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# QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

MONIQUE HENNINK • INGE HUTTER • AJAY BAILEY



# Qualitative Research Methods

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Monique Hennink  
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Qualitative research humanizes science

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## About the Authors

The first edition of this book was initiated jointly by **Inge Hutter** and **Monique Hennink**, who developed training workshops in qualitative research methods for academic researchers and graduate students. These training courses were conducted during the late 1990s until 2002 in many developed and developing countries including China, India, Pakistan, Uganda, Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania, Kosovo, France, Germany, Sweden, Netherlands and USA. **Ajay Bailey** later joined as an instructor on some of these workshops. These workshops and our extensive experience in applying qualitative research in diverse research settings provide the backdrop for the content of the first and second editions of this book.

### **Monique Hennink\***

is an Associate Professor in the Hubert Department of Global Health, Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University in the USA. She is trained in demography and conducts qualitative and mixed methods research in globally diverse settings. Her research focuses on understanding socio-cultural and behavioural aspects of public health issues, particularly sexual and reproductive health, often to develop effective health interventions. She teaches graduate-level courses on qualitative research and mentors Doctoral and Master's-level research students in Public Health, Behavioural Sciences, Nursing, Sociology, Epidemiology and Medical Sciences. She also developed the *QUAL-WORKS* program to train public health professionals in qualitative research. Throughout her teaching and mentoring of qualitative research, she encourages balancing methodological rigour with the practical realities of global field research. She has authored other textbooks on *International Focus Group Research* (2007) with Cambridge University Press and *Focus Group Discussions* (2014) with Oxford University Press. She has also published articles on qualitative methodology, including research experiments on saturation and sample size for qualitative studies; the quality of transcription via court reporters; and using interpreters and translators in qualitative research.

### **Inge Hutter\***

is a Professor of Participatory and Qualitative Research in Population and Development at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Hague, of Erasmus University in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. She is trained as a non-western demographer and a cultural anthropologist and conducted extensive fieldwork in India and Cameroon. She has been involved in many qualitative PhD research and research-for action projects in the Netherlands, USA, Asia and Africa. Her own research focuses on culture and (reproductive) health and the application of qualitative research within the quantitative discipline of demography. Listening to people, hearing their voices and situating them in the cultural context in which they live, is the central theme of her research work. She wants her research to lead to not only academic knowledge but also to contribute to actions and interventions, in partnership with other societal stakeholders such as policy makers and non-governmental organizations. In this light, a participatory approach to qualitative research was co-developed. Several joint research projects in India, Kosovo, Malawi, Ghana and the Netherlands demonstrate this participatory approach to qualitative research. Thus, she believes not only that qualitative research humanizes science, but that qualitative research can also contribute to improving the well-being of people and enhancing social change in society.

(\*Both authors contributed equally to this book)

### **Ajay Bailey**

is an Associate Professor of Transnational Mobilities at the Department of Human Geography and Spatial Planning, Utrecht University in the Netherlands. He leads the research line Global Migration, Culture and Place working at the interface of anthropology, geography, demography and public health. He holds the prestigious Dr T.M.A. Pai Endowed Chair in Qualitative Methods at Manipal Academy of Higher Education, India, named after Dr Tonse Madhav Ananth, the founder of the university. With his Chair, he coordinates the Transdisciplinary Center for Qualitative Methods – a joint initiative with Manipal Academy of Higher Education. To develop this research line he has been awarded more than €1.5 million in grant funding by a number of organizations such as NWO/Dutch Organization for Scientific Research, Ubbo Emmius Foundation, Gratama Foundation, amongst

others. As an anthropologist and a cultural demographer, he has produced more than 30 top peer-reviewed international publications; one highly cited monograph; and has supervised nine PhD researchers. He is passionate about qualitative research, teaching, and capacity building of young researchers. His work significantly contributes to expanding the field of transnational mobilities, ageing, inter-generational relations, health systems research, health services, reducing barriers to care, while establishing meaningful North–South and South–South collaborations.

## About the contributor

### Christine Fenenga

contributed to [Chapters 4](#) and [12](#) on the participatory approach to qualitative research. She is a post-doctoral researcher in Public Health and Social Anthropology and works with the Applied Health Research Department of the University Medical Centre Groningen in the Netherlands and the Global Partnership for Zero Leprosy in the US. Originally trained as a physiotherapist, she pursued her career in international health, living and working in over 15 countries in Africa and Asia. Through her experience as healthcare coordinator in different countries with different cultures, she developed interest in socio-cultural beliefs and practices in health. She thus continued studying. She holds a Master's degree in Community Health from the University of Liverpool, and Anthropology from the University of Amsterdam, and conducted her PhD research in Ghana, studying clients' perspectives on healthcare and health insurance. She remains involved in various studies, mainly qualitative studies in Africa, Asia and Europe. She strongly believes that real change can only happen when people themselves are part of the process. Listening to their voices in their own community, understanding their beliefs and perceptions are key. The strength of qualitative research, in particular when using a participatory approach, lies in the contribution people themselves make in each stage of the research. This not only contributes to scientific knowledge but can also lead to social change and improved well-being.

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## Preface to the Second Edition

Ten years have passed since the first edition of this book was published. The enthusiasm of students, teachers and researchers who have used the book has exceeded our expectations. We were pleased to learn that our book has been widely cited across very diverse disciplines worldwide. It is very encouraging for us that our book is a useful resource and is relevant across a wide range of academic disciplines and in many different countries. This is exactly what we intended when we developed the book.

Over the years, we used the textbook as the foundation for our own courses and workshops on qualitative research, as a resource for mentoring graduate research students, and while conducting our own research projects. During these activities we also received much feedback on our approach from other researchers, questions from our students and workshop participants, and we refined our own understanding of qualitative research from both teaching and applying the techniques we described in the book. Inge Hutter even uses knowledge from the emic and etic perspectives in her management role at a research institute. The feedback we received over the years provided a useful starting point to reflect and improve the content of our book for a second edition.

When Sage asked us to consider writing a second edition of our book, we readily agreed, since qualitative research is our passion. However, writing this second edition was a long journey. We experienced many changes in our personal and professional lives: significant personal losses, family illness and changing professional appointments with increasing demands on our time. Despite many delays, we were determined to complete this second edition and continue to encourage the rigorous application of qualitative research methods.

In this second edition, our *Qualitative Research Cycle* (QRC) remains the central focus of the book from which we describe the cyclical processes of qualitative research. However, we have refined the QRC from our own reflection and application of it and from feedback of others. We refined the

names of the cycles and tasks within them to better reflect what we do in qualitative research.

We also strengthened the description of inductive and deductive reasoning, which is a key characteristic of our approach to qualitative research and the QRC, by describing how to integrate both aspects throughout the different stages of a qualitative study. The chapters now include a description of inductive and deductive approaches.

We have also enhanced the content on evaluating quality, by adding a new Postscript chapter on assessing quality in the QRC. The Postscript describes the core attributes of quality in our qualitative research approach: the importance of coherence, the iterative processes of inductive and deductive reasoning, and reflexivity. The Postscript complements the quality assessment criteria which we include at the end of each chapter.

In the chapters on data collection, we added the range of skills needed for effective interviewing, group moderation and observing when using the different methods of data collection. In the chapters on data analysis, we added a summary of different approaches to qualitative data analysis and how the analytic tasks we describe can apply across different analytic approaches. We also expanded our discussion on using computer programs in qualitative data analysis.

We have restructured and expanded the chapter on writing qualitative research to focus on writing different sections of an academic journal article or thesis, as reviewers stressed this as an area where novice qualitative researchers need more guidance. This chapter also includes a new section on responding to common critiques of qualitative research (e.g. criticisms of ‘small’ sample sizes, lack of generalizability, subjectivity, and using an iterative process), which are often received from journal reviewers or peers at academic conferences.

In addition, the content of all chapters has been generally revised and updated. We have also included a glossary of terms used throughout the book, since we assume that most readers will not read the book cover to cover, and may have missed the first time a term or concept was introduced and defined, so they can now easily find these definitions in the glossary.

The second edition also has a website of online resources that can be used to enhance teaching qualitative research. The website includes PowerPoint slides from each chapter with key points, figures and further resources.

The second edition includes two new chapters on participatory qualitative research ([Chapters 4](#) and [12](#)). These chapters are based on the work of Inge Hutter and colleagues from the Population Research Centre at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, who conducted participatory qualitative research in India, Kosovo, Malawi, Uganda, Ghana and the Netherlands, which contributed to the development and maturing of their participatory approach to qualitative research over time. These two chapters were written in collaboration with Christine Fenenga.

[Chapter 4](#) describes how to *design* participatory qualitative research where the researcher aims not only at academic outcomes but also at social change outcomes, and where collaboration with other societal stakeholders is essential. [Chapter 12](#) describes the process of using qualitative research findings, representing the voices of research participants, to co-design and co-implement social action or community interventions for social change. Qualitative research then has an important role in reflecting the emic perspective in community interventions and ensuring sustainable social change.

Both these new chapters describe additional components to the QRC to make qualitative research more participatory and integrating rigorous academic research with principles of participatory action for social change. We believe that these new chapters are important because researchers are becoming increasingly evaluated on the social relevance and impact of their academic research.

We hope the second edition of our book continues to support new qualitative researchers to learn the art and science of this approach and to inspire more experienced qualitative researchers with new ideas on how to conduct, teach and evaluate qualitative research. We look forward to your feedback on our second edition.



## Preface to the First Edition

In the academic world there is an increasing demand for qualitative research. We notice that even within disciplines that traditionally use quantitative research, the application of mixed methods research is becoming increasingly common. This has spurred a renewed interest in qualitative research methods across many academic disciplines and a greater interest in training for qualitative research. In addition, policy and intervention research is increasingly interested in identifying the perspectives of the people and also embrace qualitative research. With this book we hope to contribute to this growing interest in qualitative research and training. Our book is aimed at researchers from many scientific disciplines who wish to learn the process of qualitative research, whether at a beginning or more advanced level.

This book is based on a ten year collaboration between Monique Hennink and Inge Hutter, who met at a research workshop in the United Kingdom. In 10 minutes we decided that there was a need for improved training in qualitative research and began to develop the initial training workshop which was first held in the Netherlands. This collaboration has continued for the past decade focusing on improving training for qualitative research through a number of joint activities. We developed and conducted training workshops on qualitative research methods in many developed and developing countries, including China, India, Pakistan, Uganda, Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania, Kosovo, France, Germany, Sweden, Netherlands and USA. More recently Ajay Bailey became involved in organizing the training workshops. These workshops provide the foundation and inspiration for this book.

Our workshop participants provided us with a stimulating environment in which to share and discuss the qualitative research approach. Workshop participants were from:

- *Diverse academic disciplines:* both from quantitatively oriented disciplines (i.e. demography, statistics, public health, economics, psychology, sociology) as well as disciplines that are more oriented to

- qualitative methods (i.e. cultural anthropology, nursing, cultural geography, spatial planning, marketing, pedagogical sciences).
- *Different cultural backgrounds*: Europe (Netherlands, UK, Ireland, Romania, France, Poland, Kosovo, Czech Republic, Greece, Estonia, Turkey), Asia (India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, China, Indonesia), Africa (Uganda, Malawi, Tanzania, South Africa, Zambia) and the USA.
  - *Various academic levels*: Master's and PhD level researchers, senior researchers from academic and independent research organizations, development organizations and policy makers.

We wrote this book to contribute to training in qualitative research more generally, but we feel that the book has several features that make a unique contribution to qualitative research training. We conceptualize the process of qualitative research in our *Qualitative Research Cycle* that is used to structure the book. This provides a structure for learning the cyclical nature of qualitative research that can seem unclear at first. We also reflect the use of qualitative research in diverse international settings and demonstrate the flexibility of the approach and techniques. We believe that our approach to qualitative research described in this book is equally valuable for researchers working in Zambia, Kathmandu, Italy or New York, and therefore has a global appeal. We also provide many practical strategies, tools and empirical examples throughout this book that we hope provides a 'real world' focus to learning qualitative research.

We hope that our book will inspire readers to develop their qualitative research skills, to identify the 'voices' of the people they study, and contribute to the humanizing of science through qualitative research. We also invite your feedback on our book and our approach.

Monique Hennink	Inge Hutter	Ajay Bailey
Emory University	University of Groningen,	University of Groningen,
USA	the Netherlands	the Netherlands

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## Acknowledgements

The first edition of this book was based on our own experience of qualitative research and a decade of teaching workshops on qualitative research conducted in Europe, Asia and Africa. We again thank the many workshop participants from years past for providing us with stimulating discussions about qualitative research that helped us to develop and improve our approach to qualitative research that formed the first edition of our book. The training workshops that we conducted would not have been possible without the support of the many research institutes in the countries where we provided training. We thank these research institutes for the invitation to contribute to training courses. We would also like to thank the various funders and agencies who made those workshops possible.

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# Online Resources



Covering every stage of your research project from design to dissemination, this book's online resources offer the support you need to use and understand qualitative research methods. Find them at: [study.sagepub.com/hennink2e](http://study.sagepub.com/hennink2e).

**Case studies** exemplify how qualitative research works in the real world.

**Real world datasets** enable you to practise and master data analysis at your own pace.

**Exercises** from the book allow you to develop specific research skills like writing a research question and conducting an interview.

**Annotated further reading** signpost key journal articles that help you develop a deeper understanding of qualitative research in practice.

**Glossary flashcards** help you gain confidence in applying and using methods terminology.

Lecturers can access:

**PowerPoint templates** featuring figures and tables from the book, which can be customized for use in your own presentations.

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# Introduction

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# 1 Introduction to the Book

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## Objectives

After reading this chapter you will:

- know who this book is for;
- become familiar with our qualitative research cycle;
- become familiar with the features of this book;
- know the structure of this book.

## Who is this book for?

This book is useful for researchers and students from different academic disciplines who want to learn the process of conducting qualitative research. The book is suitable for both novice and more advanced qualitative researchers. For those new to qualitative research we recommend starting with [Chapter 2](#), which describes the nature of qualitative research and the underlying principles for data collection that are described in [Chapters 7–9](#). Researchers who are more familiar with methods of qualitative data collection may be interested in qualitative data analysis, developing inductive theories or writing qualitative research in [Part III](#). For researchers interested in developing participatory qualitative research projects, i.e. aiming at academic *and* social change outcomes by involving participants and other societal [stakeholders](#), [Chapters 4](#) and [12](#) are most relevant. This book is also relevant for those who evaluate the quality of qualitative research projects to understand how to assess qualitative study design, data collection and analysis. We provide criteria to assess the quality of your qualitative research at the end of each chapter and in the Postscript.

## The qualitative research cycle

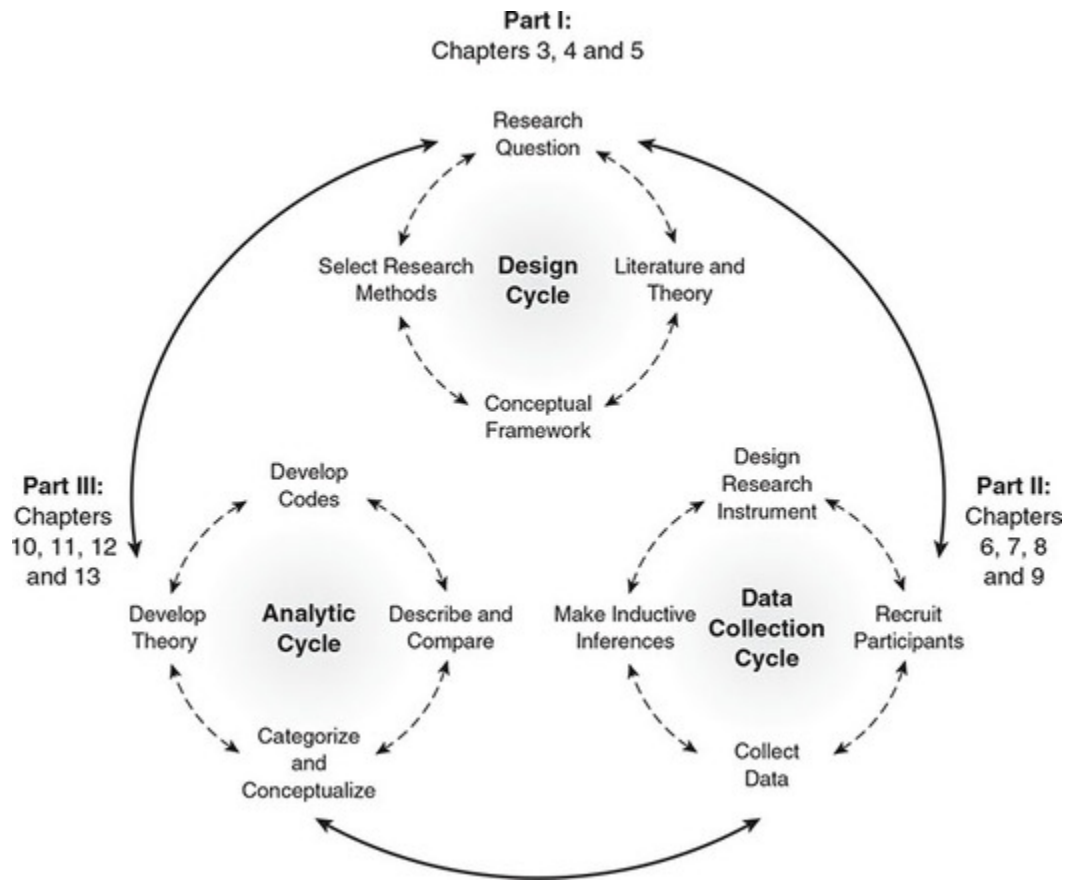
In this book we present a framework for conducting qualitative research that acknowledges the cyclical nature of the qualitative research process. We call it the [qualitative research cycle](#), and it is shown in [Figure 1.1](#). Our approach is shaped by conducting qualitative research within the predominantly positivist and quantitative disciplines in which we work (e.g. demography and health sciences). Therefore, we discern that qualitative research involves an explicit study design process (the design cycle); and while the inductive nature of qualitative research is well known, we also recognize that induction continuously alternates with deductive reasoning. Throughout the book we describe how to use inductive and deductive reasoning in designing qualitative research ([design cycle](#)), in collecting qualitative data ([data collection cycle](#)) and in analysing these data ([analytic cycle](#)). Our approach is described in further detail in [Chapter 2](#).

Our qualitative research cycle thus consists of three interlinked cycles: the *design cycle*, the *data collection cycle* and the *analytic cycle*, each of which is briefly described below.

## The design cycle

The design cycle is the first component of the qualitative research cycle. It consists of four interlinked tasks: the formulation of research questions and objectives; reviewing research literature and incorporating **theory**; developing a conceptual framework for the study; and selecting methods of data collection. These four tasks form the conceptual design phase of a research project. As you conduct each task and move around the cycle, you also return to earlier tasks and adjust these so there is coherence between all components in the design cycle. The design cycle leads to the data collection cycle and guides your initial data collection. However, you also return to the design cycle to refine the research question or conceptual framework of the study based on data collected. If you want to conduct a participatory qualitative research project you additionally follow a [participatory design sub-cycle](#) as described in [Chapter 4](#). The design cycle is described in [Part I](#) of this book.

Figure 1.1 Hutter–Hennink qualitative research cycle



## The data collection cycle

The data collection cycle is the second component of the qualitative research cycle. It is closely linked to the design cycle, to ensure a logical flow from the conceptual design of the study to its field application. The data collection cycle comprises the core tasks in qualitative data collection, including designing the research instrument, recruiting participants and collecting data. These three tasks are guided by the study design that was developed in the design cycle. The fourth task involves making inductive inferences, which is the pivotal point that makes data collection into the circular process that characterizes qualitative data collection. Making this inductive turn involves using what you learn in early data collection to guide subsequent data collection to go deeper into the research issues thereby generating richer or 'thicker' data as you proceed. The inductive turn may also lead to adjustments in the data collection tasks, for example refining the research instrument, participant recruitment strategies or the

method of data collection based on what you learn in early data collection. The data collection cycle therefore begins with deductive reasoning and continues with an inductive process that refines and reshapes the data collection process. Initiating the inductive process involves reviewing data as you collect it, which incorporates early data analysis into data collection, thereby linking the data collection cycle with the analytic cycle. The data collection cycle is described in [Part II](#) of this book.

## **The analytic cycle**

The analytic cycle is the third component of the qualitative research cycle. It comprises the core tasks of qualitative data analysis, including developing codes, description and comparison, categorizing and conceptualizing data and developing theory. These analytic tasks are closely interlinked: not only are they conducted in a circular manner whereby tasks are repeated throughout the analytic process, but tasks are also conducted simultaneously and used throughout data analysis. As data analysis proceeds you may also return to data collection to further explore issues or fill gaps in the data, thus linking the analytic and data collection cycles. The analytic cycle also links back to the original design cycle, as data analysis is informed by concepts and theory from the study design. Inductive findings from the analytic cycle are also compared with the original conceptual framework of the study (developed in the design cycle) to discern how the study findings contribute new concepts or explanations to existing theory. The process of qualitative research has now come full circle. If you conduct a participatory qualitative research project, the analysis of your data is followed by validation and dissemination of your findings and the design of social action through the participant-based action cycle (see [Chapter 12](#)). The data analysis cycle is described in [Part III](#) of this book.

## **Structure of the book**

The qualitative research cycle provides the structure of this book. We begin by describing the nature of qualitative research and the underlying concepts of the interpretive approach ([Chapter 2](#)). The book is then divided into three parts corresponding to the three cycles within the qualitative research cycle.

In [Part I](#), we describe the components of the design cycle. In [Chapter 3](#), we outline the design of qualitative research questions and objectives and describe how to summarize theory, literature and the research question in a conceptual framework. We then discuss the selection of research methods and mixed methods study design. [Chapter 4](#) is a new chapter in this second edition and describes how to integrate a participatory research approach into the qualitative research cycle, from the design stage onwards, to conduct research that aims not only at academic outcomes but also social change outcomes. [Chapter 5](#) discusses ethical issues in qualitative research.

In [Part II](#), we describe the components of the data collection cycle. We describe sampling and participant recruitment in qualitative research in [Chapter 6](#). We then focus on three common methods of data collection: in-depth interviews ([Chapter 7](#)), focus group discussions ([Chapter 8](#)) and observation ([Chapter 9](#)). Each of these methods chapters describes the process from instrument design to data collection, and how the process of making inductive inferences contributes to the circular process to generate rich data.

In [Part III](#), we describe the components of the analytic cycle. [Chapter 10](#) describes data preparation and development of codes. [Chapter 11](#) discusses the core analytic tasks: description, comparison, categorization, conceptualization and theory development. [Chapter 12](#) describes how you can move from analysis to social action and social change outcomes, following the participatory approach to qualitative research. It describes how to validate your study findings, with participants and stakeholders, and subsequently co-design and co-implement an action or intervention.

[Chapter 13](#) discusses approaches to writing and presenting the findings of qualitative research. We provide strategies for presenting findings in narrative text and diagrams.

In the Postscript, we reflect on how the qualitative research cycle may be used to assess the quality of a qualitative study.

## **Features of the book**

The following features of the book are included to help you learn the different aspects of qualitative research.

*Theory and practice.* We include a discussion of the theoretical principles as well as the practical application of qualitative research, through case studies, field examples and exercises.

*International field examples.* We provide many examples from our own research in the health and population sciences. Our research reflects the international context of our work and highlights the application of qualitative research in different cultural contexts.

*Interdisciplinary case studies.* We include case study examples from other researchers in a range of disciplines, such as geography, spatial planning, nursing, public health, medical sciences, population studies, cultural anthropology and communication sciences.

*Research tools.* We include many research tools from our own research projects (e.g. interview guides, coded data segments, theoretical frameworks).

*Visual aids.* The chapters on research methods (in-depth interviews, focus group discussion and observation) include photographs of the method in practice to demonstrate specific elements of research practice (e.g. seating of interviewers, interview context, body language).

*Exercises.* Exercises are included at the end of each chapter to help you practise specific skills – for example, writing a qualitative research question; conducting a mock focus group discussion, an interview or an observation; transcribing an interview; developing codes from data; presenting qualitative research findings.

*Methodological and empirical further reading.* Annotated further readings are included in each chapter. We include one list of readings related to the methodological concepts described in the chapter, and a second list of readings for examples of empirical research.

*Evaluating quality.* Each chapter includes a series of questions to assist you in evaluating the quality of your qualitative research – to check that your qualitative research is appropriate, valid, coherent, transparent, interpretive, grounded, saturated, reflexive, culturally sensitive, ethical and provides new information. We also include a

postscript to the book on assessing the quality of qualitative research using our qualitative research cycle.

*Key points.* Each chapter concludes with a textbox summarizing the key points.

*Glossary.* We include a glossary to define terms and concepts that we use in the book. Terms that are shown in bold text throughout the book are listed in the glossary.

*Online resources.* This book has an accompanying website of further resources for researchers and instructors.

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## 2 The Nature of Qualitative Research and Our Approach

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## Objectives

After reading this chapter you will:

- understand the principles of qualitative research;
- understand the interpretive paradigm underlying qualitative research;
- understand the concepts of Verstehen and the emic perspective;
- become familiar with the concept of reflexivity;
- start to internalize the qualitative research approach.

