough and polite. Make it easy for reviewers to see how and where you have addressed their comments.

This chapter will not repeat earlier lessons, including identifying the research problem you plan to address, formulating research questions, selecting a research method, and so forth. If you are ready to write up your data, this work has already been accomplished. You are at the point of presenting and justifying your choices.

STEP ONE: WRITING UP QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: STYLE AND SUBSTANCE

Key takeaways



- Your audience – that is, who you are writing for – will dictate the writing style, the content that is included, language used, and organization of your document

Your audience may vary throughout a single project. You may be writing your dissertation while writing an academic article, a policy report, and an op-ed for a newspaper. Each document requires a different focus, language use, and objective. Are you writing for academics? A policy or governmental group? The public? Practitioners? A funding agency? A newspaper? (Bessant & Farthing, 2012; Hennink et al., 2011; Neuman, 2011; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Silverman, 2011; Wolcott, 2009). Your earlier work conceptualizing your project (e.g. [Table 2.6](#): What is my intention?) prepared you for thinking about matching your approach to a particular audience. As Liamputtong (2013) notes:

research funding agencies, for example, usually want to see the results of the research as well as to assess whether the project attains its objectives. Policy makers will want to know how the findings and recommendations of the research can be implemented and applied. Health professionals may wish to use research findings to improve their health services or the health status of people they care for. Professional social scientists, however, will want to look at the research process, its scientific soundness, and interpretation processes. (pp. 287–288)

Below we will discuss some more common types of writing up qualitative research: a proposal, peer-reviewed journal articles and policy documents. While the approaches vary slightly, Calarco reminds us that the basic principle is the same: 'you have to show your work'. Calarco articulates the key steps that run through all high-quality qualitative writing, including walking the reader through the logic of the argument, communicating the central claims, and convincing the reader that the claims are consistent with one another and the main argument.

Getting the Logic to Work

Jessica McCrory Calarco

When it comes to qualitative writing, you have to show your work. Essentially, you have to walk the reader through the logical reasoning process you used to arrive at your conclusions. That need to show your work is, in part, a function of the logical reasoning processes involved in different methods. Quantitative research tends to rely on deductive reasoning – you have a hypothesis, you use data to test your hypothesis, and then you draw your conclusion. Qualitative research, on the other hand, involves inductive reasoning – in most cases, you gather data, you spend time reading and analysing your data, and you try out a series of possible explanations to see which one fits best. Ultimately, then, and to 'prove' an inductive argument, you have to help your reader follow your train of thought.

The first step in that process is to work out the logic of the argument for your paper and for each section therein. That includes the background/literature section ('This study asks an important question!'), the methods section ('This study uses the right approach to answer that question!'), the findings section ('Here's the answer to that question!'), and the discussion and conclusion ('This answer is important!'). Once you know the argument for each section, you have to work out the various claims you need to support that argument. And you have to organize those claims in a way

that logically flows from one claim to the next. In the methods section, for example, and to support the larger argument that ‘This is the right approach!’ some of your key claims will probably be ‘I chose a reasonable research site’ and ‘I talked to a reasonable number and type of people’ and ‘I asked them a reasonable set of questions’.

The second step is to arrange those claims into an outline for each section of the paper and then combine those outlines to make an outline for the paper as a whole. Essentially, the outline should read like a mini-paper with no evidence. The claims should be arranged in a logical order that makes sense from one point to the next. And reading the claims aloud, in order, is helpful for checking to see if there are any gaps in your logic. It’s especially common to find logic gaps in the background/literature section and in the findings section, because those are often the hardest parts of a qualitative argument to make.

Let’s say, for example, that your research question is ‘Why do kids create imaginary friends?’ Based on interviews or observations with kids and their families, you might conclude that kids create imaginary friends to reduce the feelings of loneliness they experience when they do not have close friends. But how do you convince your reader that you’ve found the right answer? I’d argue that you have to present them with a series of claims. And let’s say that the initial outline for your findings section looks like this:

- Children tend to form imaginary friendships when they do not have close real friends.
- Imaginary friendships give children a sense of belonging.
- The sense of belonging that imaginary friends create for children helps them feel less lonely.

Now, the logic here, I would argue, is missing a step. And that’s because these three claims could all be true and still support a different argument than the one you’re trying to

make. While you concluded that kids form imaginary friendships to reduce feelings of loneliness they experience when they do not have close friends, the claims above could also support the argument that forming imaginary friendships prevents children from developing close friendships with real peers by filling kids' need for social interaction and belonging, instead. To show that your argument is the right one, then, your logic needs another step. Specifically, you might rework your claims outline as follows:

- Children tend to form imaginary friendships when they do not have close real friends
- Imaginary friends tend to appear after children become disconnected from close peers
- Imaginary friendships give children a sense of belonging.
- The sense of belonging that imaginary friends create for children helps them feel less lonely.

The new second claim – that imaginary friends tend to appear after children become disconnected from close peers – is still consistent with your central argument, but it's inconsistent with the alternative argument that imaginary friends *cause* disconnection from peers. So adding that second claim strengthens your argument by helping to rule out alternative explanations for the patterns that you find. And if you rule out those alternative explanations, the reader is more likely to trust what you conclude.

Now, getting the logic right takes time. Personally, this is why I don't like to keep track of how many words I write each day. Instead, I spend time tinkering with the outline. Checking and rechecking the logic and the ordering of the claims in each section to make sure I'm not missing a step. Because if I can get the outline to work, logically, I know I'll save myself a lot of time rewriting and revising the draft later on. And once I get the outline to work, then it's time to move on to Step 3.

That third step involves adding evidence to support each claim. At this point, you already have the structure for your paper – each claim you’ve written becomes a topic sentence for a paragraph (or sometimes for a subsection of the paper). And the next task is to fill in the rest. And that might seem fairly straightforward, but it’s also important to ensure that all the evidence you include logically supports your claims.

Turning back to our hypothetical example, let’s consider again that second key claim that imaginary friends tend to appear after children become disconnected from their peers. To support this claim, you would want to include data that clearly show what you’re trying to say. For example, the following hypothetical quote from a hypothetical parent:

Brianna was having a really tough time. In kindergarten, she and Chloe – another little girl in her class ... They were totally inseparable. They would spend all day every day together at school, and we’d see them most weekends, too. But then Chloe’s dad got a new job in Texas. They moved right at the end of the school year. And at first we tried keeping up over Skype and sending letters, but it just wasn’t the same. And that’s when Zoe [Brianna’s imaginary friend] first arrived. Brianna had spent the morning crying about Chloe. Then, after lunch, she disappeared into her room for a while, and when she came out, she was all smiles, introducing us to her ‘brand new friend’.

This example clearly illustrates the larger point that imaginary friends tend to appear after children become disconnected from their peers. By including this example in the text, you can help the reader follow the logical inferences that led to your conclusions.

The fourth step, then, is to clearly explain how the evidence supports the larger claims. This usually takes the form of a summary sentence (or two) at the end of each paragraph. That sentence (or those sentences) should show the reader how to interpret the evidence presented and point back to the

larger claim. In total, then, one paragraph of the findings section in your hypothetical paper might look something like this:

Children tend to develop imaginary friendships after they have been disconnected from close peers. That can happen when close peers move away or no longer interact regularly with the child (e.g. because they are no longer in the same school or class, at the end of summer camp, or after a dispute). One mother, for example, told us about her daughter Brianna first formed an imaginary friendship with 'Zoe':

Brianna was having a really tough time. In kindergarten, she and Chloe – another little girl in her class ... They were totally inseparable. They would spend all day every day together at school, and we'd see them most weekends, too. But then Chloe's dad got a new job in Texas. They moved right at the end of the school year. And at first we tried keeping up over Skype and sending letters, but it just wasn't the same. And that's when Zoe [Brianna's imaginary friend] first arrived. Brianna had spent the morning crying about Chloe. Then, after lunch, she disappeared into her room for a while, and when she came out, she was all smiles, introducing us to her 'brand new friend'.

Brianna's imaginary friend Zoe appeared after Brianna's best (real) friend Zoe moved away. That experience of disconnection from friends was common among children who formed imaginary friendships, and it appeared in those cases that imaginary friendships helped children to regain some of what they lost.

When writing about qualitative research, some authors leave the quote or example at the end of the paragraph. I would argue, however, that doing so risks the reader misinterpreting the evidence or failing to grasp how it supports the larger

claim. By adding a summary sentence (or two), you can walk the reader through the logic you used when inductively moving from your evidence to your claims.