## What is qualitative research?

Qualitative research is a broad umbrella term that covers a wide range of techniques and philosophies; thus it is not easy to define. In broad terms, qualitative research is an approach that allows you to examine people's experiences in detail by using a specific set of research methods such as in-

depth interviews, focus group discussions, observation, content analysis, visual methods, and life histories or biographies. Qualitative research, however, is much more than just the application of qualitative methods. Simply applying the methods does not automatically make you a qualitative researcher. Perhaps one of the most distinctive features of qualitative research is that the approach allows you to identify issues from the perspective of your study participants and understand the meanings and interpretations that they give to behaviour, events or objects. For example, to understand *their* experience of illness or disability, *their* experience of using a health service, or to identify *their* social or cultural norms. This is referred to as the *interpretive* approach. To derive this information a qualitative researcher needs to be open-minded, curious and empathic, flexible and able to listen to people telling their own story. Qualitative researchers also study people in their natural settings, to identify how their experiences and behaviour are shaped by the context of their lives, such as the social, economic, cultural or physical context in which they live. Therefore, qualitative research also seeks to embrace and understand the contextual influences on the research issues. Denzin and Lincoln (2008b: 4, emphasis added) state that qualitative research ‘involves an *interpretive*, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or *interpret*, phenomena in terms of the *meanings* people bring to them’.

Conducting qualitative research thus effectively requires both learning the methods *and* internalizing the concepts and assumptions that underlie qualitative research. This requires training and experience. Sometimes qualitative research is seen as an activity that can be done without either of these. A poignant exchange between a surgeon and a qualitative researcher may illustrate this point. During a professional meeting the surgeon asked the qualitative researcher about her work, and after hearing that she used qualitative methods, the surgeon remarked: ‘That’s interesting, I am going to do some qualitative research too.’ The researcher quickly replied (jokingly): ‘Well, surgery is interesting too; I think I will do some surgery.’ The surgeon laughed out loud and said: ‘You can’t do surgery, you are not trained!’ whereupon the researcher replied: ‘and you are not trained to do qualitative research’ (Sterk, pers. comm., 2008). The message here is that rigorous training is needed for any profession whether it is surgical work or

qualitative research in order to conduct the work in a careful, appropriate and scientific manner.

In this chapter we describe two dominant [paradigms](#) that underlie social science research, the positivist and interpretive paradigms. We focus on the [interpretive paradigm](#), which underlies qualitative research, and highlight the core ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions that characterize the nature of qualitative research. We then describe the differences in qualitative and quantitative research that are a consequence of their differing assumptions and paradigms. The importance of [reflexivity](#) and how to practise it is described using field examples. Finally, we describe *our* approach to qualitative research as based on the interpretive paradigm and influenced by the [positivist paradigm](#) of the disciplines in which we work (e.g. demography and health sciences).

## When to use qualitative research

Qualitative research can be used for a wide range of applications. Qualitative methods are typically used for providing an in-depth understanding of the research issues that embrace the perspectives of the study population and the context in which they live. Qualitative research is useful for exploring new topics or understanding complex issues; for explaining people's beliefs and behaviour; and for identifying the social or cultural norms of a group or society. Therefore, qualitative research is most suitable for addressing 'why' questions to explain and understand issues or 'how' questions that describe processes or behaviour. Qualitative methods are also particularly suitable for examining sensitive topics, as the process of [rapport](#) building provides a comfortable atmosphere for participant disclosure. The list below indicates when to conduct qualitative research. Qualitative research is conducted to:

- understand behaviour, beliefs, opinions and emotions from the *perspective of study participants* themselves (this is called [Verstehen](#));
- understand and explain people's *views and behaviour*;
- understand *processes*, such as how people make decisions, or negotiate a job, or manage a business;
- *interpret* the findings of quantitative research;

- uncover the *meaning* that people give to their experiences;
- understand *social interactions* among people and the *norms* and *values* shared by them;
- identify the social, cultural, economic or physical *context* in which activities take place;
- *give voice* to the issues of a certain study population;
- provide depth, *detail*, nuance and context to the research issues;
- examine in detail *sensitive* issues such as sexuality, violence, personal relationships;
- study *complex* issues such as human trafficking or drug use, which may be too complex or hidden to be easily disentangled by quantitative research.

## The underlying interpretive paradigm

There are many different approaches (or paradigms) to qualitative research. Prasad (2005: iv) identifies four different traditions underlying the conduct of qualitative research:

- The *interpretive tradition*, including paradigms such as symbolic interactionism, hermeneutics, dramaturgy and dramatism, ethnomethodology, ethnography and phenomenology. Most qualitative researchers call this the interpretive *paradigm* rather than referring to a tradition. In this book, we also talk about the interpretive *paradigm*.
- *Deep traditions*, including paradigms such as semiotics and structuralism.
- *Critical traditions*, including paradigms such as historical materialism, critical theory, feminism, structuration and praxeology.
- *'Post' traditions* including paradigms such as postmodernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism.

It is beyond the scope of this book to discuss all these different scientific traditions and the paradigms they embrace, and we refer our readers to authors such as Prasad (2005) and Denzin and Lincoln (2008a) for further description of these traditions and paradigms. In this book we focus on the interpretive paradigm, which underlies our approach to qualitative research,

but we also draw on aspects of the positivist paradigm that influence our approach. We will first describe what paradigms are.

## What is a paradigm?

Paradigms are ‘models or frameworks for observation and understanding which shape both what we see and how we understand it’ (Babbie, 2007: 32). In other words, paradigms are perspectives or ways of looking at reality, and they are ‘the frames of reference we use to organize our observations and reasoning’ (Babbie, 2007: 31). Researchers are often trained in one particular scientific paradigm, with specific guidelines on how to conduct research (Prasad, 2005: 8). Denzin and Lincoln (2008b: 31), based on Kuhn (1970), define a paradigm as a ‘net that contains the researchers’ epistemological, ontological and methodological premises’. [Ontology](#) refers to what we think reality looks like and how we view the world, for example, the question of ‘what kind of being the human being is’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008b: 31) or to reflect on ‘the nature of phenomena, or entities, or social reality’ (Mason, 2002: 14). A multitude of ontological perspectives exist, each of them referring to different views on what reality is made of, for example of actions and behaviour, of object and subject, of facts or values. For a more detailed overview, see Mason (2002: 15). Some ontological perspectives are more relevant for qualitative research; for example, where reality is assumed to consist of meanings, perceptions, beliefs, and underlying motivations, they can be examined through qualitative research. [Epistemology](#) explores issues such as ‘what the relationship is between the inquirer and the known’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008b: 31), and ‘what might represent knowledge or evidence of the social reality that is investigated’ and ‘what is counted as evidence’ (Mason, 2002: 16). We describe in more detail below the differences in the epistemology of the positivist and interpretive paradigms. Finally, [methodology](#) refers to how we gain knowledge about the world (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008b: 31) and how we collect research data. The methodology that is applied is embedded in the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underlie our research.

To make the meaning of the four concepts that we use (paradigms, ontology, epistemology, methodology) clearer to you, [Table 2.1](#) provides a

concise description of each of these terms in the context of qualitative research. In this way, it might be easier for you to understand the later paragraphs in the chapter on the interpretive versus the positivist paradigm and the differences between qualitative and quantitative research methodologies.

Table 2.1 Definitions of concepts

Table 2.1 Definitions of concepts

Concept	Description in own words and references
Paradigms	<p>The way of looking at reality; the framework or lens that is used to interpret reality. A paradigm consists of epistemology, ontology and methodology</p> <p>From: Babbie, 2007: 31; Denzin and Lincoln 2008b: 31; based on Kuhn (1970)</p>
Ontology	<p>What does reality look like? E.g. reality consisting of facts, or perceptions/meanings?</p> <p>From: Denzin and Lincoln, 2008b: 31</p>
Epistemology	<p>What is counted as knowledge/evidence?</p> <p>From: Mason, 2002: 16</p>
Methodology	<p>How to <i>gain</i> knowledge about reality and collect research data?</p> <p>From: Denzin and Lincoln, 2008b: 31</p>

## Case study 2.1

# A struggle with paradigms: From positivism to interpretivism

Almost everybody knows that doctors diagnose diseases and prescribe medication and treatments to patients. But nurses also diagnose based on their clinical judgement about patients' responses to health problems. I wanted to examine how nurses reach their diagnoses and how we can improve their diagnostic skills. As a researcher in nursing sciences, I wanted to research the issues in a scientifically valid and reliable way. For me, the 'gold standard' for research is the randomized controlled trial, because it allows you to identify (non-)significant differences in randomized groups. This is 'science', in my opinion. My research project therefore had the following questions:

1. What is the *effect* of knowledge sources on the accuracy of nurses' diagnoses?
2. What is the *influence* of nurses' reasoning skills on the accuracy of their diagnoses?

I began with an experimental design, using four groups of clinical nurses who were invited to derive diagnoses based on an assessment interview with a patient (who was played by a professional actor). Three groups of nurses were allowed to use diverse information sources to make their diagnosis; the fourth (control) group was not. When my research article was published, I received an e-mail from a professor who wrote:

Based on your interpretation of data, you obtained new insights in the use of nurses' knowledge, knowledge sources and their reasoning skills and how this affects their diagnostic outcomes. However, this may not be the whole story to attain the final conclusions. You may sharpen your discussion by telling what the nurses think themselves about their reasoning and their decision-making.

She then asked:

Do you know if there is a fit between your findings and the perceptions of the nurses themselves; how do you know if your theoretical assumptions are correct?

This issue never came to my mind, although it seemed to be an important question. But chatting to nurses about what they think did not seem academic to me. However, I conducted interviews with nurses to identify their process of diagnosis, using domains from my previous questionnaire. I invited several nurses for interviews and asked them to discuss a recent diagnostic case history. At home I listened to the recordings and felt more and more uncomfortable as the respondents talked about how they reason in a constructed and unnatural way, not spontaneous or in-depth. This was surely not what the professor had in mind! In the course on qualitative research they also told us: 'Be more open, you need a more open approach. Let the respondents do the talking and let them feel free to talk. You want to know what *they* have to tell you, and not only what you think you want to hear. You need *their* story, not a story within your domains!'

When discussing the different paradigms underlying our research projects, I realized I always worked from the positivist paradigm, where science meant randomized controlled trials. Even though I read publications in nursing sciences about a phenomenological approach, I never quite understood what they meant. Months of confusion followed and then it 'clicked' and I understood. It happened during an interview with a nurse, when I discovered that indeed I only had to ask one very open question and be aware of keeping myself out of the conversation, giving her all the space to talk, and she told a wonderful, in-depth story about how she actually diagnoses the complaints of her patients. Since then, I feel I know more about in-depth interviewing and have a better understanding of the interpretive paradigm.

Wolter Paans 2011

In our experience, researchers are often not aware of the dominant paradigm of their academic discipline and how this has shaped their approach to research. Often, we are not aware of how our own disciplinary paradigm differs from that of other scientific disciplines. In our teaching,



we observe that those learning qualitative research often take some time to grasp that there exist different paradigms, and to understand the interpretive paradigm and its underlying assumptions for qualitative research. When our scientific training is heavily influenced by one paradigm, for example positivism, it is natural to apply the ontological and epistemological premise of this paradigm to all research we encounter. For example, novice qualitative researchers may assume reality consists of facts, rather than perceptions and meanings. They may also query the absence of randomization, generalization or large samples in qualitative research, because these are core constructs of the positivist tradition with which they are more familiar. Without knowing alternative paradigms, this reaction is entirely logical. Understanding qualitative research often becomes easier after grasping that the underlying assumptions of the interpretive paradigm may differ from those of the paradigm that you are used to. It then becomes clear that one cannot impose the constructs of one paradigm onto another paradigm. [Case study 2.1](#) highlights one researcher's struggle with paradigms; his training in the positivist paradigm highlighted that randomized controlled trials are *the* scientific approach to research and therefore it took time for him to discover that an alternative paradigm exists with different underlying assumptions and of equal scientific merit.

## **The interpretive and positivist paradigms**

The interpretive paradigm is commonly described as having emerged during the 1970s as a reaction to positivism, which was the dominant paradigm in the social sciences at that time. We do not aim to describe the development of the interpretive paradigm in detail and refer readers to other authors for this historical perspective (Charmaz, 2006; Denzin and Lincoln, 2008a; Snape and Spencer, 2003). In this section, we briefly outline the interpretive and positivist paradigms, accepting the possible consequences of oversimplification, to indicate the differences between these two scientific approaches, in terms of differences in the ontology, epistemology and methodology as mentioned above.

The positivist paradigm is often seen as *the* scientific approach to research. It forms the foundation for the natural sciences and for experimental research and quantitative studies in the social sciences. Within positivism,

there is an emphasis on objective measurement of social issues, where it is assumed that reality consists of facts and that researchers can observe and measure reality in an objective way with no influence of the researcher on the process of data collection. Research is thus assumed to be value-free, as there is a 'separation of facts from values' (Charmaz, 2006: 5). Positivism adopts the epistemological approach, whereby researchers formulate a hypothesis from theoretical concepts or statistical models, then operationalize and test the hypothesis by collecting empirical data and then evaluating whether the evidence supports the hypothesis. This experimental approach is often viewed as the core process for social science research.

Positivism is often criticized for its assumptions about objective measurement which essentially separates the researcher from the researched and fails to acknowledge the interactive and co-constructive nature of data collection with human beings. This minimization of subjective perspectives has potentially 'produced research with human respondents that ignores their humanness' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, cited in McKenzie et al., 1997: 178). In addition, positivism does not account for the contextual influences on people's lives, focusing only on capturing facts.

The interpretive paradigm emerged largely in response to these drawbacks of positivism. The interpretive paradigm has several distinguishing features. The *interpretive* aspect means that the approach seeks to understand people's lived experience from the perspective of people themselves, which is often referred to as the [emic perspective](#) or the 'inside' perspective. This involves studying the subjective meanings that people attach to their experiences; so rather than focusing on facts (as in the positivist paradigm) qualitative researchers seek to 'understand subjective meaningful experiences' and 'the meaning of social actions within the context in which people live' (Snape and Spencer, 2003: 7, emphasis added). The interpretive paradigm therefore emphasizes 'the importance of interpretation and observation in understanding the social world', which is an integral component of qualitative research (Snape and Spencer, 2003: 7). Furthermore, the interpretive paradigm recognizes that reality is *socially constructed* as people's experiences occur within social, cultural, historical or personal contexts. Even though 'we are individually engaged in acts of sense making', we often do this from a wider social context, and

constructions and interpretations are usually commonly shared and *inter-subjective* (Prasad, 2005: 14; emphasis added). The interpretive approach recognizes the importance of these broader contexts on people's lives, and questions whether the behaviour of people can really be studied outside the context in which they live (Snape and Spencer, 2003: 8). Finally, the interpretive paradigm acknowledges that people's perceptions and experiences of reality are subjective; therefore there can be multiple perspectives on reality, rather than a single truth as proposed in positivism. In addition, the interpretive paradigm questions the notion that research is truly value-free, and that researchers have no influence on data collection or interpretation. Instead, interpretivism highlights the inherent **subjectivity** of humans, both as study participants and researchers, and acknowledges that the background and values of a researcher do influence the creation of research data.

Although the interpretive and positivist paradigms appear completely opposite, the divergence between the two paradigms is not always as distinct as it may appear. For example, some approaches to qualitative research have some positivist influences, such as **grounded theory** or classic content analysis; while some quantitative methods may include some interpretive elements, such as open questions in surveys. More fundamental is the notion proposed by Denzin and Lincoln (2008b: 31, emphasis added) that '*All research is interpretive; it is guided by the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied*'. The authors subsequently categorize positivism within the interpretive paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008b: 32). To illustrate the point that positivism is also interpretive in nature, let us consider an example (Naletova, pers. com, 2011). A positivist researcher may study the relationship between religion, modernity and economic development by analysing survey data. The data may indicate a strong correlation between these three concepts to show that the more economically developed and modern a country, the less religious is the population. However, if one tries to *explain* and *understand why* more developed and modern countries are less religious, the answer cannot be found *in* the survey data and requires interpretation of the data. Therefore, the results of quantitative data analyses are also *interpreted* and subjective. We need to question where positivist researchers retrieve their interpretation

from. Although some interpretation may be from theoretical insights and literature, their interpretations may also be based on more personal views, assumptions or ideological perspectives and are thus also subjective.

## Qualitative and quantitative research

Interpretivism and positivism are the underlying paradigms of qualitative and quantitative research, respectively. Qualitative research is guided by concepts from the interpretive paradigm and quantitative research by assumptions inherent in the positivist paradigm. Due to the differences in the underlying assumptions of qualitative and quantitative research, the characteristics of each approach are also different. We summarize in [Table 2.2](#) the key differences between quantitative and qualitative research, by the purpose, conduct and outcomes of each approach.

Table 2.2 Key differences between qualitative and quantitative research  
Table 2.2 Key differences between qualitative and quantitative research

	Qualitative research	Quantitative research
Objective	To gain a contextualized understanding of behaviours, beliefs, motivation.	To quantify data and extrapolate results to a broader population
Purpose	To understand why? How? What is the process? What are the influences or context?	To measure, count, or quantify a problem. To answer: How much? How often? What proportion? Which variables are correlated?
Data	Data are words (called textual data)	Data are numbers (called statistical data)
Study population	Small number of participants; selected	Large sample size of representative cases

	Qualitative research	Quantitative research
	purposively (non-probability sampling)	
	Referred to as participants or interviewees	Referred to as respondents or subjects
Data collection methods	In-depth interviews, observation, group discussions	Population surveys, opinion polls, exit interviews
Analysis	Analysis is interpretive	Analysis is statistical
Outcome	To develop an initial understanding, to identify and explain behaviour, beliefs or actions	To identify prevalence, averages and patterns in data. To generalize to a broader population

In summary, the purpose of quantitative research is to quantify a research problem, to measure and count issues and then to generalize these findings to a broader population. Extrapolating the findings of quantitative research is possible due to the use of [probability sampling](#) of respondents, which provides a study population that is representative of the general population. In order for valid generalizations to be made, a large sample size is needed. The people in the study population in quantitative research are referred to as ‘respondents’ as they respond to questions formulated by researchers, often in a survey. The outcomes of quantitative research lead to the identification of statistical trends, patterns, averages, frequencies or correlations.

In contrast, the purpose of qualitative research is to seek a contextualized understanding of phenomena, explain behaviour and beliefs, identify processes and understand the context of people’s experiences. The people in the study population are referred to as ‘participants’ as they are seen as participating in our research, and discussing and telling their story in an [in-](#)

[depth interview](#) or [focus group discussion](#). Due to the in-depth nature of qualitative research, few study participants are needed, as the purpose is to achieve depth of information (rather than statistical representativeness) by ‘mining’ each participant deeply for their experiences on the research topic. Data are textual and generated through different methods such as interviews, focus group discussions or [participant observation](#). Qualitative data analysis is interpretive, whereby researchers seek to interpret the meanings that participants themselves give to their views and experiences.

Two further aspects of the interpretive paradigm are described next: Verstehen and understanding, and the emic and [etic perspective](#). We then highlight the importance of the concept of reflexivity in qualitative research.

## **Verstehen and understanding**

The interpretive approach can be further clarified by explaining the difference between understanding and Verstehen. A primary focus of qualitative research is to understand behaviour, perceptions or experiences. However, understanding can be viewed from two different perspectives: from that of the researcher using their own frame of reference on the issues, which is referred to as *understanding*; and from those of the study population by identifying their perspectives on the research issues, which is referred to as *Verstehen*. The concept of Verstehen is central to qualitative research and was extensively applied by Weber (1864–1920) who derived it from Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911, cited by Snape and Spencer, 2003). Verstehen means ‘studying people’s lived experiences which occur in a specific historical and social context’ (Snape and Spencer, 2003: 7). It refers to understanding the life of the people whom you study from their own perspective, in their own context and describing this using their own words and concepts.

The distinction between understanding and Verstehen makes clear that the aim of qualitative research is not simply to understand social phenomena but to go further to achieve Verstehen. The distinction between the two perspectives may be summarized as follows: ‘understanding’ refers to understanding issues from the researcher’s own interpretive framework or

the outsider's perspective; 'Verstehen' refers to understanding the issues from the interpretive framework of the study population, or from the insider's perspective.

Verstehen is important in qualitative research as you want to know the subjective meaning that people attach to their views and experiences. For example, a Dutchman gets a common cold. In trying to explain why he got this cold, his doctor says that he got infected by a virus that circulates in the community, that the Dutchman's resistance is low and that he might have been infected while bringing his children to the day care centre where viruses are abundant. This is the common understanding of a cold from the biomedical perspective. However, if we want to go into 'Verstehen' and understand the Dutchman's own perspective on why he got a cold, he might say: 'I must have caught a cold by getting drenched in the rain yesterday and wearing wet clothes and shoes in the office the whole day'. This is an example of understanding from the perspective of the insider. Why is it important to know the insider's perspective? If we would like to reduce the spread of such a virus in the community, we need to identify what the people themselves view as the cause of the virus. We may then develop educational material to show people how they catch a cold (from a virus) and how to prevent this (e.g. avoid day care centres). Or, we might provide advice following the insider's perspective, then we would advise him to wear a good raincoat to work to avoid getting wet, as is commonly done in Dutch society.

## **The emic and etic perspectives**

The concept of the emic perspective links closely to the concept of Verstehen. The distinction between the etic and emic perspectives is applied especially in the discipline of cultural anthropology (Pike, 1967, cited in Harris, 1975). The emic perspective provides information on the insider's point of view, the insider's perceptions, beliefs and meaning system. It thus reflects the cultural meaning that people attach to certain facts, events or experiences. The etic perspective refers to the outsider's point of view, their opinions and beliefs.

For example, a European development project wanted to build private latrines to improve the health status of the population in a developing country. The meaning the project attached to latrines was related to health: improved hygiene, reduced infections, thus leading to better health of the people. The project decided to conduct qualitative research to get to know the perspective of the local population on defecation, hygiene and health. In studying the perceptions and beliefs, it turned out to be common custom to defecate in the fields around the village. Women would leave early in the morning for these fields, when it is still dark, as it is not proper for them to be seen by men. The women would go to the fields in groups, and it is an event that is highly appreciated by the women. Women indicated that they enjoyed going together: it is the perfect time to talk, exchange news, to discuss problems and gossip. Latrines in the houses would deprive them of these social contacts. The building of latrines was therefore not supported by the women. The etic perspective in this example consists of the perspective of the development organization: it is good to build latrines for the health of the community. The emic perspective is the insiders' perspective and thus the perspective of the local population: 'we enjoy going to the fields in the morning, together'. It is clear that both perspectives reflect the cultural meaning attached to defecation and health. The project, trying to find a compromise between the etic (own/researcher's) and emic (community) perspectives, decided not to build private latrines behind the houses, but to build public latrines at the edge of the villages thus meeting both the health and social needs of the community (verbal information during fieldwork).

## **Subjectivity and the need for reflexivity**

The interpretive approach acknowledges subjectivity. It acknowledges that the perspectives of study participants reflect their subjective views of their social world, and that researchers also bring their subjective influences to the research process, particularly during data collection and interpretation. It is during the coming together of the researcher and the study participant that each will react to the background, characteristics and positioning of the other, and in this way each will contribute to the co-construction of reality during the interview process (Finlay and Gouch, 2003: 5). The interpretive



approach acknowledges that the researcher's background, position or emotions are an integral part of the process of producing data.

Reflexivity is a process that involves conscious self-reflection on the part of researchers to make explicit their potential influence on the research process. Through reflexivity, qualitative researchers reflect on their subjectivity, on how their 'social background, assumptions, positioning and behaviour impact the research process' (Finlay and Gough, 2003: ix) and on how study participants react to the researcher and the research setting. Reflexivity means that 'researchers take constant stock of their actions and their role in the research process, and subject these to the same critical scrutiny as the rest of their "data"' (Mason, 1996, cited in Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005: 43). Also, reflexivity implies that a researcher 'understands that he is part of the social world(s) that he or she investigates' (Berg, 2007: 178). Reflexivity thus assumes that researchers are explicitly aware of their own values, self-identity or ideologies. However, these may be ingrained within individuals, and so the reflexive process is important to bring forth a greater sense of self-awareness within qualitative researchers. Reflexivity is needed in order to legitimize, to validate and to question the research process (Pillow, 2003: 175). This means that researchers need to use reflexivity continually throughout the research process to reflect on any potential influence of the researcher on the research design, participant selection, the setting and conduct of the data collection, and on data interpretation and presentation.

There are two aspects of reflexivity that are worth distinguishing as both can potentially influence the data generated in qualitative research. Reflexivity may be considered as personal or interpersonal (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006). *Personal reflexivity* involves researchers reflecting on how their own backgrounds and assumptions may influence the research process and data created (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006: 146). It may be described as '... the process through which a researcher recognizes, examines and understands how his/her own social background or assumptions can intervene in the research process' (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006: 146). For example, if a researcher conducted an interview and was inadvertently dressed in a manner that clearly expressed their strong religious identity, they might find that all study participants also indicate

that religion was very important to them. It is possible that study participants highlighted their religious commitment as a reaction to the clear signals, albeit unconscious, given by the researcher of their own religious identity.

*Interpersonal reflexivity* recognizes that the interview setting and the interpersonal dynamic between the researcher and participant can influence knowledge creation. For example, if good rapport could not be established between the researcher and participant or if the interview context causes participants to feel uncomfortable, then this will affect the data that is generated during this exchange. Thus interpersonal reflexivity 'is sensitivity to the important situational dynamics between the researcher and researched that can impact the creation of knowledge' (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006: 146).

Reflexivity is conducted throughout all stages of research in the qualitative research cycle. Green and Thorogood (2004: 195) describe several aspects of the research process where reflexivity can be beneficial. First, it encourages 'methodological openness' whereby researchers can reflect on how the data were 'made', including the decisions and actions that may influence data collected. For example, in a study on sex-trafficked women in Nepal (Hennink and Simkhada, 2004) one of the field interviewers told the research team that she herself had been sex-trafficked. Researchers considered how this background might affect the interview process. They agreed the interviewer could join the field training and conduct a pilot interview and then they would review the situation. However, during the training the interviewer herself felt that the emotional nature of the interviews would not enable her to effectively collect data. In the same study, the study participants, who were all young women who had been trafficked, were given the choice to be interviewed by a male or female interviewer. To the surprise of the research team, almost half of the participants chose to be interviewed by the male. These different actions and outcomes were all considered carefully by the research team as each decision could impact on the data collected.