Essentially, and when using data to make an argument, it's important to show your work. To show your work with quantitative data, you'll describe your hypotheses, the statistical procedures you used to test them, the results of those analyses and the conclusions you drew based on those results. And that description is necessary for readers to judge whether your approach was sound. When writing with qualitative data, however, you can't just say 'I coded the data for evidence of key themes, here's what I found, and here's what it means'. That's because most qualitative research is inductive. It involves building arguments up from the data rather than using the data to test a hypothesis top-down. That inductive process, in turn, happens not through a software program, or even in the coding of the data, but rather in your (the researcher's) head. And if you want your reader to believe what you found, you have to re-create that logical inference process and present your case, in writing, following those same logical steps.

Questions for Reflection

1. What are the key 'takeaway' lessons?
2. What does Calarco mean when she emphasizes the importance of 'showing your work'? How is it accomplished in the context of writing up qualitative research?
3. What are some examples of 'gaps in logic'? How do we identify them? What are some strategies for overcoming them?

Quick Tip: Just start writing!

It is common to be completely overwhelmed by the sheer amount and richness of the data. You might be thinking,

‘Where do I start?’ No matter what type of document you are writing, the answer is: ‘Start wherever you want to.’ As Richards (2005) says,

writing is a way of finding out what you know and seeing things that were unclear. To do this does not require that you write a coherent, orderly account of the data. And to sit down to that task is more than most researchers can easily do. (pp. 188–189)

So, start where you feel the most comfortable, the most confident, or the most excited. This will help you maintain your stamina and enjoy the writing process.

Proposals: writing to your committee

A committee is often a qualitative researcher’s first audience. Whether you are writing a fourth-year, Master’s or PhD thesis, or major research paper (MRP), most programmes require a formal proposal and, sometimes, an oral defence. Research proposals serve two primary purposes: 1) they articulate a research plan, and 2) they seek to convince others (an audience of experts and non-experts) of the soundness of your plan (see [Chapters 2, 3, and 4](#)).

A research proposal is fundamentally about making a convincing argument: Why do you want to conduct the research (e.g. because there is a gap in the literature)? Why is this research necessary (e.g. because filling this gap can improve policy)? How does this research meet this goal (e.g. selecting methods that effectively address the research questions)? Rather than a summary or pure description, a proposal provides the logic behind a research plan. Each part of the proposal should link to the overall argument. Joseph Maxwell (2013) points out that a good argument is a coherent one. The writing should be clear and precise, and it should avoid unnecessary jargon.

The style of writing and language is usually more formal. Your committee members will likely be looking for you to ‘speak’ and ‘write’ like a sociologist, economist, psychologist, social worker, and

so forth. However, this is not an excuse to use or ‘hide behind’ thick language or fancy terminology. All proposals should clearly articulate your topic and ‘plan of action’. A good plan of action also includes communicating the potential problems you may encounter along the way so you, and your committee, can strategize.

Parts of a research proposal

We build on Joseph Maxwell’s (2013) model for writing your proposal. There are typically several standard parts of a research proposal including an abstract, introduction, literature review, and methods section.

Abstract

The abstract offers the reader a ‘roadmap’ and spells out the context, main arguments, methods, sources of data, and potential contributions. In general, abstracts are approximately 150–200 words. An abstract for a proposal has a different flavour than a journal article; it proposes what you *hope* to accomplish rather than what you *have* accomplished at or near the completion of study or a phase of the study. A proposal abstract typically articulates:

- The context of the study to ‘set the stage’
- The research problem you have identified
- What you plan to do and how you plan to do it (in short, your methods and sample)
- The knowledge gaps you hope to close (e.g. theories, policies, practices)

Introduction

The introduction is generally one to two pages and sets the stage for the research. It succinctly answers the following four questions: 1)

What are the central research problems and objectives? 2) How is the topic related to the problems and objectives? 3) What methods will be used to study this problem? 4) Why is this research necessary? Depending on your discipline, the introduction may also prime the reader for the main theories or concepts you plan on exploring or elaborating.

While a proposal is more formal, it should convey your enthusiasm for the project. You want to communicate to your audience (or, in this case, your committee) that the project is exciting and worthwhile.

Quick Tip: Placing the research questions

Should the research questions be included in the introduction? While the research problem is presented in the introduction (see [Chapter 2](#)), a fully fleshed-out version of the research question(s) is sometimes better articulated in a separate section. A proposal introduction (and a journal article, for that matter) sometimes rephrase these questions as *objectives*. The justification for your research questions may not be clear until after you have mapped out the gaps in the literature and theoretical approach to your research problem. We have provided an abbreviated example from a project that Janice Aurini and her colleagues proposed. After setting up the research problem and methods, they articulated the objectives that guide the inquiry.

Example: Technology and twenty-first-century classrooms

The project aims to clarify the relationship between the broader ecology of schooling and educational decision-making related to the development of twenty-first-century competencies and digital and technological skills.

To achieve this goal, this research will undertake the following three objectives:

1. Identify and summarize provincial policies for meeting demands for twenty-first-century and digital and technological competencies
2. Examine the goals, strategies, and considerations used by educational policy makers to make decisions
3. Explain how factors, including current or anticipated opportunities, challenges, and constraints, shape decision-making processes, and policy outcomes

Context

Some projects demand a context section that provides the reader with a bit more background about the topic, people, location, organization, and so forth. Describing the context can help you justify your research problem and methodological choices. If your study is about gang violence in a particular city, a context section may include a bit of history and statistics (e.g. education levels, unemployment, crime).

Literature review

Reviewing the literature often includes providing an overview of the research conducted on your topic and, in some disciplines, setting up the theoretical framing. It justifies the need to conduct further research and why the proposed research is essential. This section also primes the reader for the theoretical framework that informs your study.

The keyword for writing a good literature review is relevance (Maxwell, 2013). Each piece of literature or theoretical approach should be relevant to your proposed research. How do they inform your research plan, and what are the implications for your study? Thus, you will want to incorporate only literature that specifically relates to your topic and builds a coherent argument concerning the 'why' of the research. Stylistically, this section should integrate the existing literature thematically; do not simply generate a 'shopping list' in which you describe one study after another.

Quick Tip: Making sure the dog (data) wags the tail (theory)

Disciplines such as Sociology will also expect a proposal to include a theoretical 'hook' that runs through your proposal (e.g. framing the introduction). Theories are just (possible) explanations; they serve to guide our inquiry by pointing to particular types of questions, levels of analysis and social problems, along with helping us summarize our data.

So-called 'picking' a theory is not only daunting, but it may violate the basic principle of inductive inquiry. You may fall into the 'show and tell' trap described by Khan and Fisher (2013; see [Chapter 3](#)). So here is a wild idea. Why pick just 'one' from any particular lens? If your project examines how leaders make decisions, the theories that could potentially explain 'what is going on' range widely from rational choice, to new institutionalism, to social network theories, and so forth. But you will not know which one will do the job until after your data is carefully collected and analysed. This approach has the potential benefit of clearly articulating the evidence to support a particular theory or part of a theory. As you collect and analyse your data, you can compare the evidence against the central assumptions of each theory.

Research questions

Statement of your research questions is central to the proposal (just as it acts as the hub in a map of the research design shown in [Chapter 3](#)). Articulate how they relate to prior research and theory and the goals of the research. Make clear how these questions relate as a whole. Are there one or two central questions? How do the sub-questions relate to the master question(s)?

Research methods

Your methods section should not engage in lengthy debates about conducting qualitative research. Instead, your job is to articulate and justify the methodological decisions you have made and convince the reader that they are appropriate for the task at hand. Explain specific data collection strategies, including addressing the who, what, where, when and how of your study. In short, you must convince the reader that the methods you are proposing are (one of) the best approaches for answering your particular research questions.

Important elements to discuss in your methods sections are as follows:

1. What kinds of data do you need to collect to answer your research questions? Are you conducting an interview study, a case study, a comparative study, a mixed-methods study, or something different? Here, you should describe the kinds of observations, interviews, or focus groups, and so forth you will conduct and provide justifications for their use. Maxwell (2013) points out that there are always practical reasons for choosing particular methods, and that you should be candid about this in your methods section. Address why this particular methodological strategy is optimal for answering your research question(s).
2. Which people, settings and other types of data will be the focus of your inquiry? How will you select a 'fair' site or sample? What is your sample size, and what strategies will be used to reach 'saturation' (see [Chapter 4](#))? How will people, groups, organizations, and so forth be recruited?
3. What are the ethical issues, and how will you address them? How will informed consent be obtained, and what safeguards will be put in place to protect participants from harm or risk (see [Chapter 4](#))?
4. How will you analyse the data you collect? What tools (e.g. NVivo) will you use, and how will ongoing data analysis inform your research design and data collection?
5. Finally, you should outline the known limitations and parameters of the study, how you will ensure trustworthiness (e.g. triangulation of methods, member checking), and how you will deal with competing explanations and discrepant data (see [Chapter 4](#)).