Second, 'theoretical openness' means that researchers reflect on which theories have been applied in the research and how they have guided the

research (Green and Thorogood, 2004: 195). For example, in a study on the risk of HIV/AIDS among male migrants in India (Bailey, 2008), the researcher adopted concepts from both the health belief model and the cultural schemas, which guided his research design, particularly the design of the interview guide (see [Case study 3.3](#)).

The third recommendation of Green and Thorogood (2004) is to maintain ‘awareness of the social setting of the research’ to highlight any influences on the data collected. For example, in research in Pakistan (Hennink and Stephenson, 2000) focus group discussions were conducted in household compounds with young women from the community to discuss their views on fertility and contraception. In one group discussion the researchers noted that young women were becoming very quiet and reluctant to discuss the issues. When asked, the participants indicated that the mother-in-law from the compound had seated herself right outside the room and could possibly overhear their discussion, making the women very reluctant to speak. Therefore, the socio-cultural setting of this group discussion could have a strong influence on the data that resulted.

Finally, reflexivity can also include an ‘awareness of the wider social context’ (Green and Thorogood, 2004) to consider how both the social and political context might have shaped or constrained the research. For example, a study on induced abortion in Kosovo (Basha and Hutter, 2006) had to consider how easy it would be to discuss the topic of induced abortion with different stakeholders in society. Although there was ample anecdotal evidence of women having induced abortions, it was not clear whether people really wanted to talk about such a sensitive issue. Focus group discussions with Kosovar citizens in the capital Prishtina produced a lot of information, while the issue was much more difficult to discuss with more religious people in another region of the country.

A common concern about the practice of reflexivity is how far to go with conscious self- reflection without it becoming overly self-indulgent and potentially paralysing the research process. We recommend finding a balance between comprehensive reflexivity and becoming too analytical, and we agree with Finlay (2002: 541) that ‘the researcher’s position can become unduly privileged, blocking out the participant’s voice. Clearly, we

need to strike a balance, striving for enhanced self-awareness but eschewing navel gazing'. Typically reflexivity is recorded in research notes, by keeping a [field diary](#) or in memos during data analysis. In reporting qualitative research, reflexivity is very important as it shows an understanding of the interpretive paradigm and demonstrates how you managed subjectivity throughout the research process. Usually reflexive issues are included in the methodology section of an academic thesis or journal article. The level of reflexivity that is reported is often influenced by the paradigm that guides your research (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Finlay and Gough, 2003; Lynch, 2000). Some researchers will go very deep into their reflexivity on their research, while others may mention only a few issues. [Case study 2.2](#) provides a good example of reflexivity by a PhD researcher studying the role of faith-based organizations in the USA. The researcher reflects on how she thoughtfully prepared for fieldwork, and how she was received by the study population as an outsider. The example demonstrates how both the researcher and researched negotiated their identities and co-constructed reality.

## Case study 2.2

### Reflexivity during fieldwork on faith-based organizations in the USA

One of the most challenging encounters during my research project occurred while I was conducting participant observation at a mosque. The purpose of the observation was twofold: to observe the content of the religious service and to gain entry into my study community by gaining the trust of potential study participants.

I had not attended a Muslim prayer service before but was familiar with Muslim prayer rites and general mosque layouts from the media coverage and from Muslim friends. Therefore, I was aware of basic protocols: that women are seated separately from men, that shoes are removed before entering the mosque, and that women cover their heads while in the mosque. However, there were other aspects of the event where I was unsure

of my role; for example, Muslims perform ablutions before prayer, but I was uncertain if this would be required of me as a non-Muslim. Similarly, I was uncertain whether and how to participate in prayer rituals. I asked my informants how I should behave so that I would not inadvertently offend anyone. I was also concerned about influencing how they treated outsiders, as this was in part why I was using the participant observation method. I decided that I would do as I had done in Christian churches, and observe the worshippers' behaviour and act to blend in. These, then, were my concerns and preparations.

The flaws of my assumptions became clear when I attempted to enter the mosque. Laila\*, a woman greeter at the door of the mosque, intercepted me. She had seen me talking with a key community member (Fatima\*) several times but recognized that I was a stranger to the community and always regarded me with a hostile gaze; this was our first verbal interaction. She asked me who I was and what I was doing. I explained that I was conducting research and was interested in attending the service. I told her that Fatima had suggested that I attend this service. My explanation was constructed to demonstrate benign interest and to suggest that I had been pre-vetted by a key community member. Laila's expression was unconcealed disapproval, but the fact that I was known to Fatima prevented her from barring me. Despite the fact that I had been in the process of taking off my shoes when she approached me, she reinforced her disapproval of my outsider status by telling me that I needed to take off my shoes. In an attempt to demonstrate full compliance and respect, I asked her if I should also wear my scarf to cover my head. I was already holding the scarf in my hand, but in requesting her permission I wanted to acknowledge her authority and demonstrate my deference, both to her and to the religious context. However, in doing so, I inadvertently provoked her. She questioned why I would wear the scarf. This was such an unexpected question – I had thought that women were always to cover their heads in a mosque and doing so would convey my respect. Her response to this was that there was no need for me to do so. It became clear that, at least in this mosque, covering one's head indicated belief and in attempting to cover my head, I was attempting to pass as a believer. Pretending to be a believer would clearly be fraudulent and disrespectful – my attempt at deference had turned out to be an active insult.

This experience illustrates some of the challenges and opportunities of the participant observation method. Despite my preparation and reflexivity, which I thought would prepare me to straddle the insider–outsider boundaries, I had inadvertently violated rules and jeopardized my relationship with the mosque-based community. However, the experience also allowed me to discern the nuances of religion and community, in particular the specifically religious nature of this mosque community, and the difference in understanding of what constitutes respectful behaviour between a (Western) secular – and inherently Christian – perspective and one rooted in Islam.

Candice Dias 2013

\*Names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

## **Our approach to qualitative research**

Having discussed the characteristics of qualitative research, here we further describe our approach to qualitative research that was briefly mentioned in the introduction of this book. Our approach to qualitative research is influenced by the dominant paradigm of the disciplines in which we work. We predominantly work in demography and the health sciences, which can be described as traditionally quantitative disciplines. Within these disciplines our methodological focus is primarily qualitative; we focus on capturing research issues from the perspective of our study participants and seek to identify the subjective meanings people give to their experiences. However, we acknowledge that our approach to qualitative research is also influenced by the deductive reasoning that underlies much positivist research and is dominant in the disciplines in which we conduct our research.

This background has led us to depict the following components in our approach to qualitative research:

- We depict *the process of qualitative research as three separate but interlinked cycles*: the design cycle, the data collection cycle and the

analytic cycle, as depicted visually in our qualitative research cycle ([Figure 1.1](#)).

- Our Qualitative Research Cycle reflects the *overall cyclical process of qualitative research*. While other qualitative researchers indeed also identify that qualitative research is cyclical in nature (Flick, 2009; Maxwell, 2005; Spradley, 1980), these researchers typically refer to a cyclical process that links data collection and analysis. We also acknowledge this. However, we conceptualize the cyclical process of qualitative research to involve interlinkages between research design (our design cycle), data collection (our data collection cycle) and data analysis (our analytic cycle). We further distinguish that *these three components of qualitative research are themselves also cyclical*. We thus present a broader cyclical process of qualitative research than others.
- We incorporate *a specific research design process* into our qualitative research, which influences our qualitative data collection and also the nature of qualitative data analysis and theory building that we describe in this book. Not all approaches to qualitative research propose that it is explicitly guided by the tasks of research design (i.e. explicitly formulated research questions, theories and a conceptual framework). The incorporation of the design cycle within our approach is where we believe our approach to qualitative research primarily differs from others and is possibly an influence of our disciplinary environment. However, the research design process within positivism is often depicted as a linear process, while we propose that in reality this is a circular process too.<sup>[1](#)</sup>
- We recognize that both deductive and inductive reasoning is used across all three cycles. Our approach to qualitative research uses both [inductive reasoning](#) (typical of the interpretive paradigm) and the *deductive reasoning* that underlies much quantitative research. We describe throughout this book the frequent interplay between inductive and deductive reasoning. While [deductive reasoning](#) is predominant in the design cycle (by incorporating concepts from existing theories and literature into the research question and [deductive conceptual framework](#)), inductive reasoning is more prominent in the data collection cycle (when collecting data and making [inductive inferences](#) that shape further data collection). In the analytic cycle,

inductive reasoning is reflected in the ‘grounding’ of analysis and in inductive theorizing, while deductive reasoning is also used when incorporating inductive theory or concepts into existing (mostly deductive) theory.

<sup>1</sup> When discussing our *qualitative research cycle* with quantitative colleagues they acknowledge that in reality, quantitative research design is indeed also a cyclical process.

## Evaluating quality

Based on the issues discussed in this chapter we suggest that you can evaluate qualitative research by focusing on whether it is interpretive, reflexive and appropriate for qualitative research.

### *Interpretive*

Does the research fit within the interpretive paradigm?  
What characteristics of the interpretive approach are identified?  
Does the research reflect the meaning and perceptions of the study population?  
Are the ‘voices’ of the study participants evident?  
Is there ‘Verstehen’? Is the emic perspective clear?

### *Reflexive*

Does the researcher reflect on subjectivity in the research project?  
How is subjectivity managed?  
Is there evidence of reflexivity in the research?  
Does the study describe both personal and interpersonal reflexivity?

### *Appropriate*

Are the research questions suitable for qualitative methods?  
Can the research questions only be addressed by using qualitative methods?



## Key points

- The two dominant paradigms that guide social science research are positivism and interpretivism.
- The interpretive paradigm underlies qualitative research and focuses on identifying issues from the perspective of the study population.
- Qualitative researchers study context to identify how people's behaviour is shaped by the social, economic, cultural or physical context in which they live.
- Qualitative research is useful for addressing 'why' and 'how' questions, to explore new topics, understand complex issues, explain behaviour, and identify the social or cultural norms.
- Qualitative research involves identifying issues from the 'emic' or inside perspective, also known as 'Verstehen'.

## Exercises

1. Select two scientific articles that use qualitative research. Read each article and consider the following:
  - Is the research question suitable for qualitative research? Why is it suitable?
  - Do the authors identify the underlying paradigm and/or theories that shape the studies?
  - Is there any evidence of reflexivity?
  - How is the emic perspective demonstrated in the articles? Are the 'voices' of study participants included? How did the researchers try to achieve 'Verstehen'?
  - How is the research contextualized?
  - How would you assess the quality of each article?
2. Reflect on your own scientific training: do you relate more to one paradigm than another? What may influence this and how does it affect the way you approach research?

Further reading

## **On the nature of qualitative research**

Babbie, E. (2014) 'Paradigms, theory and social research', in *The Practice of Social Research* (14th edn). Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, pp. 30–59. This chapter provides a clear description of the paradigms underlying research using simple examples.

Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds) (2008) *The Landscape of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. This book provides a very useful and detailed description of different scientific paradigms underlying qualitative research; it is more useful for advanced readers.

Ormston, R., Spencer, L., Barnard, M. and Snape, D. (2014) 'The foundations of qualitative research', in J. Ritchie, J. Lewis, C. McNaughton Nicholls and R. Ormston (eds), *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers* (2nd edn). London: Sage, pp. 1–23. This chapter describes in detail the emergence of the interpretive paradigm.

Pillow, W. (2003) 'Confession, catharsis or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16 (2): 175–96. This article discusses what is meant by reflexivity, how to be reflexive, how to know if it is done effectively.

## **On field practice**

Ahern, K. (1999) 'Ten tips for reflexive bracketing', *Qualitative Health Research*, 9 (3): 407–11. This article provides practical advice on reflexivity throughout the research process.

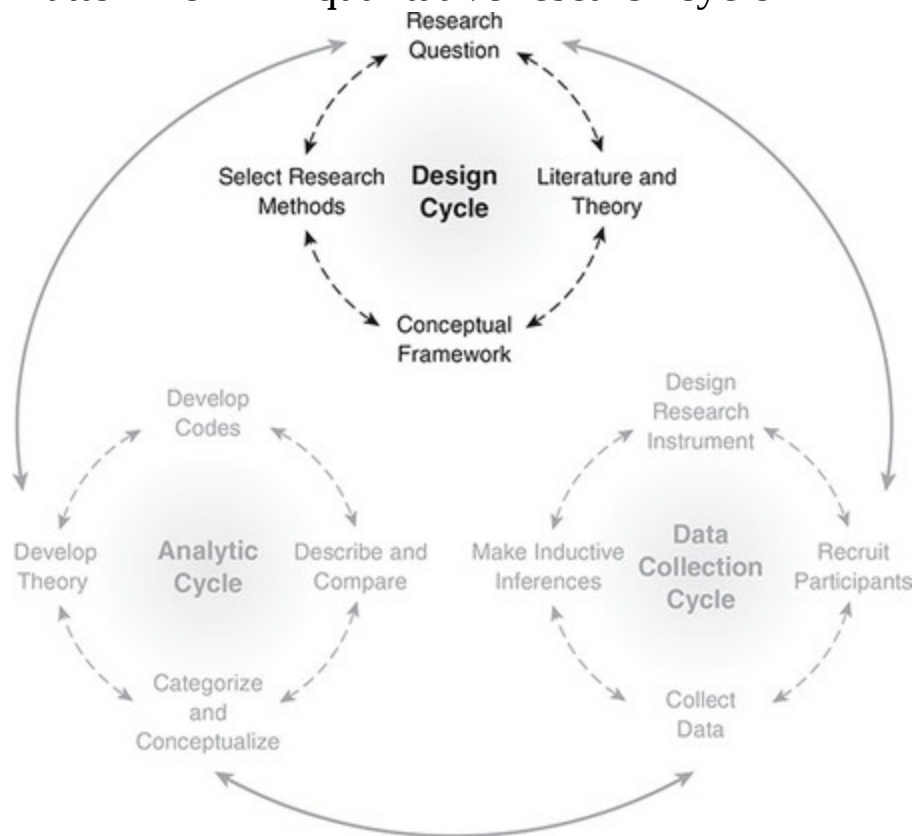
Berger, R. (2015) 'Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research', *Qualitative Research*, 15 (2): 219–34. This article gives some useful tips on how the researcher's position impacts the practice of reflexivity.

Khosravi, S. (2007) 'The "illegal" traveller: An auto-ethnography of borders', *Social Anthropology*, 15 (3): 321–34. This article describes how to do auto-ethnography and combines reflexivity and positionality on being a migrant.

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# Part I The Design Cycle

## Hutter–Hennink qualitative research cycle



The design cycle is the first component of the overall qualitative research cycle. It consists of four interlinked tasks: developing the research question and study objectives; reviewing research literature and incorporating theory; developing a conceptual framework for the study; and selecting qualitative research methods.

In our approach, qualitative research begins with identifying the study objectives and developing the research questions. Research questions may originate from many sources and are typically adapted and refined through reviewing the scientific literature, existing theory, findings of empirical research and, when adopting a participatory approach, involve participant and stakeholder perspectives on research needs (see [Chapter 4](#)). The research question leads to the development of a (deductive) conceptual

framework that summarizes the concepts, underlying theory and questions to be explored in the study. The next task is to select qualitative research methods that enable you to collect data to answer your research question. These conceptual tasks form a cycle in which the four tasks are interlinked. As you conduct each task and move around the cycle, you also return to earlier tasks to check the ‘fit’ or coherence between all components in the design cycle. The tasks in the design cycle involve more deductive reasoning than inductive reasoning, because they mostly use existing literature or existing theory to deduce or develop a deductive conceptual framework, which is then used to guide the data collection. The design cycle then leads into the data collection cycle and shapes how the initial data collection tasks are conducted. Even when you are in the data collection cycle, you still return to the tasks in the design cycle to refine the research question and conceptual framework of the study. The data collection cycle is described in [Part II](#) of this book.

In [Part I](#) of this book we describe the components of the design cycle. In [Chapter 3](#) we outline the design of qualitative research questions and objectives, and how to summarize theory, literature and the research question in a conceptual framework. We also describe how to select qualitative research methods. [Chapter 4](#) describes how qualitative research can be made participatory, by including in a social change objective in the design cycle in addition to the academic objective, and involving participants and other societal stakeholders in the *participatory* design sub-cycle. [Chapter 5](#) discusses ethical issues in qualitative research to be considered throughout the research process.

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## 3 Qualitative Research Design

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## Objectives

After reading this chapter you will:

- understand the four tasks of the design cycle;
- know how to design a qualitative research question;
- know why you need theory and a conceptual framework;
- gain insight into the difference between deductive and inductive conceptual frameworks;
- know how and why to select different qualitative methods;
- understand how to mix qualitative and quantitative research methods;
- be able to use the design cycle for your own research project.

# Introduction

The design cycle is the first component of the overall qualitative research cycle and consists of four interlinked tasks: developing the research question and study objectives; reviewing research literature and incorporating theory; developing a conceptual framework; and selecting qualitative research methods. Within the overall qualitative research cycle the processes of deductive and inductive reasoning alternate continuously and are in constant interplay with each other. Deduction is the ‘derivation of expectations and hypotheses from theories’ and induction is the ‘development of generalizations from specific observations’ (Babbie, 2007: 57). However, the tasks in the design cycle involve more deduction than induction, because they use mostly existing literature or existing theory to deduce or develop a deductive conceptual framework, which is then used to guide your data collection.

In our approach, qualitative research therefore begins with the formulation of a research question and study objectives. Research questions may originate from many sources and are typically developed and refined through reviewing the scientific literature, existing theory, findings of earlier empirical research and, when adopting a participatory approach, incorporating participants’ and stakeholders’ perspectives on what research is relevant and needed (see [Chapter 4](#)). So, research questions are adapted and refined while working through the different tasks in the design cycle. The outcome is the development of a (deductive) conceptual framework that summarizes the concepts, underlying theory and research question to be explored in the study. The next task is to select suitable research methods to collect data to answer your research question. These conceptual tasks form a cycle in which the four tasks are interlinked. As you conduct each task and move around the cycle, you also return to earlier tasks to check the ‘fit’ or coherence between all components in the design cycle. The design cycle then leads into the data collection cycle and shapes how the initial data collection tasks are conducted. Even within the data collection cycle, you still return to the tasks in the design cycle and refine the research question and conceptual framework.

It is good to realize here that not all approaches to qualitative research propagate that it should be guided by a research question and study objectives, theory and a conceptual framework, as we describe. Like us, Maxwell (2005: 3) defines an explicit qualitative research design and, quoting Yin (1994: 19), emphasizes that empirical research has ‘an implicit, if not explicit, research design’, and it is therefore also necessary to explicitly describe this research design and indicate how questions and theories guide the data collection. In contrast, an approach such as ethnomethodology (Garfinkle, 1967) emphasizes ‘ethnomethodological indifference’ where the researcher tries to completely ignore pre-existing ideas (and thus also research designs) about what social reality looks like (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 486). Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) also initially advised against conceptualizing research questions through literature at the onset of a study. However, one can question whether the pre-existing questions, ideas, values, theories and ideologies of the researcher can really be completely ignored. We suggest that this is not possible and that it is therefore necessary to make pre-existing ideas explicit, develop the research design and indicate what guided your data collection. Only then can you check the validity of the qualitative methods that are applied.

In this chapter, we elaborate on the different tasks in the design cycle. We outline the formulation of qualitative research questions and objectives, and how to summarize theory, literature and the research question in a conceptual framework. We also describe how to select qualitative research methods.

## **Formulating qualitative research questions**

A qualitative research project often begins with the formulation of a research question. A research question is a question that you propose to answer through data collection. It guides all other subsequent tasks in the research process. At the end of the project, after data collection and analysis, you should be able to answer your research question. Research questions therefore help you to keep focused during the research project (Maxwell, 2005: 67). As we indicated above, research questions become more refined as you work through the tasks in the design cycle, such as



reviewing relevant literature, incorporating theory, and the research interests of stakeholders (when adopting participatory research). But even while constructing your research instrument (i.e. an interview or focus group guide) within the data collection cycle, you may still refine your research question even further. We agree with Maxwell (2005: 66, emphasis added) that ‘well-constructed, focused, questions are generally the result of an interactive design process’. Defining the research questions for your project is not as easy as it might sound. Alford (1998: 23–4) illustrates the difficulties that all researchers face in research design, describing that researchers move from uncertainty to complete panic about how to get it all done, facing doubts about how to focus and provide structure within the multitude of information that one has to process. He emphasizes the importance of an academic attitude, whereby you may have discussions with peer researchers to ask for critical feedback on the study design, thus enhancing the quality of your research.

A research question is therefore different from interview questions (as described in [Chapter 7](#)). While research questions are more abstract and conceptual, interview questions operationalize the research questions by asking questions on an interview guide that answer the overarching research question. Research questions are posed in more academic language, whereas interview questions are posed in colloquial language so that they can be easily understood and answered by an interviewee.

In this section, we describe how to formulate research questions and the key ingredients of a good *qualitative* research question. We provide examples from one of our research projects on ‘having children’ in India. We also describe the common pitfalls in the formulation of qualitative research questions.

## **Research topic and objectives**

In designing a research question, you usually deliberate about a research topic, sometimes also called the research problem (Alford, 1998: 25). The research topic can be derived from different sources, such as existing scientific publications, other research studies, an interesting observation in everyday life, social issues or problems, or issues directly raised by policy

makers, a community or private companies. In addition, at this early stage of a research project, you also think about the objectives of the qualitative research project and consider what you want to achieve through your research. For example, you could determine that the research is purely academic and that your aim is to write articles in scientific journals or get a PhD. You might also want your research project to make recommendations for policy makers, healthcare providers or to inform the development of an evidence-based intervention which can contribute to [social change](#) (see [Chapter 4](#)). Both the origin of the research topic and the [research objectives](#) influence the formulation of the research questions for your project. For example, in our research project on having children in the rural areas of the state of Karnataka in India, the topic was derived both from earlier scientific research in the area and from the health issues raised by a local non-governmental organization (NGO), the Family Planning Association of India (FPAI). FPAI provides information to women on the health and well-being of women and children, including information about contraceptive methods. Previous research had indicated that the majority of pregnant women in the villages were malnourished and that this was related to their early age at marriage, early childbearing and short birth intervals. Women therefore reported that they felt ‘worn out’. FPAI also indicated that the health and well-being of women were negatively influenced by the fact that women did not have the decision-making power over their own health. The objectives of our study were therefore twofold:

- to gain in-depth information on the perceptions of women and their partners with regard to having children. This objective was to gain academic knowledge;
- to use this knowledge to develop a health education intervention (in collaboration with FPAI) to enhance well-being of women. This objective was to use the academic knowledge for social change.

The *general* research questions that were subsequently formulated to fit these two objectives were:

- What are the perceptions of couples in India about having children?
- How to improve the well-being of women and how to design a health education intervention based on this knowledge?

The research objectives and [research questions](#) are thus closely interlinked.

The objectives identified also give an indication as to whether you intend to conduct an exploratory, descriptive or explanatory study. In our research project for example, we intended to carry out a descriptive study, but it was also explanatory research because we wanted to identify women's own reasoning for having children.

Following the design of the research questions, the objectives of the research are also refined through the different tasks in the design cycle.

## Qualitative research questions

Initially you may begin with a very general research question and then refine it. Some examples of good qualitative research questions are:

What are couples' *perceptions* about having children?  
How do couples make *decisions* regarding their family size?  
How is family size embedded within the *social–cultural context* in which they live?

These questions are suitable for qualitative research because they focus on exploring the *processes* behind behaviour to *understand* (or *Verstehen*) the behaviour of having children; they also seek to get an *insight into perceptions, opinions, beliefs and feelings*. These qualities are typical of qualitative research questions and reflect the interpretive paradigm of qualitative research.

We frequently observe that researchers new to qualitative research formulate research questions that are inadvertently quantitative in nature and therefore cannot be answered by qualitative research. The following are examples of questions that *cannot* be answered by qualitative research:

What is the *average number* of children couples want?  
What is the *relationship* between education level and number of children?

What is the *effect* of education on having children?

One *can* ask participants how many children they would like to have; however, we cannot use qualitative research to make a quantitative statement such as ‘on average people want to have two children’.

Qualitative research is not intended to be representative of the general population (see [Chapter 2](#)), and through qualitative research we cannot measure or test *effects*, or *relationships*, or identify *determinants*. However, one *can* study the *perceived* influences or relationships, but the qualitative research questions would then be phrased as:

What do people *perceive* to be the influence of education on having children?

## **Incorporating literature and theory**

The next task in the design cycle is to review scientific literature and to incorporate theory into the study design. There are four core reasons why you incorporate scientific literature and theory in the design of qualitative research. First, it allows you to embed your research within the wider scientific literature. This helps to distinguish the particular focus of your research project and to identify where it may add new knowledge to the field of study. This is particularly important when you are developing a new research proposal. Second, referring to literature also helps to further define your research questions and incorporate concepts from previous research. This can help to refine the conceptual framework of your study. Third, embedding your study in existing literature also helps you to justify the research, for example why it is so important to conduct this study and what it will add to our knowledge. Fourth, the existing literature informs the researcher about possible data that can be collected and the methods that can be applied (Maxwell, 2005: 55). In addition, your study design can also involve your study participants, who may play a key role in co-determining and co-formulating the research question, as is done in participatory qualitative research (see [Chapter 4](#)). In this section, we elaborate in more detail on why you need theory in research design.