Quick Tip: The less than ideal scenario

In some cases, the 'best' data, method, site, or population, and so forth is not an option. If you are selecting less than ideal data or approaches, you must explain why. Lack of access or resources and safety or ethical considerations are reasonable justifications as long as you can make the case that the 'second best' option will still generate meaningful findings. However, you must acknowledge the elephant in the room: 'In a perfect world, I would do "a". I am unable to do it this way for x, y, and z reasons.' In short, you must acknowledge the limitations head-on and be honest with yourself and your audience about how it will compromise the quality of the results or your ability to address certain kinds of issues. You may need to re-evaluate your project and alter your research questions and objectives to address what you *can* answer.

Conducting some preliminary research (e.g. pilot study, literature review) and speaking to key gatekeepers (e.g. research ethics office) about what you hope to accomplish will help you bracket your study and manage your expectations about what is doable. It makes no sense, for example, to pursue a project that has a six-month process to gain access when you only have two terms to complete a major research paper. It will also provide you with sound justification when a committee member or future reviewer challenges your decisions.

Preliminary results

If you have already started collecting data, you can discuss some of your preliminary results. This section can be a useful way to justify the research's feasibility and clarify your methods.

Conclusion

Here is the place to summarize the research objectives and pull together the central arguments concerning all of the elements you address in the proposal. Summarize the research goals, the contribution and the study's relevance to broader fields. The conclusion is also a good place to rearticulate the answer to the 'So what?' question.

References

This section should only give references that are cited in the proposal (unless otherwise instructed). You should follow your discipline's citation standards (e.g. APA). There are many guidelines online, or refer to your university or college resources (e.g. writing centre, library).

Appendices

The appendices may include: a) a timetable for the research; b) ethics forms and letters of introduction; interview guides or other data collection instruments; c) a schedule or timeline; and d) a description of analysis techniques and software.

Quick tip: Anticipating and overcoming criticisms

Once a proposal is deemed acceptable by the committee, several programmes also require an oral defence. Be ready to answer general questions about the worth and appropriateness of your study. For example:

- Why is your topic worth studying?
- How does your question, data, or method improve our understanding of your topic?
- Others have been studying this topic for many years in another context (e.g. country). How does replicating this

study in a different context add to the literature?

- Others have used another method or data for studying this topic. Why did you select that method or data?
- Why did you select that theory versus others?
- Other factors that contribute to your topic. Why didn't you consider these?

Peer-reviewed journals: writing to other academics

Writing a peer-reviewed journal article begins after you have done most if not all of data collection and analysis (or at least a major phase of it). Peer-reviewed articles tend to use more formal 'academic' and disciplinary language. Most journals have word-length requirements that constrain how much you can write and how much detail you are able to provide. A typical journal in the social sciences allows for 7000–10,000 words, including references and other supplementary materials (e.g. tables). Thus, your research cannot be presented in its entirety in only one article; it may become multiple articles.

At the same time, you must provide enough detail to allow readers to understand the complete process and most significant findings and implications. This can be especially difficult when writing up qualitative work, as we must be careful not to sacrifice the depth, richness, and thick description that is key to good qualitative research (Morse, 2000a; Liamputtong, 2013). To achieve this, Wolcott (2009) argues that we should thus 'do less more thoroughly' and present only one aspect of the findings in each paper (p. 95). He suggests that 'a strategy for accomplishing this is to look for parts or instances or cases that can stand for the whole ... Reporting "part" is all you can possibly do in a journal article ...' (p. 103).

In addition to page length or word count, some journals have specific requirements, including the type of headings, the citation style, or other details. It is important to know the requirements of the journal

you are planning to submit to before formatting the document. These guidelines are usually presented clearly on a journal's website (e.g. submission guidelines; guidelines for authors).

Most journal articles have the following components, often in this order:

1. Abstract
2. Introduction
3. Literature Review/Theoretical Framework
4. Methods/Research Design
5. Findings/Results
6. Conclusion/Discussion
7. Bibliography

These headings can vary. For example, instead of 'Findings', some qualitative papers will use the heading 'Themes'. As you read qualitative work, you will begin to see the types of headings commonly used. Being familiar with the conventions of the journal will also help (see 'Quick Tip: Research Suitable Journals'). For example, some authors write a very short introduction and move immediately into the body of the paper, and others will spend more time setting up the paper and outlining the research questions and hypotheses. As you read other qualitative papers you will begin to determine which style you like best and what will work for the journal. Pratt (2009) reminds us that while authors have their own voice, so do journals; as such, we need to be familiar with the 'voice' of the journal we are writing for. The following descriptions are general guidelines for what should be included in each section of the article.

Quick Tip: Research suitable journals

Before writing an article, research potential journals that may be suitable options. Not only is it important to follow the guidelines and word limits, but journals tend to have their own 'voice' (Pratt, 2009). Policy-oriented journals will want the article to be heavily focused on evaluating, critiquing, elaborating, and/or improving policy. These journals tend to

be less theory forward and will usually expect strong empirical support and research that speaks to the context or location of the journal's audience. Similarly, interdisciplinary or international journals may expect researchers to demonstrate how disciplinary or context-specific concepts, theories, or topics are relevant to a wider audience. In addition to these types of differences, journals will vary in other ways including privileging certain methods or theoretical perspectives.

To get a handle on journal expectations, review the 'objective' or 'scope' of the journal (almost always listed on the journal's website) and four or five recently published articles to get a sense of the journal's expectations. Once you have made your selection, you can mirror its approach, style and format.

Abstract

The abstract is a concise synopsis of the paper, typically about 150–200 words in length (check the guidelines of the journal). It should be clear and focused. The abstract should outline your entire paper in a paragraph, focusing on the purpose, the methodology, the findings and the implications of those findings.

Berg and Lune (2012, p. 396) outline four key parts of an abstract: 1) identify the focus of the study and the main issue under investigation; 2) the type and scope of data that were gathered and analysed; 3) the most important findings; and 4) the implications or contributions. Almost every abstract will contain these four elements. If you cannot write an abstract using these guidelines, there is potentially an issue with the clarity and focus of your paper.

Quick Tip: Writing an abstract

Disciplinary standards vary, so you should refer to your professional association or 'flagship' journal. Your university or college may also have guidelines and tip sheets for you to follow. If you have a specific journal in mind, you should

review several examples from that journal and refer to their style guides on their websites (e.g. submission guidelines, instructions for authors).

Introduction

The first section introduces the paper and should have a 'hook' that draws readers to your article. It serves as a guide to the reader for what will come and provides an overview of the main research problem (see [Chapter 2](#)) and findings. A general rule of thumb is that the introduction is about 10 per cent of the overall paper. You want to think of it as a map to the rest of the paper; you should summarize your theory, methods and key findings. It is also the place where you explain the purpose of your paper: Why is your research important? Why should we care? And, most importantly, why should we keep reading the rest of the paper?

A stylistic decision may include adding a quote from your study or a prominent person just under the 'Introduction' heading. This quote should capture the main point or essence of the paper. When the article touches on something current or high profile (e.g. Covid-19), some writers will present a synopsis or case study of an event.

Literature review/theoretical framework

The literature review presents information on what academic material exists on your topic. What research has been conducted, and what were the main findings and arguments? Focus on both depth and breadth. Your literature search should be comprehensive and lay the groundwork for making the case that there is a gap your work will fill in some way (Merriam, 1998; Rocco et al., 2011).

This section should integrate the existing literature thematically. If you discuss each study one by one, 'without pointing out how it relates to other studies and to your own findings, [it] will bore you as you write it and bore your readers as they read it' (Van den Hoonaard, 2012, p. 141). Instead, integrate the literature according to the main themes (e.g. social class, gender, and ethnicity).

Organizing the literature thematically allows you to draw the connections between the various pieces of existing research.

Depending on your discipline, the literature review may also prime the reader to the theory you will be drawing on to explain your findings. Thus, if the paper is an extension of new institutional theory, then the literature review should relate to the central tenets of the theory (e.g. the uneven connection between policy and practice to set up 'loose' and 'tight' coupling in the theory section). While you may take a more tentative stance in a proposal, a journal article takes a bolder stance.