## Why theory is needed

Research questions are often embedded in existing theory. The word ‘theory’ may sound quite abstract or ‘heavy’, but a theory is simply a relationship between concepts (de Bruijn, 1999: 4; Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005: 14; Maxwell, 2005: 42). When discussing theory, our first image is usually of grand theories. These are theories that provide abstract constructions of the world or reality at large with little empirical grounding. However, when we discuss theory here we mostly refer to middle-range theories, as identified by Merton (1968), cited in Gilbert (1993) and Mills (2000). Middle-range theories aim at the integration of theory with empiry and apply to measurable pieces of reality; they deal with specific concepts and relationships that relate to your specific topic of research (Gilbert, 1993: 338). In this context, the concepts of intermediate and adaptive theory are also relevant (Bryant, 1999, and Layder, 1998, both cited by Mills, 2000) where theory ‘interacts with the research problem and gives shape and is shaped by empiry’ (Mills, 2000: 11).

A major function of incorporating theory in the design of your study is ‘to provide a model or a map of why the world is as it is’, and to provide a conceptual view or ‘simplification of what the world looks like’ (Maxwell, 2005: 42). The theory applied to a qualitative study typically follows logically from the paradigm underlying the research, as described in [Chapter 2](#). We observe that qualitative research is often conducted without reference to any guiding theory. However, as we suggest that research is *never* conducted ‘out of the blue’, there is always a theory underlying data collection. It is therefore essential to make this theory explicit to indicate which theories guide your research and guided the selection of particular qualitative methods. Only then can the validity of the qualitative methods that you applied be understood and verified.

Other qualitative researchers also acknowledge the importance of explicating the theoretical framework that guides research design and data collection. When he discusses the Rose–Wengraf deductive model of qualitative research, Wengraf (2001: 55–6) concludes that linking theories and empirical indicators is ‘a crucial insight associated with quantitative research, but one underestimated, ignored or even denied by researchers

declaring themselves to be “qualitative”. Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005: 1) conclude that ‘it is important to recognise and accept the variable significance of theory in qualitative research’. Maxwell also links theories with the collection of qualitative data and similarly concludes that ‘every research design needs some theory of the phenomena in reality, to guide the other design decisions that you are going to make’ (Maxwell, 2005: 46). Therefore, incorporating theory in qualitative research design is an important task, albeit one that is often underplayed in much discussion of qualitative research.

## Refining research questions with theory

Incorporating theory into the process of qualitative research design also helps to refine the research questions. We return to our earlier example of the project on having children in India to demonstrate this. The first two research questions of this study were:

What are couples’ *perceptions* about having children?  
*How* do couples make *decisions* regarding their family size?

One of the relevant theories that guided the design of these research questions was the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). This theory was relevant to this study because it postulated a theoretical rationale for how people make decisions about certain behaviour, in our case the behaviour we wished to explain was ‘having children’. In their theory, behaviour is seen as the outcome of an intention, and the intention is in turn determined by the *attitudes* of people regarding the specific behaviour, the *subjective norm* (i.e. the perceived influence of the importance of others) and *perceived behavioural control* (i.e. the perceived ability to carry out the behaviour) (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980: 6). Using the rationale of this theory, we refined the research questions of the study to make them more theoretical (i.e. they now incorporate theory):

What are the *attitudes* of couples regarding having children?  
What are the *subjective norms* of couples about having children?  
What is the *perceived behavioural control* of couples regarding having children?

The socio-psychological theories of Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) and Ajzen (1991) are based on the positivist paradigm. Usually researchers apply this theory by formulating a hypothesis that is tested through a representative, quantitative survey. However, in our qualitative study the theory helped to specify, refine and conceptualize our research questions, and to structure the interview guide that was designed later on.

An additional research question included in this study was:

How are perceptions and decisions about having children embedded in the *socio- cultural context* in which couples live?

We also identified a theory on culture that would guide this research question. There are many theories on culture (see Moore, 2004), so it was important to identify a theory that would be relevant to our specific research question. We selected the theoretical perspective of cognitive anthropology (D'Andrade, 1984, 1992, 1995) which proposes that there is a link between people's decision-making and perceptions, and their cultural context. Cognitive anthropology assumes that human behaviour is motivated by cultural schemas which are part of a cultural meaning system. The initial research question was then further refined to become a more theoretical research question:

What is the *cultural meaning system* related to having children?  
How are people's beliefs and decision-making embedded in this cultural meaning system?  
How do *cultural schemas* motivate people's behaviour regarding having children?

In summary, the original research questions were refined to become more theoretical after the incorporation of concepts from existing theory. The research questions include different theoretical concepts and assumptions that gave insight on the central domains of the research study, which indicate our expectations and guide our data collection. We have elaborated here on paper the process of theorizing the research questions. In reality, however, this is often done silently in your head and without explicating the original research and theoretical questions.

From the text above, you may wonder what exactly attitudes, perceived behavioural control and cultural schemas are. The theoretical concepts applied in your research need to be defined carefully. They are commonly defined on the basis of the existing literature and theories. For example, we defined the concept of attitudes to be ‘beliefs about the consequences of a particular behaviour and the evaluation of these consequences’ (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980: 6). Similarly, we defined a cultural meaning system to consist of ‘the cultural schemas that are shared by a group of people’ (Strauss, 1992: 1) and a cultural schema as ‘a conceptual structure which makes the identification of objects and events possible’ (D’Andrade, 1984: 92).

Concepts are defined for the following reasons. By defining the concepts that you apply to your research design you clarify the theoretical focus of your research. Clarifying concepts also guides you in the data collection process, to operationalize the research questions in your interview guide, to know what topics to focus on in the interview guide, and to guide the development of the actual questions on the guide. For example, following the definitions given above, an interview question on attitudes to having children would be theoretically defined as: ‘What do you feel are the consequences of having children?’ This is then transferred into more colloquial language to read: ‘What do you think will happen if you have children?’

It is important to note that concepts that are derived from existing theory may be quite different from how the study population would define the concept. It is possible that the study population is not familiar with a concept that you are trying to explore in your study. For example, in a study on risk perception of HIV/AIDS in India (Bailey, 2008), the concept of risk was defined according to the health belief model, as consisting of perceived susceptibility and perceived severity. Perceived susceptibility is defined in this model as ‘the individual’s perspective of his or her risk of contracting a health condition or illness’ (Rosenstock and Strecher, 1997). However, when study participants were asked about the concept of risk, they did not understand the concept of risk in the same way. In the local language only the concepts of danger (*apaaya* in the local language) and the *possibility* of contracting HIV were known. These two local concepts were subsequently



added to the inductive framework of the research (see later in this chapter, and [Chapters 10](#) and [11](#)).

In addition, it is good to use concepts in a value-neutral manner and to be aware of the terminology and concepts that we use in our research questions and how these concepts might be perceived by our research participants. For example, when we use the term pre-marital sex or unwed motherhood we are reiterating the hegemonic patriarchal norms of sexuality and childbirth as if only taking place within wedlock. Or, similarly, it is good to replace ageist terms such as ‘the elderly’ with the term older adults. In summary, it is important to be aware of the meanings and values of the concepts that we use in our research questions.

The relevant theoretical concepts in our research questions are included in a conceptual framework for the study, which summarizes the research questions and guides the data collection. This is described below.

## **Developing a conceptual framework**

The next task in the design cycle is to develop a conceptual framework for your study. A conceptual framework essentially contains the concepts included in the research and may be depicted diagrammatically using boxes that are linked together with arrows to indicate potential relationships between the concepts which you intend to further explore in your study. Maxwell (2005) uses the term ‘concept mapping’, which clearly illustrates what a conceptual framework does – it maps the concepts included in your study. Usually, the behaviour or event that you wish to explain is depicted centrally in the conceptual diagram, or perhaps on the right-hand side, for example. An effective conceptual framework allows the reader to clearly identify the components of your research question and how these are linked. A conceptual framework is therefore developed through deductive reasoning based on existing literature and theory.

We often ask our students to show their conceptual framework to their fellow students, to identify whether the framework clearly shows what their study is about and highlights the essential research questions or purpose. We also advise students to try to draw their conceptual framework, perhaps

on a board or paper, and then play with how the concepts are related until the conceptual framework clearly reflects the intention of the study.

It is important to keep in mind that a conceptual framework consists of concepts, and that it is not an operationalized framework consisting of empirical variables. A conceptual framework depicts an abstract concept, such as socio-economic context, not the operationalized variable of the concept, which might be annual household income. We now turn to why a conceptual framework is needed.

## **Why a conceptual framework is needed**

There are several reasons why a conceptual framework is needed, in both a qualitative and quantitative study. In summary, a conceptual framework:

- provides focus and structure to the study;
- provides clarity to the concepts that are being investigated in the study;
- provides a way to further refine the research questions;
- reflects the theoretical assumptions and concepts adopted in the study;
- reflects the expected relationships between the concepts that will be explored.

The conceptual framework also provides coherence between the different tasks in the design cycle and allows you to check whether all components are linked in the study design. You may check this coherence by asking the following questions:

- Does the conceptual framework effectively summarize the research questions?
- Do the research questions need to be further adapted or refined?
- Does the theory fit the research questions?
- Why has this theory been selected for the study?
- What is the underlying paradigm of the design?

As an example, the conceptual framework for our research project on having children in India is shown in [Figure 3.1](#). The conceptual framework summarizes the theoretical assumptions and research questions of our study.

It shows that people's attitudes, their subjective norms and their perceived control of having children are thought to be linked to cultural schemas. These concepts in turn link to an individual's intention to have children. The circle around the conceptual framework suggests that these concepts are all thought to be embedded within a specific cultural meaning system. Therefore, the conceptual framework includes the concepts that we intend to explore in the study and the relationships that we anticipated between these concepts, based on the research literature. It is this framework that guided our subsequent data collection. Keep in mind that the framework does not depict 'the answer'; it is literally a conceptual framework that includes the concepts that guide the study and data collection. This brings us to a discussion on the difference between deductive and inductive conceptual frameworks, which is essential in our approach to qualitative research.

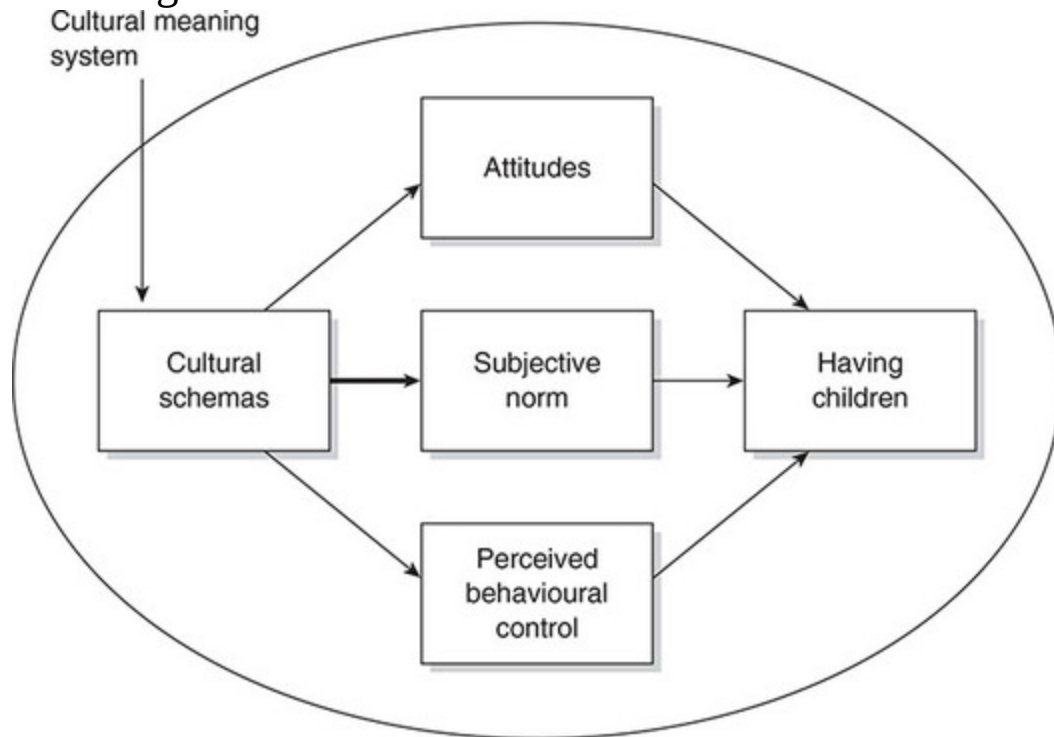
## **Deductive and inductive conceptual frameworks**

We have described the importance of embedding your qualitative research within existing theories and also the importance of making these theories explicit before you collect your qualitative data. Within the design cycle we mainly describe deductive reasoning, which means using existing literature or existing theory to deduce or develop a deductive conceptual framework that guides the data collection. The design cycle could therefore be described as a mostly *deductive conceptual cycle*. In research based on the positivist paradigm, the first three tasks in the design cycle would be followed by the formulation of hypotheses. In the positivist paradigm, hypotheses are formulated on the basis of existing theory and literature and are then tested empirically. The hypotheses are subsequently verified or falsified by the data that are collected. Hypotheses are very much part of the epistemology of positivism: they are closed statements which one can decide to be true or not true. This approach goes against the main principles of qualitative research, which focuses on understanding and Verstehen of experiences and behaviour and on hearing the voices of people themselves.<sup>[1](#)</sup> Some researchers do define expectations or propositions for a qualitative study based on existing literature and theory; however these are not framed

as hypotheses to be ‘tested’ but rather expressed as potential expectations to be explored in data collection or analysis.

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Wike Been for critical remarks on this part of the design cycle.

Figure 3.1 Deductive conceptual framework for research on having children



*Source:* Based on Hutter et al. (2006), Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) and Ajzen (1991)

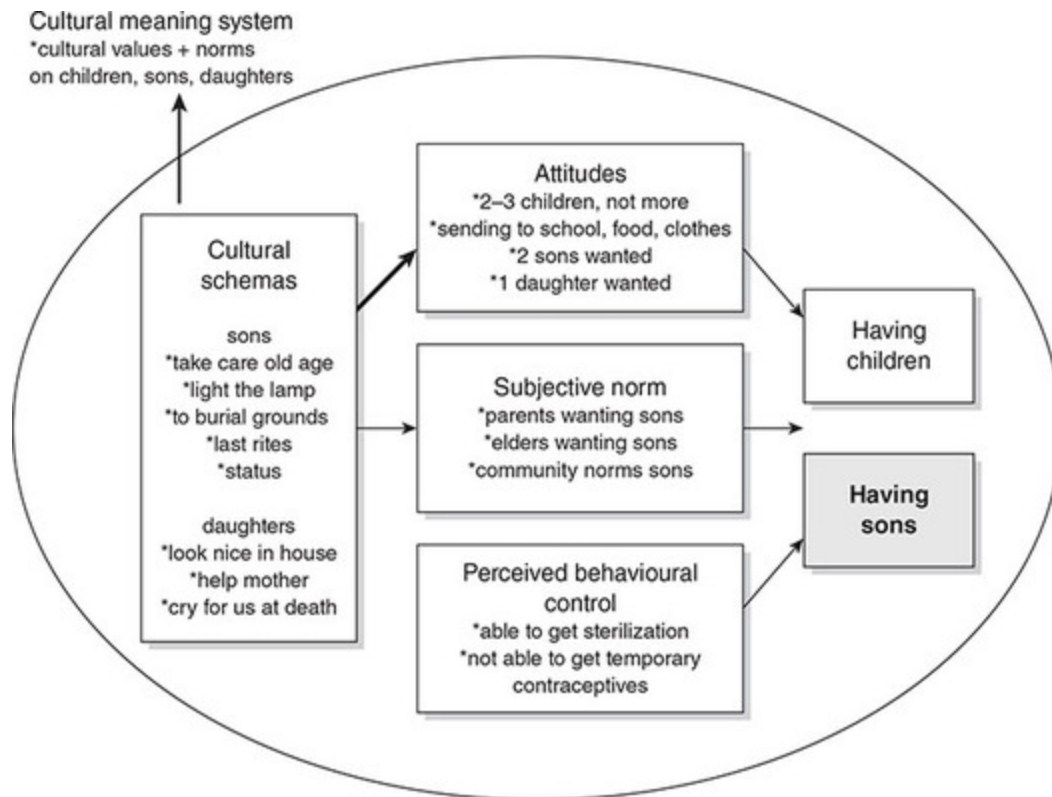
In qualitative research deductive reasoning is also predominant in the design cycle; inductive reasoning begins and becomes predominant in the data collection cycle and in the analytic cycle of qualitative data analysis. We will describe this in much more detail in [Part II](#), but in order to understand the difference between deductive and inductive conceptual frameworks we include here a short description of inductive reasoning. For example, when conducting [in-depth interviews](#), you begin to learn more about the key issues of the study after the first interview and use this

knowledge to make inductive inferences which lead you to go deeper into the issues in a next interview. After each interview, you make these inferences and therefore go deeper and deeper into the research issues, until a point is reached where new information is no longer coming up (this is called the point of [saturation](#)). Making inferences is also called formulating grounded or inductive hypotheses (Maxwell, 2005: 69). Within the analytic cycle, all the data collected is analysed in greater detail; here codes emerge from the [transcripts](#) of the interviews, and concepts and theories are induced from the information provided by the research participants. The analytic cycle could therefore also be called the *inductive conceptual cycle*.

To illustrate this difference between deductive and inductive conceptual frameworks in the qualitative research cycle, we show in [Figure 3.2](#) the [inductive conceptual framework](#) of the research we described on having children in India. Earlier (in [Figure 3.1](#)) we showed the conceptual framework that was developed in the design cycle (through *deductive* reasoning).

The inductive conceptual framework shown in [Figure 3.2](#) describes (in a simple way for the sake of clarity) some of the themes and concepts that were derived from the interview data, consisting of 32 in-depth interviews with couples in South India. The basic structure of the inductive conceptual framework ([Figure 3.2](#)) clearly reflects the concepts that were included in the original deductive conceptual framework ([Figure 3.1](#)), as it includes the concepts of attitudes, perceived behavioural control, cultural meaning system, etc.

Figure 3.2 Inductive conceptual framework for research on having children



Source: Based on Hutter et al. (2006), Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) and Ajzen (1991)

The couples whom we interviewed indicated that their *attitudes* about having children were that they wanted to have children but not too many. They stated that in the past it was desirable to have many children to ensure that enough would survive to take care of the parents in old age, but nowadays they said that two or three children were enough. This was because children are expensive nowadays; they need to go to school, be fed and they need good clothes.

Couples also indicated that they preferred to have two sons and one daughter, because having sons is extremely important in the cultural context of India. Therefore, during data analysis we identified 'having sons' as an important new concept that emerged from the interview data, and this new concept was added to the original conceptual framework. This indicates that previously we did not realize how important this issue would be for the study participants. We feel that qualitative research should always induce

some new information, which the researchers were not aware of before they conducted the research. We go as far as to state that if qualitative research does not generate new information, the research has not been well conducted.

When asking about *subjective norms*, the interviewees indicated that parents and elderly people are extremely influential in their decisions about having children, in particular about having sons. The interviews therefore revealed the cultural schemas about children and about sons and daughters, which motivated couples to have children. For example, sons are important because they are expected to take care of the family, they remain living in their parents' home and they continue the family line (referred to as *lighting the lamp* in the local language). Also, sons will carry the deceased parents to the burial ground and perform their last rites. Daughters are seen as important because they 'look nice in the house' and can help the mother in the household. Participants also indicated that there is a strong emotional attachment to daughters: 'Sons might indeed carry our dead body to the burial grounds, but it is our daughters who will cry for us and who decorate our dead bodies before the cremation.'

These cultural schemas about having children and the nuances about sons and daughters are shared within the study community, and there is a very strong relationship between the cultural schemas of individuals (indicated by a thick arrow in [Figure 3.2](#)) and the cultural meaning system in the larger community. Also, the relationship between cultural schemas and attitudes appeared to be very strong, even stronger than the link with subjective norms (also indicated by a thick arrow in [Figure 3.2](#)). The link between cultural schemas and perceived behavioural control seemed to be non-existent. Therefore, the arrows between the concepts are either thicker or are removed completely from the inductive conceptual framework.

In comparing [Figures 3.1](#) and [3.2](#), we can observe that the original deductive conceptual framework in [Figure 3.1](#) is based on existing literature and theory, and thus represents an *etic* (or external) conceptual framework that originates from the researchers (see [Chapter 2](#)). The inductive conceptual framework in [Figure 3.2](#), conversely, is derived from qualitative data and represents an *emic* (or internal) conceptual framework that



includes the perspectives of the study participants. However, it also reflects the concepts from the original deductive conceptual framework that guided the data collection. The inductive conceptual framework is therefore a combination of both the etic and emic frameworks. Data collected on attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control are indicated, while important and new concepts that emerged from the data (e.g. ‘having sons’) are also included. In summary, the deductive conceptual framework guided the research, while the inductive conceptual framework helps to answer the research questions and refine the conceptual framework according to the emic perspective. Thus, a deductive model is developed before data collection and an inductive model is derived from the empirical data collected.

In turn, an inductive conceptual framework like this, based on participants’ perceptions, can be a starting point of new research and thus the beginning of a new design cycle.

## Selecting qualitative research methods

The next task in the design cycle is to select qualitative research methods (i.e. in-depth interviews, observation, etc.). The selection of research methods needs to be a logical progression from the earlier tasks in the design cycle and also reflect the paradigm underlying your research (see [Chapter 2](#)).

[Table 3.1](#) lists the three qualitative research methods that we discuss in this book, and highlights the objectives, advantages and disadvantages of each method. The table briefly highlights that the purpose of in-depth interviews is often to seek the personal perceptions and experiences of participants. In-depth interviews may also enable researchers to get an insight into the socio-cultural context of people’s lives, particularly if interviews are conducted in a participant’s home. Focus group discussions, on the other hand, are often conducted to identify a range of opinions about a certain issue, or to understand community norms and values. The focus is therefore less on seeking individual level experiences, which are harder to discuss in a group setting. Observation is conducted to understand what people do and how they act and interact in given social situations. The three methods are



described in detail in [Chapters 7–9](#). The method you select depends on your research questions and study objectives. If your aim is to gather in-depth and personal information you would choose in-depth interviews; however if you wish to identify a range of opinions or understand social norms, focus group discussions would be a better method, or if you aim to understand the context of specific behaviours or people’s living conditions, you would select observation as a method of data collection. In the following sections we give examples of how to mix qualitative methods, and qualitative and quantitative methods in the same study design.

Table 3.1 Comparison of three qualitative methods

Table 3.1 Comparison of three qualitative methods

	In-depth interviews	Focus group discussion	Observation
Objective	To identify individual perceptions, beliefs, feelings and experiences	To identify a range of opinions on a specific issue or seek community norms	To observe how people act and interact in certain social situations
Research instrument	Interview guide	Discussion guide	Observation guide
Advantages	<p>Gain in-depth information</p> <p>Identify personal experiences</p> <p>Useful for sensitive issues</p> <p>Identify context of participants’</p>	<p>Group interaction provides range of issues and opinions</p> <p>Discussion provides detail, justification and clarification</p> <p>A lot of information</p>	<p>Unobtrusive</p> <p>A lot of contextual information</p> <p>Supports data from other sources</p> <p>Identify people’s actual behaviour</p>

	In-depth interviews	Focus group discussion	Observation
	lives	collected quickly  Identify key issues  High emancipatory effect	Conduct in many situations
Disadvantages	No interaction or feedback from others  Individual perceptions only  Multiple interviews needed to identify range of issues	Less depth of information  Less suitable for personal experiences  Managing group dynamics	Interpretation of observations may be subjective  Distinction between participation and observation is needed

## Mixing research methods

A 'mixed methods' research design often refers to the use of quantitative and qualitative methods. It is defined as 'research in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or program of enquiry' (Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007: 4). Mixed method research may be seen as another paradigm (Teddle and Taskhakkori, 2009) and involves combining multiple methods of data collection in a single study to get a better understanding of a research problem. Mixed methods research enables you to gain an in-depth understanding (from the qualitative methods) as well as the ability to

generalize your findings to a larger population (from the quantitative methods). These methods can either be used concurrently or sequentially.

However, we feel that the term ‘mixing research methods’ is broader and can also encompass combining different qualitative research methods in a single study. We therefore use the term *mixing research methods* where researchers combine several research methods, either across paradigms (e.g. qualitative and quantitative) or within the interpretive paradigm (e.g. mixing qualitative methods).

In the following sections, we discuss mixing different qualitative methods and mixing qualitative and quantitative methods in a study and describe how they can be combined in a different order and sequence. We provide research case studies to show different combinations of [mixing methods](#).

## Mixing qualitative methods

One strategy for mixing research methods is to use different qualitative methods in the same study. Knowing which qualitative methods to combine in a study, whether the methods should be used concurrently or sequentially and which method to sequence first will become clearer with an understanding of the purpose of different qualitative research methods (see [Chapters 7–9](#)). The decision on whether to mix qualitative methods will be guided by your research questions and the objectives of your study. For example, if your study objectives were to identify community norms on a particular issue and to understand individual experiences of these issues, using a mix of focus group discussions and in-depth interviews would be appropriate. These two methods can be used sequentially or concurrently. Another example of mixing qualitative methods may be to use participant observation to establish rapport with the study population and then use in-depth interviews. During the conduct of interviews, you may also use observation: this involves observing the interviewee, their body language and the social environment in which they live. Data obtained from the method of observation can enrich the data derived from the stories told in interviews. In a study on nursing student’s perceptions of nursing in India we combined the method of photo-voice (see [Chapter 9](#)) and in-depth interviews. The photos taken by the nurse participants were used as a

starting point for the in-depth interviews. In this manner we could 1) capture the phenomenon of interest through the photos, 2) understand the meanings participants gave to the photos and situations they depicted through the interviews, and 3) co-interpret the visuals together with the participants.

[Case Study 3.1](#) describes a study where in-depth interviews were used followed by focus group discussions. Initially we thought in-depth interviews would be the most appropriate method to collect data on the sensitive topic of induced abortion and contraceptive use in Kosovo.