When discussing theory, outline all the key concepts and terms and explain them clearly. This section of your paper does not present your research. When you present your findings later in the article, you can refer to the literature review/theoretical framework to demonstrate how the literature and/or theory guides your conclusions. This section needs to be robust enough to explain the literature and theories but not too large to overtake the heart of the paper: your findings.

Methods/research design

The methods or research design section explains how you accessed, gathered, and analysed the data. Bryman et al. (2012) report that 'quantitative researchers often [give] more detailed accounts of their research design and methods than qualitative researchers' (p. 311). However, qualitative methods should include the same level of detail. A methodological fit must also be demonstrated. According to Richards (2009), 'such a fit is never perfect, so don't try to present it as such. It is important to assess honestly the adequacy of your design and the sufficiency of the data you worked with' (p. 201). You should also report if you used any software, such as NVivo, and how it facilitated your analysis.

Rocco et al. (2011) suggest that the methods section can be organized in six parts: '1) conceptual framework, 2) sample and sampling method, 3) data collection, 4) data analysis, 5) integrity measure, and 6) data management' (p. 167). The particular order is not nearly as important as ensuring a 'systematic description of the procedures, techniques, and tools used' (p. 168). Depending on the

type of study you conducted, the details of a methods section can include:

- **Methods:** What types of data were collected? Why were these particular methods chosen? How were the data collected?
- **Sampling:** How were respondents located and selected? Why were particular groups, locations, or others chosen? How were people, locations, and so forth sampled?
- **Recruitment:** How were respondents recruited?
- **Details about the inquiry:** Where did the data collection take place? On average, how long were the interviews, your time in the field, and so forth? What was your role in the data collection process (e.g. participant-observer)?
- **Data collection documentation:** How was data recorded? Was audio or video recording used? Were interviews transcribed? Were transcriptions verbatim or more selective? How were other forms of data treated?
- **Details about research ethics:** How were they given informed consent?
- **Details about data analysis:** How was analysis accomplished? What were the steps? How were the main themes developed? How was saturation achieved?

Findings/results

The findings or results section should be the longest part of your paper. Identify the key themes that have emerged through the process of data collection and analysis. Present the research findings in a way that connects to the research questions and, if applicable, their hypotheses. If appropriate, they should relate to the literature or theoretical concepts that you are claiming to align with, elaborate, critique or so forth. It makes no sense, for example, to highlight themes or make claims about how your work speaks to a particular literature or theory earlier in your paper if you fail to make

explicit connections to your findings. The point here is not to reiterate a theory, concept, or argument explained earlier, but to flag it and connect it to your findings. You will want to use quotations, examples, and excerpts from your data to demonstrate the strength of your themes and the relevance to the literature review and theory. See the section below called 'Presenting Your Data' for ways of integrating quotations, excerpts, and tables effectively.

Conclusion/discussion

Return to the research questions and hypotheses that were presented in the introduction and carefully spell out the implications for each: 'linking the findings of the study to the hypotheses and theories introduced earlier allow the authors to discuss whether the hypotheses or theories are supported, and what the implications are for further research' (Bryman et al., 2012, p. 314). The conclusion, like the introduction, should be a recap of the paper. The conclusion is your chance to reiterate the importance of your findings and drive home why it matters. In short, the discussion section is an opportunity to reflect on the research, the implications, or the policy outcomes.

The limitations of the study are also discussed. No research is perfect; often, there are aspects of the project that are beyond the scope of the paper. According to Ellinger and Yang (2011),

limitations are often associated with the sampling approaches used, the data collection and analysis methods, and the concepts of generalizability, among others. It is important to acknowledge elements that have limited the scope, design, or in terms of generalizability so that other authors can carefully interpret the meaningfulness and usefulness of the findings given the limitations. (p. 122)

Although no new information should be introduced, the conclusion is a place to talk about other possible linkages or extensions of your work.

Bibliography

The bibliography must include every article referenced within your entire article; this can be tiresome and tedious. Whether you use a citation manager (we recommend this) or write out the bibliography, keep a complete and detailed record of every source you have used. Keep track of the: names of authors (first and last names, and middle initials if given); the complete title of the work; the publication year; for journal articles, the name of the journal, the volume and issue number of the journal; for books, the publication location and publisher of the book; for websites, the URL and the date it was last consulted. This information is important for subsequent researchers who attempt to find the website, especially if it has been changed, updated, or moved. Every journal has different requirements for its bibliographic formatting, so you must make sure that you format your bibliography accordingly. Having a complete record of all of the literature you have used will help you make required formatting changes.

Quick Tip: Planning your articles

Unless you are doing a sandwich thesis, you should plan how you will 'slice and dice' up your thesis to ensure that each article is sufficiently distinct in terms of its main contribution, framing, quotes, and so forth. The papers will overlap in terms of research design, data, analysis, and perhaps even the theory used to explain the data; however, you must ensure that each paper is unique. A journal article is also an excellent way to publish other ideas that do not make it into your thesis.

Policy reports: writing to the government, think tanks, and policy makers

Policy reports tend to be much shorter than books, but longer than peer-reviewed journal articles. Most policy reports have the following components, often in this order:

1. Title
2. Table of Contents
3. Executive Summary
4. Introduction
5. Theoretical Framework
6. Study Location/Population and Sample Characteristics
7. Research Design/Methods
8. Findings
9. Discussion/Conclusion

The executive summary serves as an extended abstract. An executive summary is often two to three pages (250–500 words). The purpose of the executive summary is to allow readers to identify the key points quickly. Like the abstract of a peer-reviewed article, it should include the purpose, the methodology, the findings, and the implications of those findings. It should also include detailed recommendations for policy implementation, suggested interventions, and suggestions for future research (Liamputtong, 2013).

How are policy reports different from an academic journal? Typically, the details are written using plainer, less academic language. While policy reports may draw on particular theoretical frameworks, there is usually little to no expectation that the author contributes to that particular literature. The policy report published by the Toronto Foundation (2018), for example, draws on social capital theory to examine social networks, connectedness, and trust. The authors use the theory to advance their argument, but do not claim to advance disciplinary knowledge.

Quick Tip: Journal articles and books

Given the audience for this textbook, we have not included a standalone discussion of book publishing. Books can publish entire studies, whereas journal articles can only focus on one aspect of a much larger piece of research. Books allow authors more room to elaborate on each element of the study (Liamputtong, 2013). The approach and style of the writing

and presentation of qualitative data will depend on whether you are writing for a popular or academic press.

There is some debate regarding which takes longer: a journal article or book. On the one hand, some argue that it can take much longer to write a book than to write a journal article, partly because books are much longer than articles (Fetterman, 2010). On the other hand, others argue that publishing qualitative research as a book is much faster because of the high rejection rate of journal article submissions. Similarly, for those manuscripts that are accepted, the wait times at journals can be lengthy (McKercher et al., 2007; see also Persell, 1985).

Our advice is to think about whether your data is better presented in its entirety (as an ethnography often is, for example) or a few shorter articles, each highlighting a different aspect of your research. You can also consider writing both, but note that each contribution should be sufficiently distinct.

STEP TWO: PRESENTING YOUR DATA

Key takeaway



- Qualitative data can be presented through tables, quotations, and excerpts which help clarify and summarize information

Tables

Tables can help you clearly and succinctly present information. In qualitative writing, tables convey descriptive information and characteristics of the subjects (e.g. demographic characteristics of participants). Tables can also include summaries of key findings (e.g. a breakdown after school activities). Integrate the information presented in the tables into the discussion.

Quotations and excerpts

The same people who conduct the research are often the ones who write it up; this makes the selection of quotes difficult because you are likely excited or moved by a lot of the information. On the one hand, the main arguments, concepts, and theories must be sufficiently supported with evidence. On the other hand, you need to be mindful of the length of the quotations you choose. As Richardson (1990) argues, 'readers are more likely to read short, eye catching quotations than long ones' (p. 41).

Wolcott (2009) suggests that earlier drafts should include 'an excess of illustrative material' that can be shortened and tightened with each draft as you edit (p. 101). Richards (2009) suggests integrating the data (in the form of vignettes, anecdotes and quotations) as part of the overall argument; she suggests that as editing occurs, the quotations should be pruned and that the author should 'remove all words that don't make the point' (p. 204). The use of ellipses (...) and square brackets ([]) are devices that can help you shorten quotations or make the excerpt more direct while maintaining its meaning.

Integrating observed versus inferred behaviours

The distinction between observed behaviour and inferred behaviour must be made clear in your writing. It needs to be evident to the reader whether the information you are presenting is something you witnessed first-hand or something a respondent told you directly (observed behaviour), or something you have interpreted (inferred behaviour) ([Table 10.1](#)). We can very easily slip up by reporting inferred behaviour as though it was observed, 'with action

and intent coloured by the eye of the beholder' (Wolcott, 2009, p. 28).