## **Mixing qualitative with quantitative methods**

Another strategy for mixing research methods is to use both qualitative and quantitative methods in the same study. The mixing of methods that originate from different paradigms is not easy, as each method is guided by the principles of its respective paradigm. [Chapter 2](#) discussed the differences in objectives, data and analysis between qualitative and quantitative research, showing how mixing qualitative and quantitative methods can complement each other. In both qualitative and quantitative methods, we go through the same design cycle; the main difference is in the formulation of the research objective, research questions and selection of the methods. We describe two approaches to mixing qualitative and quantitative research methods. Qualitative methods can follow or precede quantitative methods. We describe the function of qualitative methods in each case.

### **Case study 3.1**

## **Mixing qualitative methods: An example from Kosovo**

### **Research question**

What are the community opinions and personal experiences of induced abortion in Kosovo?

This research question was proposed by the Kosovo United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Ministry of Health in Kosovo. The purpose of the research was to provide scientific evidence (rather than the existing anecdotal evidence) of opinions and experiences of induced abortion in Kosovo. The outcome was a report for UNFPA and the Ministry of Health.

## Theories incorporated

Although theories were not made explicit in this study, as the study objectives were not solely academic, an implicit theoretical framework guided the study. The framework used was the process-context approach to demographic behaviour (De Bruijn, 1999; Willekens, 1990).

## Selection of methods

This study used *in-depth interviews* and *focus groups discussions*. Focus group discussions were used to identify the broad range of opinions about induced abortion in Kosovan society. Focus group discussions were conducted with both women and men, who were older and younger, and from urban and rural areas. In order to learn about personal experiences with induced abortion, we then conducted in-depth interviews with individuals who were selected from the focus group discussion participants. When developing the study, we were uncertain whether it would be possible to collect information on the sensitive issue of induced abortion in this society. Although induced abortion is quite common in Kosovo, it was not clear how easily people would talk about it. We found that people were willing to talk about this topic; however, they felt more at ease to discuss this issue within the focus group discussions, rather than the in-depth interviews as we had planned in the study design.

*Source:* Basha and Hutter (2006)

In a sequential mixed methods study, you may move *from quantitative* methods (e.g. a survey) *to qualitative* methods (e.g. in-depth interviews). In this sequential mixed methods design, the purpose of qualitative methods is explanation:

- to *interpret* the findings and results of the quantitative research;
- to *understand* and *explain* the trends or patterns of a certain behaviour as indicated by the quantitative survey;
- to know the *processes* underlying the trends – the underlying behaviour, decisions, perceptions and motivations;
- to *contextualize* the behaviour under study.

You can use a range of sources for quantitative data in a mixed methods study; primary data collection may involve conducting your own survey, but you can also use secondary sources of quantitative data, such as existing survey data or government records data. When using secondary quantitative data sources be aware that the concepts used for collecting data in the survey will not necessarily correspond with the concepts from your own theoretical framework. In such cases you have to look closely to the questions posed in the survey and see if they can be used as a proxy for the concept *you* are trying to measure. For example, in a study on women's empowerment your theoretical framework may include the concept of financial autonomy, but the survey data you are using may not have used this particular concept. In this case you could see if the survey includes questions on decision-making on the use of household resources. In the qualitative methods that follow the survey you can go deeper to understand the concept through interviews. [Case Study 3.2](#) illustrates the use of quantitative methods followed by qualitative methods. The researcher first analysed quantitative data from the Netherlands civil registration system and used nationally representative surveys to identify patterns of partner seeking behaviour. She then used focus group discussion to interpret the patterns found in the quantitative analysis.

## Case study 3.2

# **Mixing quantitative and qualitative methods: An example from the Netherlands**

## **Research questions**

What is the influence of geographical distance on the process of selecting a life partner?

To what extent do people choose similar partners, and how important is geographic similarity compared to demographic, cultural and educational similarity?

How do people select their life partners and where do they meet?

These research questions originated from the findings of an earlier research project and were then further refined after reviewing the scientific literature. The purpose of this study was to get insight into the process of selecting life partners and the role of geographical distance, and to understand how people choose their life partner and where they meet. The outcome of this study was a doctoral thesis.

## **Theories incorporated: Theories on homogamy (Kalmijn, 1991a and 1999b)**

## **Selection of research methods**

This study used the explanatory mixed methods design. The study began with examining quantitative data from the Dutch population register to calculate the geographic distances between all new cohabiters in a given year. These data were then used to calculate the probability of choosing a partner with similar characteristics. Using *survey data*, the social differentiation of meeting places was studied. Qualitative methods were then used to understand the decision-making processes that precede partner choice, in order to explain and contextualize the findings from the quantitative data analysis described above. This part of the study dealt with what people look for in a partner, where people meet potential partners and

who or what influences these processes. Additionally, given the interest in the role of local cultural differences, which connotations circulate about people from neighbouring villages, and how does this influence partner choice? *Focus group discussions* were used to allow participants to share and respond to the views of others in the group on important influences on partner choice, where people meet partners, and perceptions about people from neighbouring villages, resulting in a deeper understanding of the process of partner choice in the village. The stories of the participants clarify how partners are chosen, what influences the place where partners were chosen, and they illustrate the patterns found in the quantitative part of the research project.

Karen Haandrikman 2010

Another way to mix methods is to move *from qualitative to quantitative* methods. In this sequential mixed methods design, the purpose of the qualitative methods is exploratory:

- to *explore* relevant issues, for example if the topic of research is not yet well known;
- to *identify themes or concepts* that are important to include as variables in a survey;
- to fine-tune the *operationalization* of variables in a survey, using findings of the qualitative research;
- to include the *local meaning and context* of concepts in a survey, for example to indicate how to ask questions (such as which words or concepts to use in a survey), to indicate the language to be used, and to indicate different response categories to include.

The function of the quantitative methods in this exploratory mixed methods design is:

- to *quantify* the findings of the qualitative research;
- to *generalize* the findings of qualitative research to the general population;
- to *attribute* qualitative findings to different population groups (e.g. age, gender, socio-economic status).



When moving from qualitative to quantitative methods you typically analyse the qualitative data first and use the findings to refine questions and/or response options in the quantitative survey. For example, from using qualitative methods in a study on HIV prevention in India you may have found that people refer to condoms as ‘chatri’ (umbrella in Hindi). You could then use this specific term in the survey questions and response categories. Using local terms in the survey instrument reduces cognitive dissonance that arises from using unfamiliar terms and therefore improves the validity of the survey data. [Case study 3.3](#) provides an example of a research project that not only combines different qualitative methods, but also includes a small quantitative survey. In-depth interviews were conducted first, followed by focus group discussions, then a quantitative survey. In this example the findings derived from the interviews were validated through the use of focus group discussions to discern whether the issues indicated by the individual interviewees are shared by other people in the community. In the survey, the findings of both in-depth interviews and focus group discussions are incorporated to quantify the issues.

## **Case study 3.3**

### **Mixing qualitative and quantitative methods: An example from India**

#### **Research questions**

What are migrant men’s perceptions of risk for HIV infection in Goa?  
How are the migrant men’s risk perceptions locally grounded in their culture?

These research questions originated from earlier research and scientific literature. The outcome was a PhD thesis.

**Theories incorporated: Health belief model (Rosenstock and Strecher, 1997) and theories on**

## culture (Geertz, 1973)

### Selection of research methods

This study used an exploratory mixed methods design. When this study began, little was known about the risk perceptions of migrant men towards HIV infection. The researcher began by designing an exploratory ethnographic study using qualitative methods, then used a survey to measure the prevalence of these risk perceptions in the community.

This exploratory study used in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to gain an in-depth insight into the socio-cultural context in which migrants live and the social context within which their risk perceptions about HIV/AIDS are embedded. First, *in-depth interviews* were conducted to identify men's individual beliefs about their risk of HIV infection. These interviews provided personal stories which were developed into vignettes for use in subsequent *focus group discussions*. One of the objectives of the focus group discussions was to validate whether the beliefs and experiences expressed by individual men were evident within the wider community. For example, men in the in-depth interviews described using certain visual heuristics to assess whether their sexual partners posed a risk for HIV transmission or not. This issue was also raised by men in the focus group discussions and was clearly a strategy used by men in this community. Following this, a *small-scale survey* was conducted which combined the insights from both the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Referring to the same example, a question was included in the survey about the visual heuristic as applied to the different sexual partners which men indicated to have. The qualitative methods therefore provided information on:

- the way of posing the question in the survey;
- the local terminology to use;
- the response categories to be included – the different types of sexual partners mentioned by the men in the qualitative interviews.

In this manner, we could use the survey to quantify the emic perspective on risk assessment that was derived through qualitative research.

*Source:* Bailey (2008) and Bailey and Hutter (2006, 2008)

## Evaluating quality

### *Interpretive*

Are the research questions qualitative in nature?  
Why are they qualitative in nature?  
Can they only be answered by applying qualitative methods?

### *Appropriate*

Are research questions embedded in literature and theory?  
Is relevant and recent literature included?  
Does the theory adopted fit the research questions?  
Do research questions relate to the conceptual framework and vice versa?  
Does the selection of research methods logically follow the earlier tasks in the design cycle?

### *Coherent*

Is the theory adopted coherent with the underlying paradigm ([Chapter 2](#))?  
Are the different tasks in the design cycle coherently interlinked?  
Is there a coherence of sequencing in mixed methods study design?

### *Transparent*

Are all tasks in the design cycle described in a transparent way?

### *Valid*

Do the research methods selected 'fit' the research questions and objectives?

## *Reflexive*

In reporting on the design cycle is the following included: how research questions were formulated; why was a certain theory selected; why are the methods selected the most appropriate?

### Key points

- The design cycle consists of four interlinked tasks: developing research questions and objectives; reviewing research literature and incorporating theory; developing a conceptual framework for the study; and selecting research methods.
- Research questions emerge from the selected research topic and the stated research objectives.
- Qualitative research questions are interpretive in nature, and focus on understanding and Verstehen (on processes, perceptions and beliefs, and identifying the social-cultural context of the study population).
- Research questions are embedded in existing theory and literature to ensure that your research contributes to the existing body of knowledge.
- Research questions are different from interview questions: they have a different purpose, are more abstract and theoretical.
- A conceptual framework captures the central concepts and their relationships that will be explored in a study.
- The conceptual framework structures your research and guides subsequent data collection.
- A mixed methods study design leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon.

## **Exercises**

1. Write an appropriate qualitative research question for your own research project. Why is this question appropriate for qualitative

research? Identify the study objectives. From where do the research questions originate and what is the purpose or expected outcome of the research?

2. Which theories will guide your research? Why are these theories most appropriate?
3. What does your conceptual framework look like? Can you derive the research questions from your conceptual framework?
4. Having defined your research questions, and having identified your theoretical framework, which research methods would you select? Is there coherence between the different tasks that you do in the design cycle?

Further reading

## **On the design of qualitative research**

Leavy, P. (2017) *Research Design: Quantitative, Qualitative, Mixed Methods, Arts-based, and Community-based Participatory Research Approaches*. New York, NY: Guilford Publications. This book provides a good overview of the different research designs and has several examples on how to apply these research designs.

Maxwell, J.A. (2012) *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*, Applied Social Research Methods Series, vol. 41 (3rd edn), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. This book elaborates on the importance of the design process in qualitative research and provides several examples of formulating research questions, using theories and mapping concepts.

Spradley, J.P. (1980) *Participant Observation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. This is a useful text for learning more about participant observation.

## **On field practice**

Angucia, M., Zeelen, J. and de Jong, G. (2010) 'Researching the reintegration of formerly abducted children in northern Uganda through action research: Experiences and reflections', *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 20 (3): 217–31. An interesting article which examines the use of participatory research among formerly abducted children in Uganda.

Laws, R., Kirby, S., Powell Davies, G., Williams, A., Jayasinghe, U., Amoroso, C. and Harris, M.F. (2008) "'Should I and can I?': A mixed methods study of clinician beliefs and attitudes in the management of lifestyle risk factors in primary health care', *BMC Health Services Research*, 8: 44. This article combines a survey and interviews to examine clinicians' attitudes and beliefs on lifestyle risk factors.

Sallaz, J. J. (2008) 'Deep plays: A comparative ethnography of gambling contests in two post-colonies', *Ethnography*, 9 (1): 5–33. This article shows how ethnography was used to understand gambling in Indonesia and South Africa. It uses the theories developed by Clifford Geertz.

# 4<sup>1</sup> Designing Participatory Research

<sup>1</sup> This is a new chapter in the second edition of the book and is co-authored with Dr Christine Fenenga.

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## Objectives

After reading this chapter you will:

- understand the key characteristics of our participatory approach to qualitative research;
- know that the goal of a participatory approach is to understand and to contribute to social change;
- understand that a participatory approach requires flexibility and that implementation is tailored to the research context;
- be aware that a participatory approach starts from the design cycle;
- know the key tasks in the participatory design sub-cycle;
- know how to engage participants and other societal stakeholders in your research design to enable effective social change;

- be aware how you can apply a participatory approach in data collection and analysis;
- be aware that subsequent steps of the participatory qualitative research cycle are described in [Chapter 12](#).

## Introduction

In [Chapter 3](#) we described how to design a qualitative research project. However, if you want your qualitative study to go beyond understanding and Verstehen of a social phenomenon (see [Chapter 2](#)) and also contribute to social change, then you can use a participatory research design. Conducting a participatory research project means that you want your research to also lead to social change, which implies the involvement of research participants and other societal stakeholders, from the very beginning of your project. In the design phase this means embedding your research topic in society and involving participants and other societal stakeholders in co-defining a social change objective.

In order to understand the overall idea of our [participatory approach to qualitative research](#), please read [Chapter 4](#) along with [Chapter 12](#). In this chapter we elaborate on the characteristics of our participatory approach to qualitative research and then describe how you can include participatory elements in the design cycle. We also describe how you can make your qualitative data collection (as described in [Chapters 7–9](#)) and data analysis (as described in [Chapter 10–11](#)) more participatory. [Chapter 12](#) elaborates on how the findings of your research, the voices of your participants as derived through data collection and analysis, can contribute to social change. For this, we distinguish a participant-based action cycle. Both this chapter and [Chapter 12](#) provide examples of participatory research projects in the global South and global North. We recommend that you read both chapters, including the case studies, together, as they illustrate the different tasks performed in different participatory qualitative projects. The case studies show that there is no one blueprint for a participatory qualitative research project, because: implementation is often tailored to the research context.



Let us first present you with some background information on the development of our participatory approach to qualitative research. Since the early 1990s we faced an important question when conducting our qualitative research: how ethical is it to collect research data for academic purposes only, and not contribute to enhancing the well-being of the people whom we study? This question is especially relevant when we conduct research among vulnerable populations. We asked ourselves how the voices of our research participants, represented in the findings of our qualitative research projects, can be used to improve their situation?

We began to develop a participatory approach to qualitative research that adds participatory elements to our qualitative research cycle. This means involving participants and other societal stakeholders in rigorous qualitative research, which leads to both understanding and *Verstehen* (the academic outcomes) *and* to social change. Note that we deliberately talk about *other* societal stakeholders, acknowledging that we, as researchers, consider ourselves also to be societal stakeholders.

A number of researchers, led by Inge Hutter, then at the Population Research Centre of the University of Groningen, the Netherlands started developing a participatory approach to qualitative research. They conducted research projects with academic colleagues, participants and other societal stakeholders, for example, in India (Hutter et al., 2006), Kosovo (Basha and Hutter, 2006), Malawi (Sibande and Hutter, 2012), Uganda (Angucia, 2010), Ghana (Fenenga, 2015), and the Netherlands (Klaassens et al., 2012). Each of these studies applied specific participatory aspects, and contributed to the development and maturing of our participatory approach to qualitative research over time.

In present day academic life, researchers are increasingly asked to highlight the societal relevance and impact of their academic research. In the Netherlands, and also the USA and UK, research programmes are evaluated not only on the basis of academic quality but also on societal impact. Also, in externally funded research programmes, academic researchers are increasingly required by donors to collaborate with other societal stakeholders and indicate the possible societal impact of their research.

If you want to make your qualitative research participatory, you must start from the design phase. Therefore, *this* chapter is included in [Part I](#). Below, we first describe the four main characteristics of our participatory approach to qualitative research. We then elaborate, step by step, on how to integrate this participatory approach into the design cycle of the qualitative research cycle.

## **Our participatory approach to qualitative research**

First, what are the characteristics of our participatory approach to qualitative research, and how is it different from other participatory research approaches? The literature on participatory research identifies a variety of different terms for participatory research, such as *Participatory Action Research* (PAR) (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013; Lawson et al., 2015; McIntyre, 2008) or more specifically *Participatory Action Research for Health* (Koch and Kralik, 2006; Loewenson et al., 2014); *Action Research* (Boog et al., 2008; Herr and Anderson, 2015); *Community-based Qualitative Research* (Johnson, 2017) and *Community-based Participatory Research for Health* (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2008); *Participatory Qualitative Research Methodologies* (Higginbottom and Liamputtong, 2015), and *Qualitative Research for Community Development* (Silverman and Patterson, 2015). All these approaches *do* have some common features that also underlie our participatory approach to qualitative research. We identify the following four characteristics of our participatory approach.

## **Rigorous data for understanding *and* social change**

As stated earlier, our participatory research projects aim at both understanding and *Verstehen* (these are the academic outcomes), *and* at social change outcomes. Because of this dual role, we emphasize the need to conduct rigorous qualitative research, as described throughout this book. The academic findings of our research are critical and provide the foundation from which to build the social change outcomes. This approach

is different from some other participatory action research approaches. For example, McIntyre (2008) provides a definition of participatory action research as research

- conducted *with* people rather than *on* people, that is, the research is participatory,
- to *improve and understand* the world *by changing* it (McIntyre, 2008: ix).

Our approach differs in that we *do* conduct participatory research to improve and understand the world, *with* people, but we aim to develop both academic theory *and* social change. We feel this is an important difference between our approach and other participatory research approaches.

Indeed, the selected publications we cited earlier mention action-research processes that differ from the qualitative research cycle that we describe in this book. The *recursive process* of McIntyre, for example (2008: 7), identifies the phases of questioning, reflecting, investigating, developing a plan, implementing and refining. The *cyclical and spiral process* identified by Loewenson et al. (2014: 13) identifies the stages of systematizing experience, collectively analysing and problematizing, reflecting and choosing action, taking and evaluating action and systematizing learning. Neither action-research processes include a specific phase of rigorous application of (qualitative) research methods, as we do in our qualitative research cycle. The mentioned literature *does* pay attention to the need for rigorous data *analysis*, especially through grounded theory (Cashman et al. 2008 in Minkler and Wallerstein, 2008; Higginbottom and Liamputtong, 2015; Johnson, 2017; McIntyre, 2008; Silverman and Patterson, 2015), as do we, in [Chapters 10](#) and [11](#). Also, the publications list specific participatory data collection methods such as photo-voice, neighbourhood walks, community mapping, needs assessments, Venn diagrams, and interviews (see Loewenson et al., 2014; McIntyre, 2008; Silverman and Patterson, 2015). In a participatory qualitative research project, it would be useful to combine these methods with the qualitative research methods that we describe: in-depth interviewing, focus group discussions and participant observation ([Chapters 7–9](#)).

In our approach to participatory qualitative research we thus aim at understanding and Verstehen (see [Chapter 2](#)) to produce academic evidence, and then *use* this research evidence to contribute to social change. The emic or insiders' perspectives represent the voices of the participants and are therefore an essential part and starting point for subsequent efforts to define and develop social change interventions (see [Chapter 12](#)).

Because of our dual objectives of generating academic knowledge and initiating social change, our participatory research projects require well trained qualitative researchers to conduct the research *and* collaborate with other societal stakeholders (see [Case study 4.1](#) and also the case studies in [Chapter 12](#)). Active *involvement of* and *collaboration with* participants and stakeholders takes place in specific stages of the participatory research process. For example, collaboration in identifying the research problem, co-defining the social change objectives and representing the voices of participants (this chapter); in validating research findings, co-defining specific social change outcomes, and co-designing and co-implementing interventions (presented in [Chapter 12](#)). There are, thus, different levels of participation of participants and stakeholders. Referring to the participation ladder of Arnstein (1969, cited in Higginbottom and Liamputtong 2015: 43), the two latter authors distinguish different forms of citizen participation, ranging from *non-participation* at one end and *complete citizen control* at the other. In the middle part, citizens are *informed*, *consulted* or in *partnerships* with researchers. The degree of participation then reflects the ownership of the project: is it owned by the researchers, by the community and citizens, or by all? Ownership can vary from project to project.

## **Paulo Freire: 'Start with people themselves'**

Almost all participatory approaches mentioned above start with the work by Paulo Freire, published in 1970 and entitled '*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*'. It inspires our work as well, through his emphasis on starting with people themselves, and the description of specific ways to combine research and action for social change. We elaborate on these two influences below.

Freire identifies a humanist and libertarian (no fear of freedom) theory on teaching and learning, especially in adult education (Johnson, 2017: 16). While sketching the predominant top-down approach in education, called a 'banking' approach, in which practical information is 'poured' into students, making them passive and pure recipients of information, Freire pleads for a pedagogy (or educational and political action) of problem-posing education that is characterized by the following principles. He argues '*to start with the people themselves*': the 'point of departure must always be with men and women in the "here and now", which constitutes the situation in which they are submerged, from which they merge and in which they intervene. Only by starting from this situation – which determines their perception of it - can they begin to move' (Freire, 1970: 58). For Freire, this is all about the concept of *consciousness* (conscientização), defined by Freire as 'being with the world' (1970: 43) and which is the basis for *social transformation* by people themselves, that 'a deepened consciousness of their situation leads people to apprehend that situation as an historical reality susceptible of transformation' (Freire, 1970: 58). Koch and Kralik (2006: 13) describe it as critical awareness: 'to come to an *awareness of self-hood* and begin to look critically at the social situation in which they find themselves'.

Freire's humanizing pedagogy requires critical reflection *and* collaborative action. As he indicates, it cannot be action alone, as then 'action is pure activism' (1970: 40). It involves *critical dialogue* and leadership that 'establishes a permanent relationship of dialogue with the oppressed' (1970: 42). Thus the pedagogy is about critical dialogue and critical thinking, about communication and learning.

As a consequence, being participatory means acknowledging the existence of different knowledge systems (for example local knowledge, indigenous knowledge, scientific and biomedical knowledge). In [Chapter 2](#), we similarly refer to the concepts of Verstehen (understanding the world from the other's perspective) and the possible differences between the emic (insider's) and etic (outsider's) perspective, as the basis of our qualitative research.

Participatory research projects, aiming at social change, begin with people. It encourages the co-creation of knowledge, where people from different

knowledge systems (and different power status) meet and try to understand each other. In this way, participants and researchers each bring their own story. One could say that the ‘outside’ researcher and ‘inside’ participants are partners, exploring topics of mutual interest together (Tolley and Bentley, 1996). It acknowledges the value of co-learning, co-dialogue and the ability to listen to each other.

Later in his book, Freire refers to the need to first gather data on daily life in the area to getting to know the world views of people from the community, with students as critical co-investigators; to identify local thought-language and generative themes reflecting the world views of people (1970: 70). This is indeed how we describe the collection of qualitative data in [Chapters 7, 8 and 9](#), and identifying themes in data analysis that capture participants’ own issues in [Chapters 10 and 11](#). Freire focuses on getting to know the world views of the oppressed with the ‘ultimate goal of taking action to transform the world around them’ (Johnson, 2017: 16). As Johnson concludes, Freire’s theory ‘provides a model for how to reconceptualize research projects to enact changes that can benefit communities and research participants’ (2017: 16). This is key to our participatory qualitative research too.

## **The principle of embeddedness: Involvement of stakeholders**

A third important principle of our participatory approach to qualitative research is that of the [embeddedness](#) of our research through involving stakeholders. Granovetter (1985) introduced the concept of embeddedness as meaning that people’s perspectives and actions (as discussed above) are importantly shaped by the social relations in which they function.

Embeddedness helps to describe, explain and interpret how – within relational, institutional and cultural contexts – perspectives are formed (Gemici, 2008). We thus study people in their own context, and not only study what they *do* but also how they understand the world and relate to others, and how this shapes their practice – the so called double hermeneutic (Giddens, 1987: 20–1). Involving these stakeholders in our participatory research projects helps us to obtain a better understanding of our participants’ perspective and actions. Only by embedding our research

and involving participants and stakeholders, can the second aim of our participatory research – social change – be achieved.

The differences between the terms participants and stakeholders are described in the [Box 4.1](#).

Box 4.1 Definition of participants and stakeholders in participatory research

**Participants** are the *prime focus subjects* of your study. Your aim is to capture their voices to get answers to research question(s) that are derived from an identified societal problem.

**Stakeholders** are all *relations and institutions* that will be affected by or will affect the social outcome of the study (Bryson, 2004; World Bank, 1996).

The concept of [stakeholder mapping](#) was introduced in the field of agricultural development programmes in the 1990s (Mitchell et al., 1997) and later adopted in other, more academic fields. Findings from programme evaluations reveal that engaging stakeholders in problem identification, programme development and implementation yielded more sustainable social change. These participatory elements, and a better understanding of the context, led to new action-oriented approaches in research. A mapping of relevant stakeholders can help to determine stakeholders' interests and their power/influence in relation to the participants. A stakeholder map offers insight into the positions (determined by the expected level of influence on the issue at stake) of participants and stakeholders, and can help to provide direction and indications as to whether social change can realistically be achieved. By embedding the project and mapping and involving stakeholders your research will thus enhance the societal relevance as well as the quality of your findings. In other words, the project is even more *grounded* in reality. Outcomes of the study will be recognized by the stakeholders as they are bound to their world.

The involvement of stakeholders encourages not only the co-creation of the project design as sketched in this chapter, but also the co-design of



interventions as outlined in [Chapter 12](#). The relationship between researchers and participants implies a high level of reflexivity of the researcher within the research process (see [Chapters 2](#) and [7](#)).

## **The regulative research cycle of Van Strien**

The three earlier characteristics are interlinked with the fourth characteristic of our participatory approach to qualitative research, the *Regulative Research Cycle* of Van Strien (1997). The regulative cycle focuses on how to involve participants and stakeholders in identifying the research problem, co-designing interventions based on the research outcomes and evaluating these interventions. This hermeneutic process between the research participants and the researcher continues throughout the regulative cycle.

The regulative cycle was developed in the discipline of psychology as a ‘methodology of professional practice’, in response to the over-emphasis on ‘empirical–analytical methodology’ and the ‘generalizing science’ (Van Strien, 1997: 683, 684). The Regulative Research Cycle of Van Strien consists of five distinct steps (see [Box 4.2](#)) of research *plus* action:

Box 4.2 The regulative cycle of Van Strien (1997)

### **Step 1: Problem definition (orientation)**

This stage involves researchers collaborating with the study population and stakeholders to orient themselves on the societal issue at stake. The (research) problem is thus co-identified and co-defined.

### **Step 2: Diagnosis (analyse)**

Only after step 1 is taken can the research process start. The stage of diagnosis involves all research activities of data collection and analysis; in our qualitative research cycle this includes the design, data collection and analytic cycles.



## **Step 3: Planning (design)**

This step involves designing an intervention, action or change process, which is co-created with stakeholders.

## **Step 4: Intervention (test)**

The intervention is implemented, tested and monitored.

## **Step 5: Evaluation**

The intervention is evaluated.

[Case study 4.1](#) illustrates every step of the Regulative Research Cycle. In the case study, Step 2 in the Regulative Research Cycle (on diagnosis that include all research activities), consists of all tasks in the qualitative research cycle. The case study also reflects the other three characteristics of our participatory approach: the ideology of Paulo Freire, the principle of embeddedness and stakeholder involvement, and the dual objectives of participatory research to achieve both academic and social change outcomes.

## **Case study 4.1**

### **Participatory research with older people in the Netherlands, towards client-oriented care**

This research project followed the five steps of the Regulative Research Cycle by Van Strien (1997).

## **Step 1 Problem definition**

In 2011, the management of the care organization De Hoven, in the Northern part of the Netherlands, approached researchers at the Population Research Centre. They heard about our participatory research projects in the health field in India and Malawi, where we studied community perspectives on health and disease within the social and cultural context. Based on these research projects, the voices of the participants were the basis for development of community-based and cultural relevant health interventions (see also [Case studies 12.1](#) and [12.2](#)).

The management of De Hoven presented their organization for (elderly) care as being client-oriented. However, as they indicated very honestly, the organization was not really client oriented: much of the care provided was top-down, determined by care providers, management and the Dutch health and insurance system. The management reasoned that the rules and regulations at both the national and local level led to a top-down approach in the organization, determining what was good *for* the residents and what had to be done *for* them. The management also recognized that – for the well-being and empowerment of the residents – it would be much better to respond to *their* needs and wishes. In their view, client-oriented care would start from the stories of the residents themselves.

The request by De Hoven to the researchers was to study:

the stories and the perspectives of residents and to use these as the basis for interventions and actions in the organization.

They wanted the involvement of residents, family and care providers, and together develop *real* client-oriented care and thus increase the well-being of the residents.

Our participatory qualitative project would be part of a larger experiment entitled ‘Zorg zonder Regels’ (ZZR: Care without Rules), to be conducted by De Hoven and which would mean abolishment of some rules and regulations set by the national healthcare system to enable a greater focus on quality and client-oriented care.

We gladly accepted the invitation and together with the management of De Hoven we defined the academic and social change objectives of our project in the first instance as:

- to understand the perspectives and needs of the residents of De Hoven (academic objective) and; based on these perspectives and needs,
- to develop interventions – together with residents, care providers and family – to make the organization more client-oriented and increase the well-being of residents (social change objective).

The participatory qualitative research project was therefore co-designed by both the researchers and the management of De Hoven.

## **Step 2 Situation analysis by the researchers among participants**

Based on the research objectives, we conducted a situational analysis in two departments of De Hoven, at different locations: a residential care ward for older people and a closed ward for patients with Korsakow<sup>2</sup> or an acquired brain injury. For several months, the researcher, Mirjam Klaassens, was present in these departments for several days per week. This first stage of the situational analysis consisted of participant observation in the organization, observations of daily life, interviews and small talk with residents and care providers, to get acquainted and create rapport and to get to know daily life and the socio-cultural context of the organization.

<sup>2</sup> The syndrome of Korsakow consists of lasting amnesia, predominantly caused by a shortage of vitamin B1, commonly caused by non-varied food intake with chronic alcohol misuse (Wikipedia, consulted on 13 March 2019).

Also, the embedding of the upcoming overall project Zorg Zonder Regels was studied. As the final permission to start Zorg Zonder Regels, and thus abolish some rules and regulations was given when we were half way through our research, we had the opportunity to study the pre-existing situation, that is, before the intervention started. We found that – although

management thought that rules and regulations prevented care providers from performing client-oriented care – in reality the culture of the institution played an important role. It thus became clear that a more cultural change towards client-oriented care was needed.

All principles of the data collection and analytic cycles of our Qualitative Research Cycle were applied. Data were collected and validated with the people who were interviewed.

Although it is impossible to describe all results and all subsequent interventions and impacts in this one case study, we present a small selection of findings, with the goal to clarify the process and different steps in the regulative cycle of Van Strien (1997). For more information please see the full report (Klaassens et al., 2012).

In general, the residents in the residential ward of De Hoven indicated they were positive about the care provided to them. Sometimes, care providers were perceived to be too busy, too rushed, and their telephone would ring all the time. Residents felt that not enough time was taken for their care. They also indicated that they had to adjust themselves to the new situation and found it difficult to bond with others. They also mentioned having dinner at 12 o'clock in the afternoon, and not in the evening time, as being strange.

The residents in the closed Korzakov ward indicated several issues they did not like, for example, waiting too long before care was provided, especially if care providers were drinking coffee and talking with each other instead; and there was a distrust of care providers who discussed organizational problems with each other while providing care. Some residents indicated that they felt at home in De Hoven, but many others indicated that they did not. They indicated: 'it will never become my own place', 'I am feeling locked-in', and 'I miss going outside and visiting other places in a leisurely way'. Residents also indicated that they missed their independence. They felt that they did not have a say in things; they were not asked about their needs and wishes. They found it strange that other people (care providers) were determining their life, e.g. what time to wake up, to take a shower, to go to sleep; the norm to have dinner in the common room while some preferred to have it in their own room.

Overall, the findings indicated that the wish to ‘feel at home’ runs as a key theme through the organization. Later the findings were analysed by the researchers using concepts of theories of homemaking (Klaassens and Meijering, 2015).

The findings of this first stage of the situational analysis were presented to the management and the participating teams of care providers. The analysis contained quotations from residents and care providers and used language and concepts as used by the residents themselves. The presentation was, first of all, a feast of recognition. Typical reactions were ‘indeed, yes, this is who we are’. Some of the residents’ perspectives were recognized by the care providers; others were not. For example, the care providers understood that residents did not feel at home and understood their frustration that they did not have a say in their own life. But they indicated that they had not been aware of how the residents perceived the quality of their care.

During this feedback of findings, a next step in the regulative research cycle, i.e. that of going into action, already started. Residents could feel empowered as their needs and perspectives were presented and became a central focus. Care providers started to think how to do things differently, e.g. the need to listen to residents, becoming more aware of their perspective, ensuring that they feel at home and thus improve well-being and quality of life.

### **Step 3 Co-design of interventions**

Following the situational analysis and the feedback to the participating teams of care providers, small interactive interventions were co-defined and co-implemented by the researcher, care provider teams and the residents, taking the perceptions and the needs of the residents as the basis for change. During this process, the researcher became the spokesperson for the residents. The interventions took place in three wards.

Care providers became aware that they should not discuss their work while helping a resident. However, they indicated that they found it difficult to change the manner in which they provided care and to meet the needs and perspectives of the residents. They were used to following rules, to plan the

work and to determine what work had to be done. They indicated that: ‘the ministry needs us to plan and be accountable for all our activities’. They also wondered ‘how can I know what a resident wants?’, and, ‘maybe residents want something and I then do not know the answer’, and, ‘how do I ask an open question?’ To answer these worries, the researcher organized training in open question techniques.

Another good example of the role of the researcher as spokesperson of the residents was that one resident at the Korsakov department indicated to the researcher that he did not want to have a hospital-like bed. He wanted a homely bed. When this research finding was discussed by the researcher with the care providers, the latter discussed what kind of homely beds existed and which one they could purchase. The researcher asked the care providers whether this was client-oriented care? Then they realized that it was not about what *they* would think is homely, but that they should ask the client what kind of bed he thinks is homely and what kind of bed he would like to have. They realized that again they were deciding for the resident, rather than listening to the residents’ wishes.

Some residents in the Korsakov ward didn’t want to eat together. This was compulsory, because the care workers thought that it would make the residents feel lonely if they eat alone. They realized (because of the outcomes of the situational analysis, and it was a very strong wish of some residents), that this was their perspective. An intervention that was implemented right away, was that the residents could decide for themselves where they would eat in their own room or in the communal room.

The researcher thus took the role of change agent and continuously emphasized the findings of her qualitative research, i.e. the voices of the residents, and repeatedly presented them again and again to care providers and management. She also provided training to the care providers on how to ask open questions and react to answers.

## **Step 4 Monitoring**

The interactive interventions were implemented in the three different wards of De Hoven, and processes and activities were actively monitored. Specific

attention was paid to whether the perspectives and needs of the residents were used as the basis for change. The data collection of the monitoring was adjusted to wishes expressed by the care providers at the different wards. In the residential wards, only interviews with the care providers and residents were conducted to monitor the project. At the Korsakov ward, the care providers kept a diary for ten days in which they described about how they (tried) to work differently, i.e. more client-oriented, the dilemmas/problems they experienced, and the experienced effect of their interventions, on themselves and the clients. These diaries were used as input for later interviews with these care providers as well. In the meantime, the overall Zorg Zonder Regels project was also monitored. The researcher attended project meetings and smaller team meetings.

## **Step 5 Evaluation**

Qualitative monitoring and evaluation research indicated several perceived effects of the interventions.

We present only some findings are here. The care providers indicated that they have become more aware of the need to put the client central in their work. Changes were perceived to take place, care providers moving from task-oriented work to demand-oriented work. Some of them indicated: 'I now just take more time to listen to people, to sit with them', and 'I focus more on their needs, e.g. when they would like to eat, to take a shower, etc.' Also, they went more often for a walk with the residents, or went shopping together. Dinner was more often prepared together. Work pleasure increased among providers. They also indicated that they could see differences in their clients.

Residents indicated they wanted more autonomy in their decisions, for example, when to sleep, when to wake up, when to drink coffee. They indicated they were taken seriously and experienced more self-management. They also indicated that they felt more at home in De Hoven because of these changes. These findings – i.e. feeling more at home – were later also used by De Hoven in their brochure about the organization (see [Figure 4.1](#)): at De Hoven everyone can make their own home and feel at home.

Figure 4.1 Make your own home and feel at home, within care organization De Hoven (brochure)



A qualitative evaluation of the overall Zorg Zonder Regels project was conducted by researcher Louise Meijering, conducting qualitative interviews other people, other than the care teams, in the organization – for example, management and heads of departments – on the processes of the project Zorg Zonder Regels. A quantitative impact evaluation of Zorg Zonder Regels, conducted by a collaborating geriatric health research team, through a pre- and post-study, found that residents perceived higher levels of well-being (from score 0.73 to 0.83 on well-being index), and providers' work pleasure increased after the changes (De Hoven, 2013).

The research project had both social change and academic outcomes:

*Social change outcomes*

- Contribution to development of client-oriented care and to project Zorg Zonder Regels; De Hoven changed their way of working in their entire organization.
- Internal report (Klaassens et al., 2012)
- Brochure by De Hoven, 2013, *Evaluation Care without Rules*; an exception to the rules.



- Report on conference (2013).
- Contribution to development of participatory approach to qualitative research

#### *Academic outcomes*

- Klaassens and Meijering (2015).
- Contribution to academic development of participatory approach.

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## **The participatory design sub-cycle**

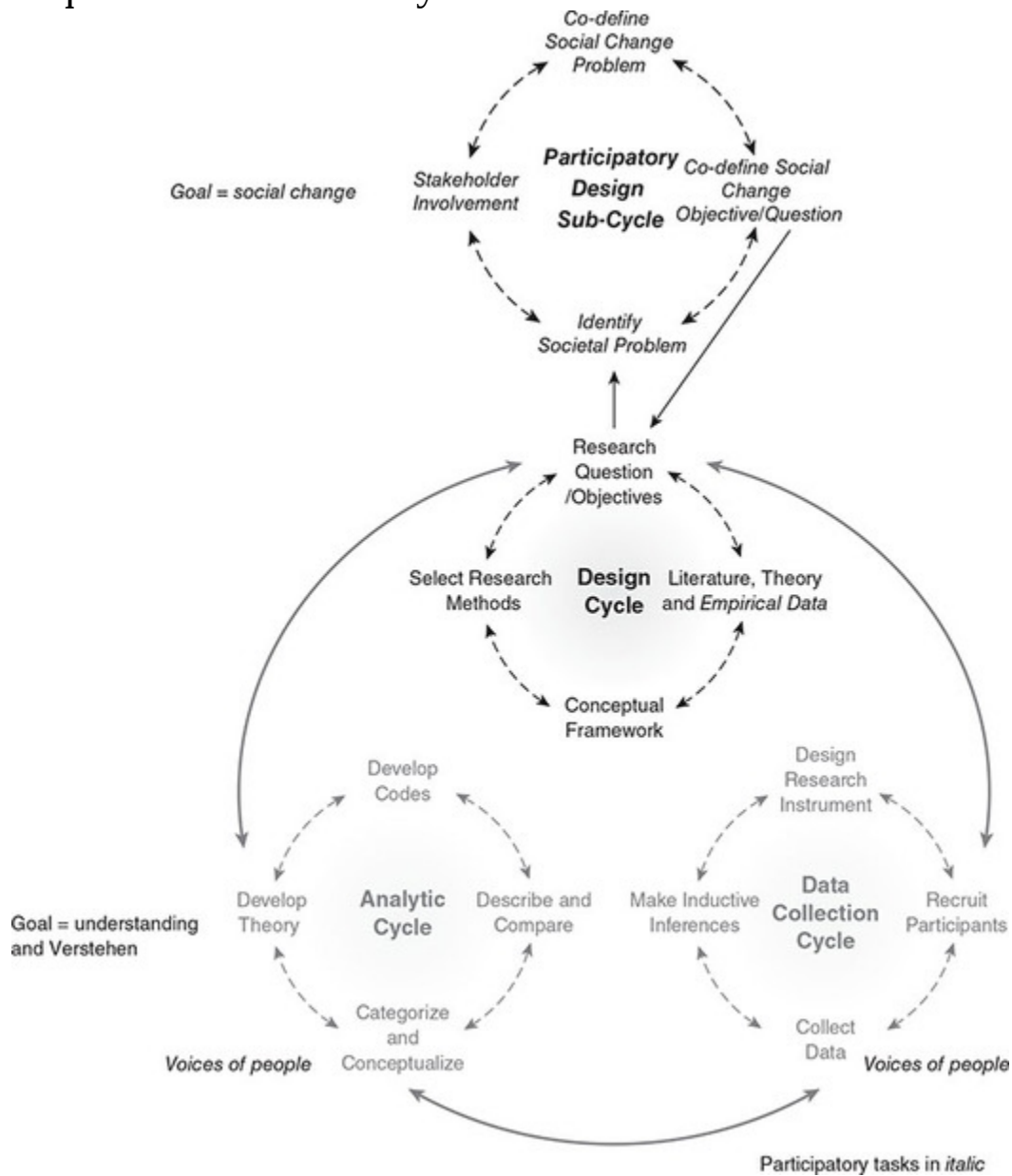
Following the four characteristics of our participatory approach and the case study, we now describe how you can design your own qualitative research project in a more participatory way by integrating aspects of the participatory approach into the design cycle. As discussed, the academic objective of a qualitative research project is to come to understanding and Verstehen of the phenomenon under study. If you want your research project to enable social change, you must perform additional tasks in the design cycle.

What do you do? First, you take the first task in the Design Cycle – identifying the research problem and defining the research question and objective. You then step into the participatory design sub-cycle, as presented in [Figure 4.2](#). The aim here is to embed your research problem in society, involve participants and stakeholders and co-define the social change question and objective. The tasks in this sub-cycle consist of:

- identify the societal problem, embed your research problem in society (task 1);

- identify and involve participants and relevant societal stakeholders (task 2);
- co-define the social change problem of your research project (task 3);
- co-define the social change objectives and questions of your project (task 4).

Figure 4.2 The participatory design sub-cycle added to the qualitative research cycle



As in the other cycles in the qualitative research cycle (see Introduction and [Chapter 3](#)), here you also perform tasks in an iterative way, shifting forward and backward as required to, and come to co-defined social change research objective(s) and research question(s). Below we describe in more detail how to perform the different tasks.

## **Task 1: Identify societal problem**

What is the *societal problem* and how is your research problem embedded in reality? You might have a topic in mind for your academic research project, but what is the societal relevance of this problem? Is it also a societal problem? For whom is it a problem? In the words of Freire, you start from the perspectives of people themselves. You conduct an inquiry in society *with* the people who face this societal problem. You can, for example, start with a needs assessment among the study population: what are the needs of people themselves in the issue that you want to study? Alternatively, you may be approached by a societal stakeholder who faces a specific societal problem related to their programme/project. They may request support to generate scientific evidence that could lead to solutions for this societal problem. For example, in [Case study 3.1](#) the United Nations Population Fund Kosovo (UNFPA) and the Ministry of Health of Kosovo asked us to conduct a study on perceptions and opinions about induced abortion and contraceptive use, as input and evidence for the formulation of policies in this field. In [Case study 4.1](#), the management of De Hoven asked us to conduct research on the needs of their inhabitants, in order to increase their well-being. And in [Case study 12.3](#), on health insurance in Ghana it was the health insurance company that asked the researchers to study why the use of the health insurance scheme was so low, in order to enhance community access to it. The societal problem, then, is already defined.

## **Task 2: Stakeholder involvement**

You then identify *who* would benefit from social change and which participants and other *relevant societal stakeholders* are to be involved. To obtain more insight into the positioning of participants you can conduct a mapping of all possible stakeholders. Differences in power relations and

interests among and between participants and relevant stakeholders influence the success of social change outcomes. These differences are often rooted in people's levels of education, profession, knowledge and/or access to information. For more information on stakeholder mapping and stakeholder analysis, see Chevalier and Buckles (2013: [Chapters 10](#) and [11](#)). Often, however, it is already quite clear who the relevant societal stakeholders are, or collaborations already exist, so no stakeholder analysis has to be conducted.

A *feasibility study* that uses, for example, focus group discussions, interviews and/or key informant interviews, is another way to obtain better insight into the context, participants and relevant stakeholders. Through critical dialogues, you identify the views of participants and stakeholders on the topic. You may apply specific participatory techniques such as neighbourhood mapping, pile sorting, ranking, listing or Venn diagrams (Loewenson et al., 2014; McIntyre, 2008; Silverman and Patterson, 2015).

Available resources (time and funding) often determine what options you have. Both mapping and feasibility studies will lead to a clearer insight in the embeddedness of your research.

Involvement of stakeholders, specifically in social development objectives, is believed to ultimately lead to more sustainable results; however, note that consistent actions for stakeholder involvement are also time consuming and often also more costly. Embedding these activities in routine practices may help to reduce this resource problem. In the case of De Hoven, some of the activities were part of the regular management plans, others were financed from the overall project Zorg Zonder Regels, hence it was easier to integrate the project into this umbrella programme.

### **Task 3: Co-define social change problem**

Together, researchers, participants and stakeholders *co-define the social change problem*. That may sound easier than it really is. For example, in [Case study 4.1](#), De Hoven care providers had different views than the residents about service provision, and thus about what needed to be done and achieved. Differences in interests and views are also illustrated in [Case](#)

[study 12.3](#) in Ghana, where we found clear differences between the perspectives and interests of patients, health staff and health insurance staff. Discussion with stakeholders can help to shine light on the problem from different angles, thus facilitating a problem statement that all groups support and are interested to solve. These discussions require time and sometimes the group needs splitting up into more homogeneous subgroups before acceptable results can be derived. This process is crucial and determines to a large extent the success of the project.

## **Task 4: Co-define social change objective / question**

From the co-defined problem statement, the *social change objective(s)* and *research question(s)* then become part of your research project. Often, at this stage the social change objective is still rather broad, as you do not yet know the results of your qualitative research project, which will form the basis for social change interventions. Later, in [Chapter 12](#), where we identify the participant-based action cycle, the social change objective will become more specific as it will be based on the voices of your participants.

After this, you return to the first task in the *design cycle* and add the social change objectives and questions derived from the tasks in the participatory design sub-cycle, to the academic objectives and questions. You now have both your research and social change objectives and questions defined.

Now return to the first task in the *design cycle*, and add the social change objectives and questions derived from the tasks in the participatory design sub-cycle to the research objectives and questions. The latter might have changed a bit, based on the findings from the participatory design sub-cycle. If necessary, adapt your research questions and objectives. You have now defined both your academic and social change objectives and questions.

You continue to the subsequent tasks in the design cycle. In task 2 – embedding your research in literature and theory – it is important to add the empirical findings from the participatory design sub-cycle. This more

strongly embeds your research design in society. In task 4 of the design cycle, while selecting your qualitative research methods, you can decide to include more participatory research methods like the ones mentioned above. Please read also [Case studies 12.2](#) and [12.3](#) as they illustrate the participatory design process with examples of participatory research projects in India and Ghana.

## **A participatory approach in data collection and analysis**

Having carried out the tasks in the design cycle, you continue to the data collection and the analytic cycles. These two cycles are an integral part of the participatory approach: you want to capture the voices of people, through high quality academic research. Rigour in data collection and analysis is thus very important because you want to generate evidence that is grounded and novel and that can be published in academic outlets *and* form a basis for interventions for social change. Data collection and analysis processes are described in subsequent chapters of this book.

Regarding data collection, if you conduct a participatory research project, you *can* include more participatory elements, for example, include the specific participatory methods mentioned earlier. As well, [Chapter 8](#) describes using participatory elements in focus group discussions such as free listing, pile sorting, or drawing body silhouettes. Also, research work in the data collection cycle itself can already be participatory, for example, you can use interviews or focus group discussions not only to collect data but also to create awareness of the societal problem. In this way, data collection itself already has an emancipatory function. And you can make the process participatory by not only capturing the participants' perspectives on the problem but also by soliciting their opinions regarding what solutions or changes are required to solve the problem. Collecting data in collaboration with local researchers, local research assistants who know the specific situation, local customs and dialect (as described in the methods chapters) will make your research (and your subsequent actions) even more relevant for the participants. The data collection process serves to validate your raw data with participants and stakeholders.

You next analyse the data according to the tasks in the analytic cycle, as described in [Chapters 10](#) and [11](#) in this book. The participatory element in data analysis involves checking the codes and themes that you identified *with* your participants and stakeholders; or, like other authors did, asking participants to identify themes on the basis of data, and compare those themes with your own, more academically focused analysis.

As an academic researcher, you need to be aware of the possible differences in data interpretation and analysis between your participants and yourself. McIntyre (2008) reflected on this, and compared the co-analysis (by researchers with participants) of transcripts with her own academic analysis based on grounded theory. She identified interesting differences in the interpretation of data and indicates the need to integrate these different views. Cashman et al. (2008) cited by Minkle and Wallerstein (2008), make a similar comparison. Higginbottom and Liamputtong (2015: 72–3) also identify these differences in interpretations of data and point to the importance of reflexivity on how the (theoretical) background of the researcher influences the interpretation of data. Identifying many *in-vivo codes* (see [Chapter 10](#)) will make your findings more relevant to your participants' experience. In that way, you might also be able to develop the final inductive theory together.

The findings derived from these two cycles, representing the voices of your participants, are thus the basis not only for understanding and Verstehen, and achieving academic outcomes, but also for social change opportunities. [Chapter 12](#) returns to the participatory approach; progressing from data analysis to actions aimed at social change.

## Different roles of the researcher

Applying a participatory approach to qualitative research requires more than just research skills. Besides being an academic researcher and knowing how to design a research project, to apply theories, to select appropriate research methodologies and methods, and do rigorous analyses, in a participatory approach you also have to be able to:



- react and adapt to circumstances in an even more *flexible* way (than for qualitative research) as participants and relevant stakeholders are more involved;
- *reach out* from your academic institution into society, to embed your research;
- *connect* to people outside your academic institution, and *collaborate* on the project;
- *communicate* with stakeholders whose objectives aren't solely academic;
- be *aware of power relations* between different stakeholders, and between *you* and the stakeholders;
- *establish rapport*;
- *facilitate* stakeholders ability to express themselves;
- *intermediate* between different stakeholders;
- sometimes being *a change agent*;
- be *pro-active* and *feeling engaged* in emphasizing the need for participatory research.

At the same time it is important, as always in qualitative research, to acknowledge subjectivity and be aware of one's own **positionality** (see also [Chapters 2, 5](#) and [7](#)). Each participant and stakeholder reflects their subjective views of their own social world, while you as researcher bring your own subjective influence and positionality to the participatory research process. The interpretive paradigm underlying qualitative research acknowledges that the researcher's background, position and/or emotions are an integral part of the process. Therefore, reflexivity is important – you as researcher should consciously self-reflect to make your potential influence on the research process implicit (Finlay and Gouch, 2003; Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006).