Table 10.1 Observed versus inferred behaviour

| Observed behaviour | Inferred behaviour |
|--|---|
| 'Frank stated "I was so angry with her."' | 'His tone of voice sounded <i>to me</i> as though he was angry.' |
| 'I saw her back away when he extended his hand.' | 'Her body language <i>gave me the impression</i> that she was uncomfortable.' |

Integrating quotes, field notes, or unobtrusive data

There are two main ways that you can integrate quotes, field notes, or unobtrusive data. The first is to embed them into the body of a paragraph and discussion. The second is to include a standalone quote from one participant, an excerpt of field notes, or other sources (e.g. brochure). In the following example, both ways are used to illustrate the character traits parents believed their children gained from participating in extracurricular activities (Aurini, Missaghian, & Pizarro Milian, 2020):

Embedded Quote: Parents also considered the potential for extracurriculars to develop valuable character traits. As Liam explained, by repeatedly practising 'dance or hitting a ball', they learned the generic recipe for success: dedication and hard work. Claire, whose daughter participated in cross-country running competitions, noted that her daughter understood the connection between hard work and success. These values, and not 'winning', are what matter.

Standalone Quote: I think the most important thing is mental discipline ... [my daughter] said to me once that a friend of hers ... was saying how 'lucky' she was to be able to leave the city and attend these runs. But, she said to me that she didn't feel lucky, because it was something she had worked so hard for. So, I really like that she has made the connection that her achievements are something that she has worked at ... Those are the values my husband and I have tried to instil in our children. It's not all about winning.

Introduce and set up all quotations. Do not expect your reader to do the work of interpreting the meaning and the context of the data. Instead, a clear introduction – one that orients the reader to the quotation, tells the reader information about the speaker and demonstrates the importance of that particular statement – will increase the effectiveness of the example you have chosen. The following excerpt from Steph Howells's (2012a) PhD dissertation is indicative of the many tools discussed in this section. It introduces the quotations and sets up their meaning and importance. One quote uses an ellipsis to indicate that it has been shortened. Each quote is referenced with the **pseudonym** of the respondent and the school. Multiple quotes are used in a single paragraph to demonstrate their similarities. This short paragraph illustrates the most effective tools that you can use to present clear and compelling quotes to your audience:

Many respondents were hesitant when asked if they felt safe at school, but stated that their hesitancy was only because they had not thought about their own safety at school before. As one respondent, Lilly (a teacher at Sweet Valley High School) noted, 'I've never thought about it before, that's all. The hesitation is because I've never really thought about it'. In fact, as the interview respondents were asked to think about their safety at school and specify what made them feel safe or unsafe, many respondents began statements with phrases like 'Now that I'm thinking about it ...'. Thus, until they were forced to think concretely about their personal safety, or the personal safety of their children, school crime and violence had not been a concern for most of these individuals. Furthermore, some parents said that they had not discussed the issue of school crime or

violence with their children, as neither parent nor child had any concern with the topic. For example, Edward, the parent of two students (a grade 11 student at Agrestic High School and a grade 12 student at West Beverly High), said, ‘in general, it’s not a huge topic of conversation in this house, because I think they feel safe’. Again, these are indicators of a relatively low-level of fear, and demonstrate a general lack of concern from parents, teachers, and students about school crime or violence.

[Table 10.2](#) can be used to think about how you are integrating quotations into your own work. Ask yourself the questions at each stage of review to ensure that your answers are consistent and that editing the paper has not changed the purpose, clarity, or attribution of the quotation. This table is adapted from Hennink et al. (2011, p. 281).

Table 10.2 Integrating quotations

| | |
|--------------|---|
| Introduction | <p>Is the quotation clearly introduced?</p> <p>Is the meaning and importance of the quotation explained?</p> <p>Is the reader told whether the excerpt is about inferred behaviour or observed behaviour?</p> |
| Purpose | <p>Why is each particular quotation selected?</p> <p>Does the quotation serve as a typical example or as a unique case?</p> <p>Is the purpose made clear in the introduction to the quotation?</p> |
| Clarity | <p>Is the quotation clear in its meaning?</p> |

| | |
|-------------|--|
| | <p>Do any words need to be removed (use ...) or added (use []) to improve clarity?</p> <p>Is the quotation long enough to impart meaning but short enough to retain reader interest?</p> |
| Balance | <p>Is there a balance between the number of quotations and your own words?</p> <p>Is there a balance between the length of quotations, with some short and some long?</p> <p>If you removed all quotations, is there still enough information to understand the issue?</p> |
| Attribution | <p>Is the proper pseudonym used?</p> <p>Has all potentially identifying information been removed?</p> <p>Is anonymized information about the speaker provided?</p> |

Quick Tip: 'Data don't speak for themselves ...'

All data should be 'set up' and connected to the main empirical, theoretical or policy argument you want to make. By itself, it is *not* 'proof.' It is not the job of the data – nor the reader – to make connections for you. As Richards (2009) points out, 'data don't speak for themselves' (p. 204).

Here is an overly dramatic illustration of this point. Imagine a lawyer who is trying to prove that the defendant killed the victim with a particular gun. Leaving quotes or field notes 'hanging in the wind' with little to no analysis is the equivalent to a lazy lawyer who expects the jury to 'guess' how the gun, the victim and the defendant are connected. Instead, the

lawyer has a far greater chance of winning his case by convincing his audience (in this case, the judge and jury) if he establishes: a) that the gun is the murder weapon, and b) the defendant is the one who ultimately fired that gun, killing the victim.

Like the lawyer in this example, you will be far more convincing if you set up the data with a fulsome explanation or argument (e.g. the defendant is guilty of murder!), and then **saturate** that point with a substantial amount of data (e.g. the ballistics, fingerprints, gunshot residue analyses clearly showing that the victim was killed with a gun fired by the defendant).

Using pseudonyms

When choosing pseudonyms for your participants, they should be different enough from the respondent's name to ensure confidentiality. Popular culture is a great reference point: for example, in Howells's (2012a) research, she used high school names from television shows and movies as pseudonyms (you may recognize 'Bel-Air Academy' from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, 'Degrassi High School' from the popular Canadian show *Degrassi* and 'West Beverly High School' from *90210*). Similarly, Clarke (2010) used names from the show *Coronation Street* to represent the research participants. Baby name books are another avenue of finding pseudonyms for your participants. Other identifying references should be changed, including locations, organizations or other 'tells' that may tip off a reader.

STEP THREE: TIPS FOR GOOD WRITING

Key takeaways



- Proper spelling, grammar, word choice, and effective writing style is key to writing a strong piece of qualitative research
- Editing and having peers review your work are key to presenting polished written research

A student once asked why we attribute so many marks to the writing, grammar, and style of their paper. She asked, 'But doesn't the argument matter more? Aren't the ideas more important than the grammar?' To some extent, we agree with her: the analysis and synthesis of ideas are the foundations of any solid piece of written work. But to fully understand and appreciate the ideas, concepts, and contribution, the piece must be well written; if it is not, these key features are lost.

Edit, edit, edit. You need to make sure that you read it a few times, specifically for spelling, grammar, and writing style. Since you have put in so much time and effort, your brain knows what the paper should say, but you need to see what the paper actually says. You can do this in a few different ways. First, try editing on paper instead of on the computer screen. Print it off (double spaced works well), and go somewhere other than your usual workspace. Using a pen, go through the paper word-by-word and sentence-by-sentence. Second, read your paper out-loud. This will slow down your brain and force you to hear each word and each sentence. You will likely notice a few misplaced commas and wrong word choices (e.g. 'world' instead of 'word', or 'form' instead of 'from'). Third, when you think that your paper is perfect, ask a friend or colleague to read through it. It's helpful to have someone else read through it for content and writing. As Morse (1994a) says, 'a smart researcher never sends an article to a publisher without both a peer review (for content) and an editor's check (for style and format)' (p. 71).

Things to consider in your writing

- Flow. Do the sentences and paragraphs flow nicely from one to the next? Are there choppy sentences or sections that jump from one thought to something completely unrelated? Each section of the paper should build on the previous one, and the paper should proceed in a clear and ordered manner. Each paragraph and each section should align with the theme of the paper and the main research questions.
- Word choice. Avoid unnecessary jargon. Sometimes the best word is *not* the biggest word. Try to use accessible language wherever possible – write so that people can learn from your work, not so that they need a dictionary to get through it.
- Ease. Well-written papers ensure that the reader is not required to make assumptions or re-read sections to understand the information presented and that there are no leaps of logic or interpretation required on the reader's part.
- Presentation. Ensure that spelling is correct, that grammar is correct, that there are no typos, awkward sentences or run-on sentences.
- Active versus passive voice. Writing in the active voice moves readers along (e.g. it helps with the flow) and keeps them interested.

STEP FOUR: EFFECTIVELY RESPONDING TO REVIEWER COMMENTS

Key takeaways



- Constructive criticism will make the final product (e.g. journal article) stronger

- Responding to reviewer comments should be complete, polite, and supported with evidence

Most of our written work will be reviewed by a supervisor or colleague, a journal reviewer, a thesis committee, and so forth. After spending months, if not years, on a project, criticism can be difficult to read. However, a negative review is an opportunity to improve the work. It is important to consider the comments carefully and objectively and then respond to them positively and constructively.

- When you resubmit your manuscript with the suggested changes, you need to include a document outlining the changes you have made (sometimes referred to as a 'tally sheet'). However, even in the case of a thesis, you may be asked by your supervisor or committee members to provide written feedback. Writing a solid tally sheet takes time and effort, but it will command attention from the reviewers (Samet, 1999).
- You should begin the letter by thanking the reviewers or committee members for their comments. The remainder of the letter should provide a detailed overview of each reviewer's comments and how you have made the suggested revisions.
- You can address comments either by reviewer or thematically (e.g. theory, wording, etc.). Regardless of your approach, Williams (2004) provides three 'golden rules' for responding to reviewer comments: 1) responses are complete; 2) responses are polite; and 3) responses are supplemented with evidence.

Complete responses

Address all the reviewers' comments. Adding a footnote or vague assurance will not suffice, particularly if they point to a significant flaw (e.g. poor theoretical framing). Thus, you must engage a reviewer's comments thoroughly and demonstrate that you have taken the feedback seriously. Make the reviewers' job easier. Adding

a page number and the start of a paragraph will efficiently direct readers to the changes (Annesley, 2011).

Shared comments, criticisms, and suggestions: If you have received multiple reviews, you should acknowledge feedback that the reviewers share. You can address these shared observations or criticisms about your work at the same time (e.g. Reviewer 1 and 2 asked for further clarification about how I gained access to the company. To address this comment ...').

Additional comments, criticisms, and suggestions: You can label each reviewer (Reviewer 1, Reviewer 2, or by thesis committee member name) and then number each of their comments (Comment 1, Comment 2). This will serve as your to-do list and will ensure you do not miss anything when crafting your response to the editor, thesis supervisor, or committee member.

Polite responses

Reviewers put in a lot of time to read your work, and you owe them for that. Sometimes we receive comments that we disagree with. No matter how 'wrong' we may think the reviewers' comments are, we need to address them politely, such as, 'We respectfully disagree with Reviewer 2's assessment ...' Unfortunately, not all reviewer comments will be kindly worded; this is your opportunity to be the bigger person and write a polite response. Annesley (2011) notes that 'perhaps most important of all, expressing more humility and gratitude is wiser than what you might really want to say' (p. 554).

Evidenced responses

Using evidence to back up your claims is pertinent if you disagree with a reviewer's comment. If you disagree, explain *why* you disagree. Using evidence from published work or clarifying your position will help you to respond completely and politely.

Occasionally reviewers give conflicting advice. Although this might seem frustrating, it can work in your favour since you can choose which set of comments aligns with the aims of your paper. You can outline the conflicting advice and articulate the direction you decided

to go with and why you made that decision. You can also contact the editor for advice and clarification. Reviewers might also miss something in the text. Politely point out this oversight and indicate where they can find the information.

Quick Tip: Take a step back

Once you receive feedback – from a journal reviewer, supervisor, committee member or other – we recommend that you read the reviewer’s comments thoroughly and then step away for 24–48 hours. You may feel angry that a reviewer did not ‘get it’. Taking a step back for a day or two will give you time for your emotions to run their course and allow you to address the comments with a clear head.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined the key considerations for disseminating qualitative data thoroughly and effectively. We introduced the need for understanding your audience before you begin. Next, we discussed presenting qualitative data in a proposal, peer-reviewed journal article, and policy report. We focused on the methods section, indicating how to discuss your methodology clearly and concretely. Then we focused on writing, providing tips for demonstrating the data effectively through the use of quotations, tables, and general guidelines for solid writing. Finally, we outlined strategies for effectively responding to comments from reviewers.

FURTHER SUGGESTED READING

Healy, K. (2017). Fuck nuance. *Sociological Theory*, 35(2), 118–127. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275117709046>

The word ‘nuance’ is routinely used in publications to describe a research project’s contribution. However, it tends to discourage the development of theory that is ‘intellectually interesting, empirically

generative, or practically successful' (p. 118). Researchers who claim that their research adds 'nuance' usually fall short of making a meaningful contribution.

Jonsen, K., Fendt, J., and Point, S. (2018). Convincing qualitative research: What constitutes persuasive writing? *Organizational research methods*, 21(1), 30–67.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428117706533>

This article distills some of the central ingredients that convincing qualitative research shares including providing a 'honest, detailed and engaging narration of the field' and clear description of the research design and data collection procedures.

O'Leary, Zina. (2018). *Research proposal: Little quick fix*. Sage.

This book provides students with a practical guide and examples for crafting an effective proposal.

Wolcott, H. F. (2009). *Writing up qualitative research* (3rd edn). Sage.

Wolcott offers clear guidelines for writing up qualitative research including developing a writing plan, tips for keeping on track, advice on how to revise and edit a piece, and tightening up an argument.

SAGE CASE STUDIES

Meiklejohn, S. (2020). Novel ways of communicating researcher reflexivity: Reflexive quilting. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. www.doi.org/10.4135/9781529735963

Perera, K., & Emmerich, N. (ed.). (2018). The ethical concerns of writing in social science research. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. www.doi.org/10.4135/9781526437020

Toze, M., & Emmerich, N. (ed.). (2018). The ethics of anonymization when talking to older lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans people about health care experiences. In SAGE Research Methods Cases. www.doi.org/10.4135/9781526428448

KEY TERMS

| | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|------------------|
| <u>Inferred Behaviour</u> | <u>Observed Behaviour</u> | <u>Pseudonym</u> |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|------------------|

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

accretion measures

A type of physical trace, accretion measures are the additions or changes to physical space which indicate the social activity within a particular environment.

asynchronous internet interview

An interview method that does not occur in real time, and that relies on text-based, picture and video information and communication technologies to gather data.

breaching experiment

A conscious display of unexpected behaviour to expose social norms, rules, and order.

CAQDAS

Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, used for organizing, sorting, and coding qualitative data.

case study

A research design that approaches one (or a few) instance of a current phenomenon and studies it in depth. Case studies are centred around context and seek to contribute in-depth understanding and explain a phenomenon by capturing multiple perspectives.

categories or categorization

The process of grouping codes under larger unifying classifications (or categories) based on themes which begin to emerge from the data.

codebook

A reference tool for qualitative research that contains the project codes, definitions, and examples to help analyse the data. The codebook operationalizes the project's codes, and maintains consistency across coding, and coders in the case of multiple researchers on a team.

codes

A word or phrase that provides a summative meaning to a portion of textual or visual data.

coding

The process by which researchers bring order to qualitative data through the assignment of codes and categories.

common ground

In the context of focus groups, bringing together participants who share an understanding and interest about a particular topic.

comparative argument

When your argument has an implicit assumption about similarities or differences.

comparative problem formation

Projects formulated on the basis of comparing like, unlike or deviant cases.

comparative research

Involves evaluating, the association and differences between phenomena. The goal of comparative research is to uncover correspondence and variation between the individual elements being compared.

comparative (research) problem

A comparative research problem that is supported by a systematic comparative problem formation, research design and analysis.

comparison coding

An analytic strategy to better understand data, where the data is divided into comparison groups, and compared and contrasted with one another.

concept mapping

Visual representations that are more structured than a mind map, and that include many potential starting points for research. Concept maps can include not only key ideas, concepts, characteristics, people, groups, and organizations, but also examples and the nature of their relationships.

conceptualization

Process of moving from a general topic to formulating a defensible and researchable research problem.

contrived observations

Observations about a research setting that has been altered in some way by the researcher to see how participants respond to the changed setting.

convenience sample

Convenience sampling selects research participants based on their ease of availability. This sampling method lacks a clear sampling strategy, instead relying on those who are eager and available to participate in the study.

conversational interview

An interview structure characterized by informal and spontaneous interactions and conversations with participants.