## Evaluating quality

All quality criteria of qualitative research apply to participatory qualitative research.

In addition, for the participatory approach, quality criteria are:



### *Participatory*

Does the study include a societal change objective, in addition to the academic objective?

### *Embedded*

Is the study embedded in the study society?

Is the research problem co-defined by participants and stakeholders?

Has stakeholder mapping been done?

Are power relations identified?

Is the social context and the positions of stakeholders sufficiently taken into account, in the design of the study?

### *Appropriate*

Are the research questions supported by literature and theory *and* embedded in socio-cultural context?

Have the principles of the participatory approach been sufficiently applied and tasks of the participatory cycles performed?

### *Coherent*

Are all tasks in the participatory design sub-cycle and the design cycle coherently interlinked?

### *Transparent*

Are all tasks described in a transparent way?

### *Reflexive*

Is there a reflection on the participatory process and the positionality of the researcher?

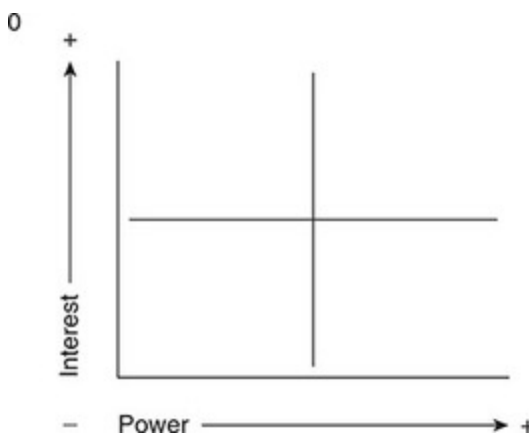
### Key points

A participatory approach to qualitative research:

- starts from study design onwards;
- requires the formulation of an academic *and* social change objective;
- involves participants and/or other societal stakeholders;
- is embedded in the local community, and involves a description and interpretation of how the perspectives of your participants are formed within relational, institutional and cultural contexts;
- has a strong emphasis on co-defining a research project.

### Exercise

1. Define a research question for a study and identify the academic objective. Then, define a social change objective and based on this, a social change question. Describe your tasks through the participatory design sub-cycle.
2. Who are your prime participants? Who are the relevant stakeholders? When defining the social change objectives, try to predict the interests of your participants and of each of the stakeholder groups. It can help if you map them and estimate the power relations as related to your research topic/question. You can use the diagram below to map your stakeholders:



## Further reading

Chevalier, J.M. and Buckles, D.J. (2013) *Participatory Action Research. Theory and Methods for Engaged Inquiry*. New York: Routledge, pp. 255–292. These two chapters (11 and 12) provide more information on stakeholder involvement and analysis.

Higginbottom, G. and Liamputtong, P. (eds) (2015) *Participatory Qualitative Research Methodologies in Health*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. This book presents a nice combination of a participatory approach to qualitative research and its methodologies and many examples of participatory research projects. Among the refereed publications, we feel this book is close to our approach.

Johnson, L.R. (2017) *Community-based Qualitative Research: Approaches for Education and the Social Sciences*. London: Sage Publications. This book nicely describes community-based qualitative research. It reflects more elaborately on design, data collection and analysis, and the role of the researcher in it. Among the refereed publications, we feel this book is close to our approach.

McIntyre, A. (2008) *Participatory Action Research*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications. This book is a nice basis to get acquainted with the participatory (action) approach to research.

## 5 Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research

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## Objectives

After reading this chapter you will:

- understand the ethical challenges in qualitative research;
- be aware of different ethical issues throughout the qualitative research cycle;
- be able to identify ethical issues in your own qualitative research.

## Introduction

In this chapter, we discuss the ethical issues and challenges you may face while conducting qualitative research. The purpose of this chapter is not to prescribe what is ethical or not in qualitative research nor to provide

solutions to ethical dilemmas but to highlight some of the ethical challenges you may encounter in conducting qualitative research and allow you to become more sensitive to potential ethical issues throughout the research process. We encourage you to develop your own sense of ethics, using the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki (described below) and your own judgement. We suggest that you also refer to the ethical guidelines for research set up by national organizations (e.g. National Institutes of Health, National Science Organization, Economic and Social Research Council, The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research) and your University's research ethics committee. In some situations, the ethical issues are clear and can be agreed upon by most researchers; however, in other situations you have to carefully assess whether a decision or action is ethical and what the consequences of such a decision or action may be. In these instances, researchers' views may vary, as what remains ethical for one researcher may not be considered ethical for another; this boundary will also be influenced by your own personal background and experience. We encourage you to develop your own sense of how to conduct ethical qualitative research. We highlight field examples of ethical challenges in qualitative research to assist in developing these skills.

Your attention to ethical issues does not stop simply because you have been granted ethical approval to conduct the study by your research institution. Ethical challenges arise throughout the research process and we structure this chapter to highlight ethical issues commonly faced by qualitative researchers throughout each stage of the qualitative research cycle. In particular, we focus on the following ethical principles at different stages of the research: seeking permission and [informed consent](#), voluntary participation, minimization of harm, [anonymity](#) and [confidentiality](#). In addition to these principles we also encourage researchers to be culturally sensitive when conducting qualitative research in other cultures.

## What is ethics?

Typically, research studies are required to undergo a formal assessment by an **institutional review board** to determine whether the study will be conducted ethically. The principles for the ethical conduct of research are now well recognized. Even though these principles were initially developed

for medical science, we use the same principles for all types of research, including qualitative studies.

In 1964, the World Medical Association (WMA) released the Declaration of Helsinki, a statement about the ethical principles for all medical research that involves human subjects (see WMA, 2008). The *Belmont Report* was created in 1979 by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Behavioural Research to serve as a core reference on ethical principles for institutional review boards dealing with research on human subjects. The *Belmont Report* identifies three core principles for the ethical conduct of research:

***Respect of persons.*** Participants' welfare should always take precedence over the interests of science or society. Participants should be treated with courtesy and respect, and they should enter into research voluntarily and with adequate information.

***Beneficence.*** Researchers should strive to maximize the benefits of research for wider society, and to minimize the potential risks to research participants.

***Justice.*** Researchers should ensure that research procedures are administered in a fair, non-exploitative and well-considered manner.

The application of these principles to the conduct of research leads to the following important ethical guidelines:

***Informed consent.*** Individuals should be provided with sufficient information about the research, in a format that is comprehensible to them, and make a voluntary decision to participate in a research study.

***Self-determination.*** Individuals have the right to determine their own participation in research, including the right to refuse participation without negative consequences.

***Minimization of harm.*** Researchers should not do any harm to participants or put them at risk.

***Anonymity.*** Researchers should protect the identity of research participants at all times.

***Confidentiality.*** Researchers should ensure that all data records are kept securely at all times.

Throughout this chapter we describe how to apply these ethical principles to different aspects of qualitative research.

## **Ethics in qualitative research**

Although the ethical responsibilities of a qualitative researcher remain the same as in other types of research, ethical challenges in qualitative research may be more pronounced for several reasons. First, qualitative research methods are used to understand perceptions, beliefs and feelings of people – as we indicated in [Chapter 2](#), we want to hear the voices of our study participants. To achieve this, we seek to establish rapport (a trust relationship) with the participants. The subsequent closeness in the relationship between researcher and participant demands that we carefully consider the ethical principle of ‘doing no harm’, by keeping the information we acquire secure, and by making the data anonymous. If information were disclosed to others, or if data were not anonymized, then the privacy and security of the participants could be compromised. For example, in a study on the living arrangements of older adults in Karnataka, India, we observed that some of the information the participants shared went beyond the topic of our study. Therefore, we made the decision to inform the participants that they need not share other personal family issues, if they didn’t want to, to maintain their own privacy.

Second, qualitative research methods are often used to study sensitive issues such as sexuality or violence. This implies an even more careful consideration of the above-mentioned ethical principles. On asking interviewees about these experiences, they also might relive painful memories or events in their life which can cause emotional distress. In some research projects on sensitive issues, researchers ensure that they can refer interviewees to a counsellor or provide information on support services. In addition, qualitative researchers aim to get an in-depth insight into the lives of the study population, which may be through in-depth interviews or living in the study community for some time. For example, an ethnographer may spend a long time getting to know the community while conducting their research and therefore develop a level of trust whereby participants may share information which is not part of the research. Such information has to be kept confidential too. In some instances, researchers switch off the

recorder when such information is shared during an interview, or you may blank out or delete some sections from the transcript to maintain the privacy of the participant.

[Table 5.1](#) sets out the definitions of some of the key terms in research ethics.

Table 5.1 Key terms in research ethics

Table 5.1 Key terms in research ethics

Confidentiality	To ensure all data are kept private, stored securely and accessible only to the research team.
Anonymity	To remove personal identifiers from data to protect the identity of study participants.
Informed consent	To provide accessible information about the risks, benefits and procedures of a study that allows potential participants to make a free and informed decision about whether to participate. The persons giving consent must also be of legal age and be cognitively competent to make the decision to participate.
Human subjects research	Research involving living human subjects and the collection and storage of personal data including biological samples.
Conflict of interest	When the research team has economic, political or social interests which could bias their role in the research process.
Research ethics committee	An independent, multidisciplinary and legally mandated committee that evaluates research proposals to ensure ethical guidelines are followed.
Research	Following ethical principles throughout the research



integrity	process.
Risk analysis	Assessing the potential of harm to participants from participating in a research study.

## Ethical issues in the design cycle

As you conceptualize your research project during the design cycle, there are already ethical issues to consider. The ethical considerations at this stage of a study typically focus on a number of questions. Who will benefit from the research? What will the research give back to the study community? How do you plan to enter into your study community? How will you present yourself to the study population? These considerations are discussed below.

### Beneficence

As you design your research project, consider who will benefit from the research and whether there will be any benefit for the study community, either directly or indirectly. This will be reflected in the purpose of the research and its outcome. Think about whether the research is solely for academic benefit, for example to contribute to theoretical knowledge, or whether you are conducting research to respond to a problem from the study community or for an organization working with the study community, as described in [Chapter 4](#). For example, suppose you want to conduct research in which people will be interviewed about sensitive issues, and your outcome will simply be an academic thesis. You will have to reflect on whether it is ethical to seek participation of the study population in your research, on issues that they may find difficult to discuss, purely to build up the body of scientific knowledge and to gain an academic degree.

Therefore, at the beginning of your research project, it is useful to reflect on how the findings of the study may benefit different stakeholders in the community, and whether this element can be strengthened. Social science research can provide valuable data from which to develop solutions to social problems, so serious consideration can be given to how your study results may improve the situation of the study population. For example, in a

study among formerly abducted child soldiers in Uganda, the researcher not only studied the experiences of the children but also formed feedback committees and organized workshops on how to help the children reintegrate into the community (Angucia, 2010). Increasingly funding organizations ask researchers to make explicit the value of their study to society, often explicitly requiring a ‘pathway to impact’ in research proposals. Designing an impact pathway also helps researchers to conceptualize the process of knowledge exchange with study participants and communities. For more information on research transfer see the toolkit developed by Economic and Social Research Council in the UK (<https://esrc.ukri.org/research/impact-toolkit/developing-pathways-to-impact/>).

## Justice

Qualitative researchers also need to ensure that the approach to research does not exploit the study population or involve their deception in order to conduct the research. In the design stage of the research, you can begin to consider how you will enter the study community and how you will present yourself to the study community to ensure that it is not exploiting the study participants. Consider what information you will give the local community and study participants about the research and how you will inform them that they are part of a research study. For example, suppose you are conducting ethnographic research in a poor inner-city neighbourhood and intend to live in the community to observe people’s lives and interview local residents. You have to think about the manner in which you would introduce yourself to the local residents. For example, would you present yourself as a new resident of the neighbourhood or as a researcher? In many situations, it would not be ethical to conceal your status as a researcher and the fact that you are conducting research with the community. However, this revelation could also influence the way in which local residents view and interact with you and how they go about their normal activities.

A good example of this situation was seen in a study conducted on migrant workers in Germany. The German researcher–journalist, Günter Wallraff, participated in the life of the migrant workers, pretending to be a Turkish migrant himself. He participated in their daily activities, he worked with

them, ate with them and observed their work and lives. He kept detailed notes on what he did, but he did not reveal that he was conducting research on them and intended to write about their lives. He then published his findings in a book (Wallraff, 1985), and people in German society were shocked about the working conditions of migrant workers that was revealed in his book. Wallraff certainly succeeded in bringing attention to the living and working conditions of the migrant workers. However, he was equally criticized for using deception by concealing his identity and intentions in order to benefit the research process. This example highlights the importance of conducting research without deception. A basic ethical principle in social science research is to inform participants that they are involved in a study, so that they can decide to freely participate or not.

## **Ethical issues in the data collection cycle**

In qualitative research many ethical issues will arise during the tasks in the data collection cycle. This is when you will begin to recruit study participants, prepare for fieldwork and begin data collection. During these research activities you will be in your study community and have direct contact with the study participants.

## **Research Ethics Committees**

Research Ethics Committees (RECs), also known as Institutional Review Boards, are established by research institutions and organizations. They are intended to be independent and multidisciplinary and include members of both the academic and the lay public. In some Medical RECs they also require representatives of patient organizations to review research proposals. Research organizations vary in size and nature. In some cases, several faculties or departments come together to form a single ethics committee whereas large organizations have a central committee. In such situations you may have to prepare a research protocol that can be reviewed by interdisciplinary teams. The key characteristics of RECs are:

- *Independent:* RECs cannot include any members of the research team or anyone who has a conflict of interest (see Table 4.1) with the

research proposal.

- *Transparent*: RECs need to make transparent the guidelines by which they assess research proposals and grant ethical clearance.
- *Protect rights*: RECs aim to protect the rights of study participants.
- *Advisory*: RECs provide advice but cannot be held liable for the outcomes of the research.

All RECs set clear guidelines on the information to be submitted to them to make an assessment on whether a study follows ethical procedures. The nature and formulation of the questions can vary but broadly they would like to know the plan of data collection, process of informed consent, the [participant recruitment](#) strategy, processes to minimize harm, and data management plan. Depending on how sensitive the study topic is, the REC could rank the proposal as low-risk to high-risk to determine the extent of the review. If the committee determine that the study is high-risk, it may be referred to specialist reviewers. The researcher or research team always need to wait for ethical approval before starting any data collection. In some circumstances ethical clearance is needed from multiple RECs, particularly for international research where you may need ethical approval from both your own research institution plus the ethical review board of the country in which you will conduct the study. It is also possible that the REC can request additional information or documents before a determination can be made. Research teams also need to allocate time for the ethical review process in their study timetable, perhaps by identifying the average time for the review process and including this time in the study timetable. In some cases, a research proposal will not receive ethical clearance from the REC, whereby the research team can re-apply with changes to their study design indicating how they will reduce the risk of harm to study participants.

## **Participant recruitment**

Numerous ethical issues arise during the recruitment of participants in qualitative research. The core tasks include seeking permission from participants and providing adequate information to participants, so that they are able to consider whether they are willing to participate in the study. During recruitment you also may consider potential harm to participants from the recruitment strategy used or from their participation in the study.

In addition, researchers should keep confidential the names of study participants at all times.

## **Seeking permission, providing information**

Seeking permission from people to participate in a study is an essential part of the research process. Permission may be sought at different levels such as from national and local organizations. In cases where you conduct research in another country you have to be aware of the rules and regulations of that country with regard to the conduct of research. This process of seeking permission starts right at the embassy where you will apply for a visa. For example, one of our students from the Netherlands wanted to conduct research in the global South and the embassy of that country asked her what kind of visa she wanted to apply for. The student knew that a research visa would take three months to be prepared, but a tourist visa would take just one week. She chose to apply for a research visa, as this was the objective of her travel, but knowing that the conduct of the research would be delayed. Thus, when planning field research in another country, take into account the amount of time it may take to get permission to do so. Similarly, the procedure of getting permission from an ethical committee can take quite some time.

When you enter your study community it is considered good practice to seek permission to conduct the research from stakeholders or groups within the community. Seeking this local endorsement for your study involves providing information about your research objectives, how the data will be used, who will have access to the data, how you will ensure the anonymity of the study participants and how you will minimize harm to the participants. For example, in a study among street children in an urban neighbourhood in Brazil a researcher was asked by the neighbourhood committee not to take pictures of the children or give information about the children to any legal authority. Therefore, you prepare a plan on how you will ensure the anonymity of the study participants. It can be useful to make project information sheets in the local languages, which include ensuring participant anonymity and data security, which you can give to community members or local authorities. During these first meetings with community members and organizations you also begin to establish rapport within the

community, and may begin to reflect on how you present yourself, in terms of being a student, a researcher and so on, as was reflected in the example above of Wallraff's research among migrant workers.

## **Minimization of harm**

There are many different strategies for recruiting participants in qualitative research (see [Chapter 6](#)). An important ethical issue in participant recruitment is minimization of harm to your (potential) participants. That we should minimize any physical harm to participants is relatively straightforward; however, harm can be evident in other forms, such as mental harm in the form of shame or embarrassment, or social harm in terms of how an individual is viewed or treated by others in their community. For example, suppose you are conducting research on a sensitive issue such as induced abortion. Women or couples may keep this information to themselves, so it may be difficult to recruit participants with these experiences. A common recruitment strategy for research on sensitive topics is to use [snowball sampling](#). This involves finding your first participant, interviewing them and then asking if they know others who also had an induced abortion and who might be willing to participate in your study. Suppose the first interviewee does know other women who experienced an abortion. Now you have to take care not to invade the privacy of these potential participants. In this situation, it would be unethical to contact these people directly, because they may not want to talk about their abortion experience, certainly not to a researcher. It might also be the case that a woman had an induced abortion, but that this is unknown to the rest of her family. Your enquiry to participate in the research about abortion could cause serious mental harm to the woman (e.g. the abortion may be too painful to remember) or social harm (e.g. through her family or others learning about the abortion that she wanted kept secret). In these situations, you can instead ask the first participant to let the woman know about the research and to contact the researcher if they are interested in participating. The woman can then make her own independent decision about whether to participate in the research or not, and if so, where they would prefer to meet, given the sensitivity of the issue. Considering the physical health of study participants is also important. It is generally

advised not to include participants who are too ill to give consent for the study. For example, if your project is about the use of neighbourhood spaces by older adults, you may want to walk with the older adults in their neighbourhood. At the stage of participant recruitment ask participants if they have mobility issues and would they be able to walk in the neighbourhood. This will ensure that they are not harmed or put in discomfort when they participate in the study.

## **No coercion, informed consent**

Another strategy for recruiting participants in qualitative research is to use 'gatekeepers' (see [Chapter 6](#)). A **gatekeeper** can be a village leader, the manager of an organization, the director of a hospital, and so on. When you first meet with gatekeepers to seek permission for your study, they may suggest which community members would be the best participants for your study. These may be particular residents of the community or certain employees of the organization. Although it is common practice to seek the assistance of a gatekeeper for recruiting participants in qualitative research, it is your responsibility to ensure that participants are not coerced by the gatekeeper to take part in the research. This may not be through force, but through the social or employment expectations of the gatekeeper. For example, employees may not wish to participate themselves, but feel obliged to participate if encouraged to do so by their employer. Given the power relationship between employee and employer, there may be subtle coercion for them to participate. You must therefore ensure that you have received informed consent from each participant themselves, which includes their right to refuse to participate in the study without fear of retribution from their employer. In such a situation, researchers may keep a participant's refusal confidential from their employer or the gatekeeper, still providing the incentive or payment that was given to those who did participate, in order to protect the person from any negative consequences from a gatekeeper.

## **Voluntary participation, no harm to participants**

A further ethical issue with participant recruitment is that an individual may wish to participate in the study but others do not want them to participate. For example, in a study in India, a newly married woman indicated that she would like to participate in our study. In this region of India, a woman moves to her husband's household after marriage and her mother-in-law has an influence on her decisions. In this case, the mother-in-law strongly objected to her daughter-in-law's participation in the study, stating that she needed to help with the housework. She also indicated that her daughter-in-law would be too busy to participate at any other time. At first, the research team (consisting of local researchers and interviewers) tried to encourage the mother-in-law to allow participation in the study, by explaining the research objectives, and asking whether they could come back at a more convenient time. However, the researchers ultimately decided not to pursue the issue any further as it became clear that the daughter-in-law could face serious problems with her mother-in-law if she participated in the study against her mother-in-law's wishes. This would seriously harm her position in the household. At times, ethical issues are not clear-cut and researchers need to make judgements about each situation as it arises. This example also highlights the need to remain culturally sensitive when considering ethical issues in qualitative research. It is good practice to seek guidance on these issues from others familiar with the cultural context of your research.

In many cultural contexts it can be difficult to explain the concept of consent. Due to social hierarchies and gender expectations, participants may be reluctant to refuse participation in a study. It could also be that they have never been asked to present their own views on certain topics or been asked to agree/disagree on an option presented to them. In a study we conducted with nursing students in India we repeatedly explained what was expected of them in the interview, their right to refuse to participate with no consequences and also to leave the study if they felt uncomfortable. These participants were surprised to know that they could refuse to participate since the cultural norms prevalent in their institution expected students to participate even though some felt uncomfortable in doing so.

## **Preparing for data collection**



As you prepare for data collection, consider issues such as the safety of your research team and how to guide the research team to remain culturally sensitive during fieldwork.

## **Harm minimization for the research team, being culturally sensitive**

During your data collection, you may be working with an interpreter or have a field team to collect the data. As a researcher you are responsible for minimizing harm not only to your study participants but also to your research team. For example, in a study on adolescents in Bangladesh (Bosch, 2005), the researcher visited the homes of the participants by boat with her research team. The study focused on women's reproductive health, so the research team consisted only of female interviewers. In the cultural context of Bangladesh, it is not considered socially acceptable or safe for women to travel alone to remote villages, so a male assistant accompanied the team at all times. This man had several duties: he carried the heavy weighing machines and measurement tools needed for the research and turned out to be an excellent addition to the team. While the female interviewers were busy interviewing participants, he talked with people in the study villages about the research. The women in the team also felt safe and more accepted by the communities in which they were working. In another study in Pakistan (Hennink et al., 2002), fieldworkers were all women who interviewed participants in their homes. To ensure cultural acceptability and the safety of the interviewers, the women worked in pairs, so that they never visited the house of a stranger alone. Although there was a team of 30 interviewers, working in pairs meant that the time for data collection was effectively doubled, as one interviewer waited while the other conducted the interview. However, ethical considerations during data collection took precedence over the study timetable. Similarly, you have to consider whether it is safe for your research team to work at night or travel to remote areas or even to visit the houses of the interviewees. It is always recommended to consult local research collaborators to identify what is permissible, appropriate and safe within the local context of the study.

It is advisable that the researcher/research team set up a protocol on where you can get help, for example from local police, embassies or educational institutions in the event of danger to the field team. When conducting research in areas of conflict or with a history of conflict, it is advisable to check with local authorities on how to make a safe exit from the field area. Bhattacharya (2014) recommends careful selection of the location, informed selection of the participants, sensitivity to the topics raised and stronger background information on the conflict including information from multiple stakeholders. The latter can be achieved by interactions with local people and community organizations.

## **Data collection**

During qualitative data collection a multitude of ethical issues may arise. Researchers must ensure that participants are provided with sufficient information about the study and the procedures during the interview or discussion, in particular that they are aware of and have consented to recording the session. Qualitative research also presents a range of ethical challenges related to maintaining anonymity and confidentiality during data collection. The process of qualitative interviewing, particularly on sensitive issues, can evoke emotional responses from participants that researchers have to be prepared for with empathy and professional support. Furthermore, qualitative researchers will be aware of any potential harm to participants that may arise during data collection, such as social or economic harm. These issues are described below as illustrative of the types of ethical issues faced by qualitative researchers during data collection.

## **Providing information**

When you begin to collect data in an interview or focus group discussion you typically introduce yourself and describe the purpose of the study. At this time participants have a right to receive information about the type of research in which they are participating. It is usual to inform participants about the research objectives, how the data will be used, and the outcomes of the study (e.g. a journal article, report, thesis or review of service delivery procedures). In qualitative research, it is common to record

interviews and then transcribe the recording into a written document called a transcript. Therefore, you must also explain to participants why the recording is necessary, who will listen to the recording or read the transcript and then seek the participants' permission to record the session. Participants should also know they can refuse to be recorded. In such situations you can try to explain the reasons for recording, ensure their anonymity and the confidential storage of data. If the participant is still unsure of the recording, you need to make a decision on whether to continue the interview or not. A participant can also withdraw consent for recording at any point, for example, a participant may ask that the recorder be turned off at certain times as they want to share something more personal/controversial with the interviewer. This information is not used as we do not have consent here.

Participants also have a right to request a copy of the information that they have given in a research study. Although this right is rarely exercised, some researchers provide a transcript of the interview to a participant. Mero-Jaffe (2011) comments that for some participants the process of reading their own transcripts can be embarrassing or could make them anxious. Reading what has been said in a moment of close rapport can be perceived as threatening as participants may be surprised at their own words. In key informant interviews, the participant may also request the transcript of their interview, often to check that they have not shared anything that is out of line with their organization's policy. In such cases you could make explicit agreements on what information will be shown as [quotations](#) and what can be merged in the overall analysis.

One challenge for qualitative researchers is whether it is necessary to provide information to those you observe when using the method of participant observation. Typically you may be participating in the daily lives of your study participants while collecting observation data. The challenge for qualitative researchers is to balance the amount of information given to participants on the fact that they are participating in research with the potential effect that this may have on the data collection process. These issues will be discussed in detail in [Chapter 9](#) on observation.