covert observations/research

Research observations that are made while the researcher assumes a covert position in the research setting, meaning that they are not interacting with participants and the participants are not aware that they are being observed.

criterion sample

Criterion sampling incorporates cases or individuals who meet a predetermined criterion of importance and contrasts them with cases that vary on the variable of interest. This sampling method requires researchers to develop clear inclusion and exclusion criteria.

deference effect

An occurrence where respondents share information that they think the moderator is looking for, rather than how they would truly like to respond.

demographic survey

A survey that allows researchers to collect a variety of key demographic features about their respondents such as age, gender, education, occupation, and income.

de-naturalist transcription

A transcription approach that does not record idiosyncratic elements of the interview or speech, such as background noises, laughter, or pauses.

descriptive questions

Interview questions that are used more inductively to examine participants' localized understandings of a phenomenon or event under study.

disconfirming sample

A sampling strategy that includes rival instances, interpretations or examples to extend, challenge, or modify existing theories or conventional wisdom. This strategy can also illustrate similarities, variations, nuance or patterns that cut across the phenomenon under investigation.

discrepant evidence

Evidence or findings that have emerged from the data during analysis that cannot be accounted for in a researcher's interpretation or explanation of a phenomenon.

discussion guide

In the context of focus groups, it includes all the topics, questions and activities that the researcher will ask or do.

dominant participant

A focus group participant who is overly assertive and monopolizes discussion even if they have nothing productive to contribute to the discussion.

emergence

A research practice involving focus groups, where a researcher takes what they learn in one focus group and adapts their discussion guide accordingly.

empirical challenge projects

Research projects that problematize empirical gaps or shortcomings in scholarly literature.

erosion measures

A type of physical trace, erosion measures are evidence of what people use, how they use it and how they utilize a physical space.

ethical tasks

A task performed by the moderator of a focus group, where they ensure informed consent has been obtained, and deal with any questions pertaining to other ethical considerations such as recording the focus group, confidentiality, and data storage.

ethnography/ethnographic

A study of the 'world view' of different groups, offering detailed thick description. Ethnography involves immersion and prolonged systematic observation of the social life of a particular group or culture for a prolonged period.

ethnomethodology

An approach to the study of social life that focuses on the discovery of implicit, usually unspoken assumptions and agreements.

extreme sample

A sampling strategy that seeks cases that are extraordinary or special in some way that can shed light on a topic. This can include exceptional cases, outliers, and disconfirming or deviant cases.

face-to-face interview

A mainstay of qualitative research, face-to-face interviews involve the researcher and one or more participants, and occur in-person and in real time with no time delay between questions and responses.

facilitating discussion tasks

A task performed by the moderator of a focus group, which includes managing group dynamics, probing all members to ensure thorough responses, maintaining discussion related to the research topic, and moderating the time of the discussion and participant responses.

feasibility

The extent to which researchers are actually able to implement and conduct a research study within their established parameters.

field

The 'field' can include physical spaces, people, objects, public places, groups, social milieu ('scenes'), organizations, online chat rooms, blogs, visual representations and artefacts, and other organizational documents and discursive materials.

field notes

A form of data recording where the researcher systematically records behaviours, activities, events, and other aspects of the research setting being observed.

first-cycle coding

A stage in the coding process that is more descriptive in nature. During this stage researchers continue to assign codes to collected text and capture the central characteristics embedded in the data. This stage may also involve beginning to develop patterns, themes, and categories.

fixed response Interview

An interview structure that is standardized and includes a close-ended interview schedule. In fixed response interviews, interviewees are asked the same questions and select responses from a pre-set range of options.

focused coding

This form of coding is selective and is used to develop larger categories. It requires researchers to select the most salient codes that best represent their data, with the goal of developing more abstract and inclusive categories.

frequency coding

An analysis technique that researchers use to count a variety of things (e.g. words and phrases) in order to identify categories and themes in their data.

gaining access

A critical stage of ethnographic research where the researcher enters the field to begin their data collection. This often involves negotiations with key social actors who have the authority to grant or deny access to the research site.

gatekeeper

Authoritative members of the field site who guards public and private boundaries and whose consent is critical for gaining

entry into those field sites.

group cohesion tasks

A task performed by the moderator of a focus group, which ensures the focus group remains an environment where all members feel comfortable and free to contribute their responses.

heterogeneous group

An orientation towards the composition of focus groups which values diversity in the participants in order to achieve dialogue between members who do not hold the same viewpoints.

homogeneous group

An orientation towards the composition of focus groups which values familiarity between the participants, or a group which comprises individuals likely to have similar views.

homogeneous sample

A sampling strategy used to provide a researcher with a detailed account of a particular group or phenomenon. In a homogeneous sample the goal is to have as little variation as possible among the characteristics of the sample cases.

inferred behaviour

In the context of writing, a researcher's interpretation, summary, or conclusion.

informed consent

A critical stage in the research process involving human participants, where the researcher provides participants with information about the purpose of the study, how the participant's data will be used, how the participant will be identified, and what is required of the participant.

insider

An insider is a research role through which the researcher participates in the research setting the way natural members do and acts as a complete participant.

institutional ethnography

A research technique in which the personal experiences of individuals are used to reveal power relationships and other

characteristics of the institutions within which they operate.

internally driven comparisons

Comparative projects that demonstrate that two more units of interest are similar or different based on a key attribute of interest; or that demonstrate that a particular case deviates from the norm based on the key attribute of interest.

internet interview

A primary source of data, where an interview takes place between the researcher and one or more participants and occurs over an online forum.

interview schedule

The questions you plan to ask your participants and the probes that you may need to elicit responses or further details. The rigidity varies depending on the interview style a researcher employs in their study.

interviewer bias

Interviewers can inadvertently or unintentionally impact their participants' responses just by being present. For example, participants may under-report behaviours that are less socially desirable, or over-report behaviours that are more socially desirable.

introductory tasks

A task performed by the moderator of a focus group, which helps welcome the group and establish expectations about what the remainder of the focus group time will be devoted to. Also involved in these tasks is acquainting participants with other members of the research team who may be present, as well as introducing the research and how the participant responses will be used.

latent approaches

When exploring physical data (i.e. documents, photographs, or other 'things'), examining the implicit meaning embedded in the item as observed by the researcher.

literature mapping

Visual representations of existing literature, organized around one central dimension, several dimensions of literature or as

multi-hierarchical representations (e.g. theory, methods and data, context).

literature review

A comprehensive tool to identify key themes, arguments, and ideas in a particular body of literature, and that allows the investigator to determine what is known, unknown, problematic, and/or missing from the literature.

longitudinal research

A particular approach to qualitative research to capture changes over time, or a sequence of events. This involves more than one episode of data collection to capture processes of change in real, or somewhat real, time.

manifest approaches

When exploring physical data (i.e. documents, photographs, or other 'things'), examining what is observable (i.e. frequency of words, number of items, size).

master question

Orients the project in a manner that is consistent with the research problem you have identified and captures the overarching goals of the study.

maximum variation sample

This sampling technique is used to capture a range of attitudes, perspective and experiences, with the goal of identifying patterns that cut across individual cases. Heterogeneity is embraced as a strength in identifying core experiences and central problems in particular populations, contexts, and so on.

method of agreement

Comparative projects in that researchers isolate conditions that may explain the generic conditions that have led to a particular outcome.

method of difference

Comparative projects in that researchers consider two cases that share some characteristics, but had different outcomes. In these cases, the missing antecedent can be used to make causal statements about the conditions that led to the divergence.

methodological memos

Summarize the methodological issues and further considerations that emerged during qualitative interviews. Here, problematic questions are flagged, as well as issues that may impact on the quality of the interview, and questions that should be added or altered in the interview schedule.

moderator

The individual guiding the questioning and decorum of focus groups. They act as a facilitator to ensure discussion occurs, that each participant's voice is shared, and that discussion remains on topic.

multiple methods

Using multiple qualitative methods within a single study to better address the research questions at hand, address potential deficiencies of a mono-method, and/or to broaden the range of data collection.

narrative (guiding) Interview

Asking a handful of guiding questions in a manner that allows participants to share their experiences and/or life stories. Participants are free to respond without a lot of direction or intrusion from the researcher.

natural groups

Groups of individuals whose connection and association occurs without the influence of the researcher, such as a group of friends or co-workers.

natural observations

Observations a researcher makes when they are interested in how participants behave and interact in a particular setting. Unlike contrived observations, the researcher does not manipulate or alter the research setting.

naturalism

An approach to field research based on the assumption that an objective social reality exists and can be observed and reported accurately.

naturalist transcription

An approach to transcription that captures idiosyncratic elements of speech, such as sighs and pauses. Used when both the content and pattern of speech is important to the research.

negative cases

The 'surprising' findings in qualitative research that go against established literature, personal beliefs, or that otherwise refuted established conventions.

non-covert observations/research

Observations that are made in a field site while the presence of the researcher is known to participants.

non-directive interview

A form of interviewing, such as a focus group, where the intention is to gather data from the discussion which takes place, the disagreements that occur, and the interactions between participants.

non-systematic social observations

An inductive approach to observation, where the parameters of observation are not specified or systematic.

note-taker

A member of the research team who is responsible for writing down key issues being discussed in a focus group, and who records enough verbal and non-verbal detail of the discussion that the discussion could be re-created should the audio recording fail or members of the focus group do not consent to being recorded.

observed behaviour

In the context of writing, communicating what the researcher directly observed and/or heard.

outsider

A research role through which the researcher observes the research setting from an outsider perspective and is removed to some degree from interacting in the field setting the way natural members do.

pattern coding

Used to analyse the connections between codes, and can help identify central processes and even explain these patterns in the data.

personal memos

A space for the researcher to summarize how they felt during the interview and any personal issues or factors that may have impacted the quality of the interview.

phenomenology

A theoretical approach, and research orientation, based on the idea that different people experience the world in different ways.

photo or video auto-driven interview studies

Also referred to as 'photovoice', this form of interview study involves participants taking all the photos or videos used in the research.

photo or video elicitation interview studies

An interview approach that uses photos, videos, or other materials (e.g. newspaper clippings) throughout the interview. The materials can be provided by the participants or the researcher.

photo or video interview

An interviewing method in which researchers use photos or videos as visual tools to facilitate the interview and gather data.

physical traces

An unobtrusive method for observing social behaviour through the remnants of human behaviour, attitudes, and culture produced by erosion or accretion.

pre-coding

The first stage in the coding process, this is where researchers assign preliminary codes to collected text.

primary sources

Materials that are produced by, for or about the person, group, organization or event of interest. These data are produced by persons or bodies who have direct and intimate knowledge or experiences.

pseudonym

Fictional names that are used to maintain the confidentiality of participants. Participants names and other (potentially) identifying information (e.g. business, city) are changed.

purposeful random sample

This sampling technique is used to increase credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative methods as it establishes systematic inclusion criteria for the sample, to generate a more manageable, yet credible sample size.

purposive sample

Comprises various sampling techniques for selecting a population that reflects particular features about a group, organization, event, or activity that a researcher is interested in.

quiet participant

A focus group participant who only speaks when directly asked a question and otherwise remains silent or provides a few short answers.

rambling participant

A focus group participant who monopolizes discussion, and who provides long and elaborate answers.

rapport

The degree of comfort and trust in the relationship between the researcher and the participant(s).

reactivity

Also referred to as observer effects, this is when the process of conducting research alters the behaviour of the participants in some way. Examples include the Hawthorne effect and the novelty effect.

reliability

Relates to the consistency of the process and findings of qualitative research. The more replicable the process and findings are, the more reliable the research study is.

research intention

The overall frame or contribution of a research project. This includes considering the intended audience, the research goals,

formulating the research problem, and considering potential contributions of the research project.

research paradigm

Although they can vary based on ontology and epistemology, these are assumptions, ways of understanding a researcher's place, and ways of understanding social reality and knowledge.

research problem

Articulates the gap in existing literature, or a conceptual and analytic shortcoming that a researcher plans to address in their project.

research question

Clearly worded, focused, and open-ended statements of inquiry that shape a qualitative research project. They will influence not only the scope of the research project, but also the research design and methodological considerations.

researcher bias

This is the tendency of researchers to collect, interpret, or present data in such a way to support their own ideas, theories, or goals, and deals with the subjectivity of the researcher.

saturation

The point at which you saturate codes, categories, and themes with a substantial amount of evidence. Data is sufficient to not only examine what is common or shared by many participants, but also what is less common.

second-cycle coding

Builds on the codes developed in first-cycle coding, researchers interpret and make sense of the data; this includes reconsidering, restructuring, and reinterpreting initial codes. This stage may even suggest additional data collection is needed to further develop theory that has begun to emerge in the data.

second interviewer

A member of the research team who plays a supporting role in the interview or focus group process and attends to peripheral tasks to ensure a smooth flow of the interview or focus group, such as distributing materials needed for activities.

secondary sources

Materials that are one step removed from primary sources. These sources are commonly referred to as 'the literature'.

segmenting or segmentation

The process of organizing focus groups/participants according to various categories (or segments) that are pertinent to the research project, such as segmentation based on age or socioeconomic status.

self-appointed expert

A research participant who claims to be an expert on the subject matter, and who states their opinions as though they are facts.

semi-structured interview

An interview structure that is standardized but includes an open-ended interview schedule. Here, all interviewees are asked the same set of questions but are able to approach and answer the question however they choose.

snowball sample

Also referred to as referential chains, this involves asking existing participants to name others who fit the selection criteria. This process is helpful for research that involves hard-to-reach or hidden populations.

social behaviour

The overall how and what people do, and how they interact with one another and their environment.

stratified purposeful sample

This sampling strategy bridges homogeneity and heterogeneity to ensure each subgroup (strata) of a given population is fairly represented within the sample. This allows researchers to capture variations by comparing and contrasting these subgroups.

sub-question(s)

These questions flag specific dimensions of the master question and are intimately tied to the subsequent data collection. They meaningfully extend the master question with which they are associated.

summative memos

Operate as an interviewer's 'check sheet', and include short descriptions of the interviewee and broad-stroke details of the interview.

symbolic interactionism

A social situation has meaning only in the way people define and interpret happenings and events. People interact based on shared meanings and understandings.

synchronous internet interview

An interview that occurs in real time, and that relies on text-based, picture and video information and communication technologies to collect data.

systematic social observations

A standardized approach to observation that specifies from the outset of the research project what and how observations will be recorded.

telephone interview

Used alone or in tandem with other methods, the telephone interview allows researchers to collect data in real time over the phone.

themes

The product or outcome of an interpretive process, themes require significant analysis and reflection. Themes generally are the few 'big' ideas that emerge from a researcher's data.

theoretical bundling of questions

Questions that are 'bundled' or organized in such a way to ensure that issues related to a particular concept or theory are addressed.

theoretical discovery

Ethnographic research which seeks discovery to develop theory. Theoretical discovery operationalizes an inductive approach to develop new theory.

theoretical extension

An approach to ethnographic research that extends existing theoretical models and concepts to new groups, phenomenon,

and contexts.

theoretical memos

Summarizes the theoretical or conceptual ideas that emerged during an interview. This is where researchers can reflect on connections between theories and concepts they are using which are central to their projects and interviews.

theoretical questions

Starting with a particular theory or concept, theoretical questions are developed with the intention of exploring the micro-foundations of a theory.

theoretical refinement

An approach to theory development through ethnographic research which adapts existing theory based on new data.

theory-guided sample

This sampling strategy is most commonly associated with grounded theory, and it includes individuals or cases on the basis of their potential contribution to theory.

transition statements

Usually two to three sentences long, transition statements are components of the interview schedule that are used by a researcher to bridge one section of the interview schedule to another.

triangulation

Triangulation is a validity marker in qualitative research that strengthens the trustworthiness of findings. Forms of triangulation include methods, investigator, data source and theory triangulation.

trustworthiness

Often used as a substitution to validity and reliability, this term refers to measures of rigour within qualitative research through four dimensions: credibility and authenticity, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

typical case sample

A typical case sample includes those cases that are considered to be 'average' cases, such as people, groups, institutions,

events, and so on. This type of sampling can be used to illustrate what is typical of particular settings to those who are unfamiliar with a particular topic.

unobtrusive methods

Methods of collecting data and undertaking analysis that do not impinge on the subjects under study are considered unobtrusive. Examples include gathering and analysing 'social artefacts' such as videos, documents, newspaper reports, or magazines.

validity

The extent that research findings are 'correct' in relation to the data that was collected, and the ability to test research claims against the real world.

validity threats

The ways in that a researcher might be wrong in their interpretation and presentation of their findings. Validity threats include alternative possibilities for explaining data, or alternative understandings that a researcher did not account for.

verbal probes

Prepared follow-up questions that encourage a participant to expand on their responses. Verbal probes encourage participants to provide more detail, elaborate, or clarify their points.

visual probes

Visual aids or cues which are used to encourage participants to expand on their responses.

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