## **Informed consent, being culturally sensitive**

While introducing your research to participants, you must also seek their consent to participate in the study. In many studies, written consent is a requirement; however, in some study populations written consent is not always possible or preferable. In these situations, verbal consent is sought and is often acceptable to an institutional review board. In a study among poorly educated men in India, a researcher was required to seek written consent from all participants, according to the procedures of their institutional review board. However, the researcher found that participants refused to sign the consent document as they were not able to read, and they believed that signing it would turn over their land to the researcher. Many institutional review boards now make exceptions to the requirement for written informed consent for specific circumstances, such as among illiterate populations or where the consent document itself can jeopardize the anonymity of the participant. Verbal consent to participate in a research study is used in these situations and is sought by reading the informed consent document to each participant, in the presence of another person, and then asking the participant if they understood the words. If not, it is repeated in simpler language. Their verbal consent can be digitally recorded.

## **Anonymity and confidentiality**

The terms ‘anonymity’ and ‘confidentiality’ are often used interchangeably in research literature; however, the ethical issues of each are quite distinct. *Confidentiality* refers to not disclosing information that is discussed between the researcher and the participant. In qualitative research, it is difficult to assure complete confidentiality because researchers report the study findings and often use quotations of participants’ own words, although these cannot be linked to a specific participant. What can be ensured is *anonymity*, in as much as all identifiable information is removed from the interview transcript or quotations used from it, so that no individual participant can be identified from these documents. You could explain the following steps to ensure that consent is informed, and the process is understood by the participants. Explain that if the interview/focus group discussion is recorded, then the recorded information will be transcribed by the researcher or the research team, and all personal

information relating to the identity of the participant will be removed from the transcript, so that only the anonymized information will be analysed by the research team. It is important to inform study participants that the research information will be collected, analysed and reported anonymously, so that participants cannot be identified in any of the research data.

Although complete confidentiality cannot be ensured, as noted above, qualitative researchers can restrict who listens to the recordings of the interviews, so that only members of the research team or those transcribing the interviews will have access to the recordings. Unless you have indicated otherwise to participants, no one else can listen to the recordings. The recordings are kept in a secure location, where only authorized persons will have access, for example, in a locked room or in a password protected electronic location. It is important to inform your participants about these procedures to indicate how you will provide confidentiality of the data they have provided. For example, in some studies participants have asked qualitative researchers, 'What will you do with this recording? I am sure you will bring it to the city, listen to it at your research institute, and then laugh about us?' Clearly, these participants must be given an assurance that this will definitely not occur. Similarly, participants sometimes confuse research with journalism and fear that the recorded interview will be broadcast on the radio and they may be shamed or embarrassed.

A further issue that may arise during qualitative data collection is the confidentiality of the interview situation. For example, you may be conducting a focus group discussion in an outdoor location where onlookers may overhear the discussion or sit nearby to listen. In this situation it is ethical to ask the onlookers to leave to provide the confidentiality in the discussion that you have promised to participants. This issue becomes more challenging when interviewing participants in their own homes, where family members or visitors may overhear the interview. In this situation you are not in a position to ask anyone to leave the house, but you may ask if the participant would like to stop the interview for a while or move to another location.

The information that you gather also needs to be made anonymous, so that no participant can be identified from the research data. Anonymizing data

involves removing any identifiers from the interview transcripts that may identify the participant, but it also includes not writing the name of the participant on the recording or not using participants' names as file names. It is common practice to replace participants' names with identification numbers or pseudonyms and to keep the list of participants' names that match the identification numbers in a secure location. For example, in the extract of an interview below the personal information of the participant has been removed so that the person can no longer be identified:

*Interviewer:* Can you tell me about yourself?

*Participant:* I was born in \_\_\_\_\_ and then we moved to \_\_\_\_\_. I am 40 years old and work for the \_\_\_\_\_ company. My children \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ go to school. We live in \_\_\_\_\_ neighbourhood.

Ensuring anonymity refers not only to the data files themselves, but also to how researchers publicly discuss information gathered from participants. In describing the findings of qualitative research, researchers need to refrain from revealing the identity of any participants, even inadvertently. This may seem obvious; however, a researcher may describe the issues reported by a female health manager in a certain location but be unaware that there is only one female health manager in that region, thus indirectly revealing the identity of the participant. You may also be tempted to share interesting things from the interviews with others in the community. However, in a closed community or within a small organization, if people learn what participants shared in an interview this may seriously harm the people you have interviewed, as they may be able to identify the participant.

Furthermore, sometimes researchers wish to validate information heard in interviews with someone from the study community, to check whether they understood the issues correctly. Although this is common practice, you have to anonymize any experiences from your data (which you share) so that you do not jeopardize participants' privacy. For example, during a study about sex work, the research team was conducting participant observation in a place where young men meet. The researchers wanted to know if any sexual negotiations took place at this location and asked a young man in the area about this. The following day most of the young men in the community had understood that the researchers had come to incriminate them for sexual

indiscretions. From that point onwards, the research team refrained from discussing or verifying their observations with community members. Instead they consulted a health worker from a community organization, who had enough distance from the community to discuss the issues.

Even though all research information remains anonymous, what do you do if you hear about illegal activities during your interviews? In a study on migrant men, researchers learnt that one participant was taking part in illegal activities, in this case petty theft. As the researcher had promised anonymity, he could not reveal to anyone the participant's identity nor the crime that he committed. Given the low level of the crime, the researcher decided not to act. However, if the crime were more serious, what could researchers do? In general, researchers are required to break the confidentiality agreement if they learn that the study participant has committed a crime, is about to commit a crime, has been a victim of crime or plans to harm themselves (Wiles et al., 2006).

## **Minimization of harm, beneficence**

Minimization of harm, as mentioned above, refers not only to physical harm but also to mental, social or economic harm. We describe two examples of economic and social harm that may occur during data collection in qualitative research.

For some participants, taking part in qualitative research can mean taking several hours to participate in an interview, which can cause economic harm, particularly if participants lose income during the time they are involved in the study. For example, in a study among sex workers in Africa (van den Borne, 2007), the ethical review board recommended that the researchers pay the sex workers to compensate their lost earnings while they were participating in the interviews. In social science research, it is common practice not to pay participants for research information as this may influence the information received. But how realistic and ethical is this? Our approach is not to pay our participants, but to give them a small gift after the interview to show appreciation for their participation, but one that will not coerce their participation in the study. In situations where the participants have to travel to the research site it is accepted practice to

reimburse the travel costs. When studying vulnerable populations in severe hardship (e.g. hunger, lack of medicines), it may be difficult not to provide something to participants. Finally, when conducting research in some countries in the Global South, participants often say ‘we want to participate, but what is in it for us?’ You have to be careful about what you can promise your participants; it may be tempting to say that your research will influence policy-making or improve their standard of living, but can you really promise this? Is it ethical to suggest it? Consider the realistic benefit of the study to your study population when faced with these questions from participants. During participant recruitment and while seeking informed consent you can very explicitly mention what the participants can expect from the study. It is an essential part of the informed consent process to inform the participants of potential harm and benefits.

Reducing harm to participants can also mean social harm, through shame or embarrassment to participants. In qualitative research, it is sometimes difficult to know the direction that the interview will take or how the selection of participants may lead to some form of social harm to participants. For example, in a study on the practice of breastfeeding in the Netherlands, the researcher wanted to explore why women stop breastfeeding before the recommended time of six months. Focus group discussions were held with young mothers who had given birth in the past five months. The researcher did not know whether participants were breastfeeding or not when they were recruited for the study. During the discussion the women who were still breastfeeding were very excited about it, claiming that this was the best way to feed your baby and that it created an intimate bond between mother and child. These participants created an atmosphere in the group discussion where breastfeeding was considered to be the best practice and demonstrated that a woman was a good mother. The few women who did not breastfeed or had stopped breastfeeding became more and more silent during the discussion. Even though these women either did not want to breastfeed or could not breastfeed due to problems after delivery, they were embarrassed by the other group members and some of them even felt harmed. These women were perhaps already feeling insecure about being first-time mothers and may have left the focus group discussion with the feeling that they were bad mothers. As a focus group [moderator](#) you have a responsibility to ensure that participants in the group



are not embarrassed or harmed by the discussion. This can be difficult to navigate, given that the discussion could go in many directions. In this example, it may have been helpful for the moderator to consider the experience of the participants in the group composition, for example, to conduct separate groups with women who were breastfeeding and those who were not.

While researchers are mostly focused on minimization of harm to participants, it is easy to overlook the benefit for the study participants from participating in a research study. Many study participants actually enjoy participating in research as it provides an opportunity for them to talk about their own lives, experiences and opinions on the research issues. By talking about their lives, participants often become aware of what they think and feel themselves, which is often considered a positive experience for participants and therefore a benefit of participating in research (Peel et al., 2006). This greater self-awareness may be beneficial in that it prompts participants to consider solutions to the problems that they have raised in the interviews or discussions. Focus group discussions for example are spaces where participants can freely express themselves and can hear the viewpoints of other people in the community. In [Chapter 4](#), we refer to this as an emancipatory function of qualitative research, and therefore it provides some benefit to study participants.

## **Dealing with emotions**

Qualitative research often focuses on the experiences, perceptions, beliefs and motivations of study participants. In these situations, participants may experience some emotions as they recall certain experiences in an interview or focus group discussion. During in-depth interviews, in particular, experiences such as personal loss and grief can come up. In focus group discussions, the atmosphere may become heated when certain issues are discussed, or opinions shared.

Sometimes participants in qualitative research will become unexpectedly emotional and researchers need to show empathy and consider terminating the interview if it is causing distress to a participant. For example, in a study among Asian teenagers in Britain (Hennink et al., 1999b) the

researcher was closing an interview by asking the participant what she planned to do after completing school. The interviewee suddenly began to cry because her parents were in the midst of negotiating an arranged marriage for her once she finished school and she was feeling unhappy about this. The researcher then stopped the interview and after a break asked if the participant wanted to continue with the interview which she did.

In other situations, the research itself may focus on a sensitive topic, such as rape, HIV/AIDS or human trafficking. For qualitative research on clearly sensitive issues that may cause emotional stress to participants, it is good practice to have a counsellor involved in the study to whom participants can be referred if needed. For example, a qualitative study among people living with HIV/AIDS (Darak and Kulkarni, 2005) asked questions about stigma and discrimination, which caused strong emotional reactions from some participants. The researchers were part of an NGO working with HIV-positive people, so they were able to refer participants to a counsellor working at their NGO, if needed.

In another study (Bailey, 2008), a participant became concerned that he might have a health problem, while being interviewed on the topic. The researcher asked the participant for permission to refer him to an NGO, but the participant refused as he was concerned that people might gossip about him attending the clinic. However, when the researcher offered to accompany him to the doctor for an examination, he agreed. Researchers have to be prepared for emotional responses during qualitative research and prepare for this, where possible. However, researchers also have to recognize their limits in assisting participants and refer them to professional support if this is needed.

## **Ethical issues in the analytic cycle**

Consideration of ethical issues continues in the analytic cycle, particularly during data analysis and when writing about the qualitative research. Researchers need to pay attention to ethical issues in making the data anonymous prior to analysis and to ethical reporting of qualitative data.

## **Anonymity of participants and confidentiality of data**

As you prepare for data analysis, you will make written transcripts from the recorded interviews or group discussions (as described in [Chapter 10](#)). At this time, it is important to anonymize the transcripts by removing any information that may identify a participant. If you fail to anonymize the transcripts and you share transcripts with others during analysis (as is common in larger-scale projects), you have not maintained the ethical practice of anonymity. Anonymizing interview transcripts involves removing not only any information that may identify a participant (e.g. name, place, profession) but also any text that may indirectly do so. For example, a focus group discussion may identify that a doctor working in a small village made a serious mistake in the diagnosis of a patient. Even though you may have carefully anonymized the name of both the doctor and the village, replacing this with a pseudonym, the text itself may identify this particular person as there may only be one doctor per village in this area. This issue is discussed further by Parry and Mauthner (2004) in relation to sharing and archiving qualitative data. In large studies, different people may collect data from those who transcribe the data. It could also be that you outsource transcribing to an individual or company, whereby it is good to make clear agreements with transcribers that they will not retain any copies of the data or disclose any information to a third party. These precautions also apply to translation services.

In a study on women's contraceptive decision-making in India, the researcher reported on the contraceptive decisions of a woman from a particular village who was from a very specific caste. Once again, the woman and the village name were anonymized in the text, but people from this caste were rare and thus the woman could still be easily identified. Hence, her experience was further anonymized, and the caste name was left out.

Furthermore, attention is given to anonymity when writing the study findings of qualitative research. Anonymity also needs to be ensured when selecting quotations of participants while writing the results. In the event that you have worked in a group with shared responsibilities in data

collection and analysis, ensure that the information linked to the participants that is shared is anonymized. The next person who takes over your data for analysis, for example, might not be able to judge whether certain information needs to be anonymized or not.

## **Beneficence**

In writing the results of qualitative research, be aware of the benefit that the study findings may have for the study population. If the output of the study is an academic thesis, is there any benefit for the study population themselves? Perhaps you can send them a copy of your thesis; however, this will have little impact or effect on their lives. Some researchers also popularize their research findings, for example in a summary report, flyer or policy brief, so that the research can reach a greater audience and therefore have more potential benefit. A further aspect of beneficence is the intrinsic aim of qualitative research to highlight the ‘voices’ of study participants to different stakeholders, which can itself provide benefits through raising awareness of the issues or result in action to benefit a community. In doing this, researchers must be mindful of providing a balanced view of the issues and not highlight only particular issues that they agree with. In some cases, researchers may only interpret one side of the story.

## **Justice**

In writing qualitative research, take care not to sensationalize the findings of the research or deliberately select quotations that do not reflect the real situation. The selection of quotations may reflect your subjective biases on the study issues or particularly impress or surprise you rather than representing a more balanced view of the issues. As a researcher it is your duty to also report both positive and negative findings; never try to smooth out information or tamper with the quotations from the interviews to change their meaning. If you are working on topics that may be particularly sensitive or controversial, it is advisable to seek advice from others or from a local ethics committee before publishing the findings to avoid potential harm. Finally, if you share the results of your study with others to publish, such as journalists, make sure your results provide a balanced view of the

issues and are not inadvertently sensationalized and become detrimental to the study population in any way.

## **Evaluating quality**

### *Informed*

Have you informed the participant about their right to consent or refuse to take part in the study?

Have proper channels been approached for seeking permission to do research?

Was oral or a written consent received?

### *Anonymity*

Have you assured the participant of anonymity?

Did you remove all identifying information from the interview transcripts?

### *Confidentiality*

Have you described in your study protocol how confidential data management and archiving will be done?

### *Justice*

Was selection of the participants done in a just manner?

Did you consider whether incentives given may be coercive to participants?

### *Beneficence*

How will the research benefit study participants?

Did you discuss ways of translating the results or sharing the results with the community?

### *Minimization*

Did you make sure that the participants and the research assistants were safe during the research process?

### Key points

- In qualitative research ethical issues are more pronounced as research often focuses on sensitive topics, and there is close and prolonged contact with study participants.
- Informed consent has to be sought by the researcher before data collection begins.
- Anonymity of participants and confidentiality of data handling and storage are key responsibilities of the researcher.
- It is essential to minimize harm at every stage of the research, for both the participants and the research team.
- Ensure the ethical use of data and the process of analysis and interpretation by reporting both positive and negative results.
- Researchers should consider a plan for sharing research findings with the study community for their benefit.

## Exercise

Consider the ethical issues in each stage of your research project. Make a list of ethical issues that may arise in the design, data collection and analysis stages of your study. Consider how you will address each of these ethical issues.

### Further reading

Cook, K. and Nunkoosing, K. (2008) 'Maintaining dignity and managing stigma in the interview encounter: The challenge of paid-for participation', *Qualitative Health Research*, 18 (3): 418–27. This article discusses the ethical challenges of paying for research interviews amongst an impoverished elderly study population in Australia.

Dickson-Swift, V., James, E.L., Kippen, S. and Liamputtong, P. (2008) 'Risk to researchers in qualitative research on sensitive topics: Issues and strategies', *Qualitative Health Research*, 18: 133–44. This article discusses risks faced by researchers when conducting research on sensitive topics.

Ellis, C. (2007) 'Telling secrets, revealing lives: Relational ethics in research with intimate others', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13 (1): 3–29. This article discusses ethical challenges such as becoming friends with study participants, and how this influences reporting your findings.

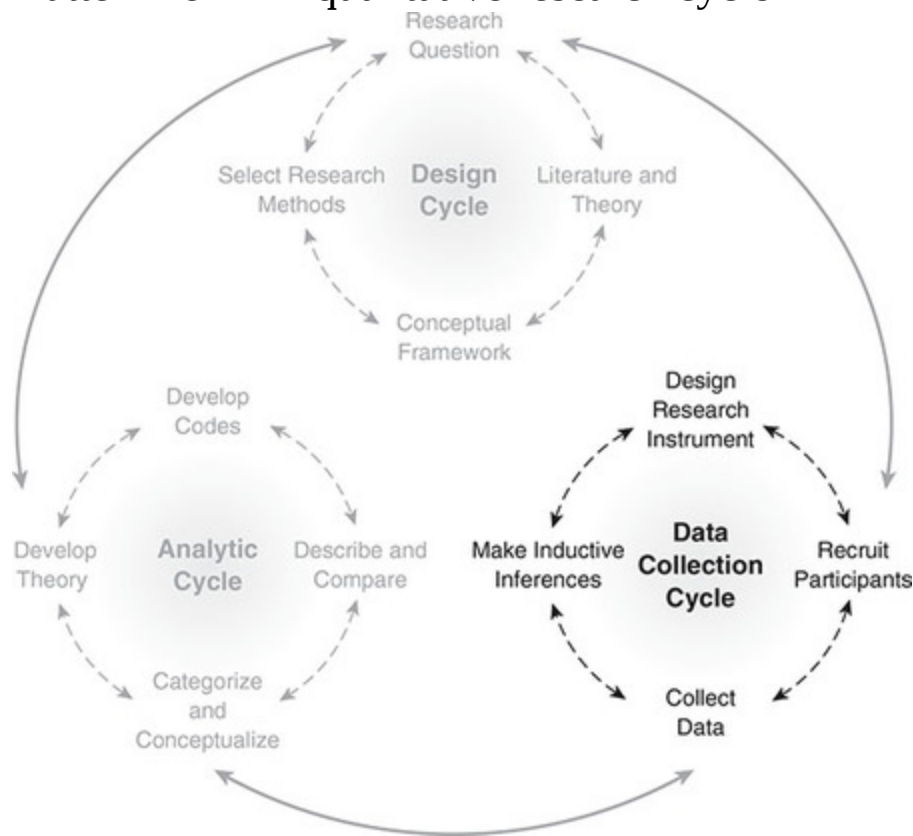
Kirk, S. (2007) 'Methodological and ethical issues in conducting qualitative research with children and young people: A literature review', *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 44 (7): 1250–60. This article discusses issues of consent and confidentiality in conducting qualitative research with children.

Miller, T., Birch, M., Mauthner, M. and Jessop, J. (eds) (2012) *Ethics in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage. This book explores key ethical dilemmas researchers face while conducting their study and has a range of practical examples to better understand the dilemmas.

Parry, O. and Mauthner, N. (2004) 'Whose data are they anyway? Practical, legal and ethical issues in archiving qualitative research data', *Sociology*, 38 (1): 139–52. This article highlights ethical issues related to archiving qualitative data.

## Part II The Data Collection Cycle

### Hutter–Hennink qualitative research cycle



The data collection cycle is the second component of the overall qualitative research cycle. It describes the core tasks in qualitative data collection, including designing the research instrument, participant recruitment, collecting data and making inductive inferences. The inductive inferences make qualitative data collection into a circular process which generates rich data that is characteristic of qualitative research.

The data collection cycle begins with the design of the research instrument, which may be a question guide for in-depth interviews or focus group discussions or a field guide for observation. The next task is participant recruitment, followed by data collection. These three tasks are initially shaped by the conceptual framework of the study that was developed in the design cycle, and determines the questions or concepts included in the



research instrument and the characteristics of the study participants. The design cycle and the data collection cycle are therefore closely interlinked as there needs to be a logical flow from the conceptual design of the study to the data collection.

The fourth task in the data collection cycle begins once you start collecting data and involves making inductive inferences, which is the pivotal turning point that makes data collection into the circular process that characterizes qualitative data collection. Making this inductive turn involves using what you learn in early data collection to guide subsequent data collection to go deeper into the research issues thereby generating richer or ‘thicker’ data as you proceed. These inductive inferences may also lead to adjustments in the data collection tasks, for example refining the research instrument, participant recruitment or the method of data collection based on what you learn in early data collection. The data collection cycle therefore begins with deductive reasoning (from the design cycle) and continues with an inductive process that refines and reshapes the data collection process. This circular process continues until the point of saturation, when data produce no more new information or leads to follow.

In [Part II](#) of the book we describe the components of the data collection cycle. We describe participant recruitment in [Chapter 6](#). We then focus on three methods of data collection: in-depth interviews ([Chapter 7](#)), focus group discussions ([Chapter 8](#)) and observation ([Chapter 9](#)). Each of these methods chapters describes the process from instrument design to data collection and describe how to use inductive inferences to initiate the circular process of data collection.

[Chapter 6: Sampling and Participant Recruitment 91](#)

[Chapter 7: In-depth Interviews 115](#)

[Chapter 8: Focus Group Discussions 137](#)

[Chapter 9: Observation 169](#)

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## 6 Sampling and Participant Recruitment

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## Objectives

After reading this chapter you will:

- understand the role of purposive sampling in qualitative research;
- understand the deductive and inductive elements of purposive sampling;
- understand the principle of saturation to determine an appropriate sample size;
- identify a variety of participant recruitment strategies;
- know how to evaluate the quality of purposive sampling.

# What is purposive sampling?

Most social science research, both quantitative and qualitative, involves selecting only a sample of people from the study population. However, the strategies for doing this are different in qualitative and quantitative research because each are guided by a different research paradigm (see [Chapter 2](#)). Quantitative research typically uses probability sampling, while qualitative research uses [purposive sampling](#).

Quantitative research is guided by the positivist paradigm which focuses on measurement of social issues and generalizing those issues to a broader population through statistical inference. To meet these goals, probability sampling is used to select the study sample. With probability sampling you can select a sample that is statistically representative of a broader population, extrapolate your results and make population-level statements with confidence – such as the proportion of the population with specific conditions (e.g. diabetes) or behaviours (e.g. drug use). Probability sampling is based on certain assumptions that enable statistical inference to be achieved and is therefore very effective for the goals of quantitative research, but does not meet the aims of qualitative research.

Qualitative research is guided by the interpretive paradigm which has different goals and principles for selecting a study sample than quantitative research. Qualitative research does not seek to measure issues, extrapolate findings or make population level statements; therefore, probability sampling is not needed for the goals of qualitative research. Instead, qualitative research aims to gain a detailed contextualized understanding of the phenomenon studied, which requires not only a small sample so that issues can be explored in depth, but also a flexible process of [sampling](#) to capture diversity of issues. Qualitative research uses purposive sampling, which involves *purposefully* selecting participants with certain characteristics important to the study. Purposive sampling means that you actively recruit participants who are ‘information-rich’ (Patton, 2002) on the study issues to gain depth of understanding on these issues. Purposive sampling is also flexible by allowing the sample to evolve as the study progresses rather than following a rigid procedure from the outset. This flexibility enables selecting a sample that is sufficiently diverse to

understand the variety of experiences or perspectives on the research topic, thereby strengthening the sample. Despite this flexibility, purposive sampling is not haphazard or conducted without principles or procedures. Overall, purposive sampling enables you to select a robust sample that will provide both depth of understanding and diverse perspectives on the study issues, which aligns with the goals of the interpretive paradigm. Although purposive sampling is non-probability based, this does not mean that we can't generalize the concepts from qualitative research; it simply means that you can't use statistical inference to extrapolate the findings to a larger population – which is not your goal in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2013).

In this chapter, sampling refers to the way we select people from our study population, while participant recruitment refers to the strategies we use to invite those selected people to participate in the study. We describe the process of purposive sampling, which involves deductively defining the study population during the design cycle, and then inductively refining the sample of participants during data collection. We then describe a range of participant recruitment strategies with examples from research studies and highlight the strengths and challenges of each strategy. Last, we describe the principle of saturation, which determines an appropriate sample size for qualitative research. We identify the influences on saturation and how they can be used to determine an effective sample size for qualitative studies.

## **Purposive sampling process**

In qualitative research, the process of purposive sampling involves deductively defining your study population during the design cycle, and then inductively refining your sample of participants during data collection. This deductive to inductive process is described below.

## **Deductively defining the study population**

The first task is to clearly define your study population. A clear definition of your study population is needed not only to determine who to include in your study but also the best method to recruit them. Initially the study

population is defined deductively as you develop your study during the design cycle. The research question or objective of your study will help to define the most appropriate target population for the study. As you design your research question you will also begin to consider who will be able to provide the most relevant and detailed information on the study topic, and whether there are different sub-populations who can provide different perspectives on the research issues. Your study population may be inherent in the research question itself. For example, if your research question is to examine people's experiences of using a particular service, then your study population will be confined to users of that service. However, if your research question is to identify community views of the service then your study population will most likely be broader to include members of the community. Similarly, if your study seeks to examine why people drive their car to work, your initial study population will be people who commute to work by car. However, you may decide that it is also fruitful to understand why people *do not* drive to work and so include people who take other means of transport to work (e.g. bicycle, walk, bus, carpooling); thus you would have two study populations.

Your study population may also be defined by reading the research literature on your study topic. You may identify from the scientific literature that people with specific experiences are likely to provide important information on your study topic, or that a particular subgroup of the population should be included in your study. Based on the conceptual framework of your study you may also decide to segment your study population by certain criteria. Typical criteria for segmenting the study population are demographic (e.g. gender, age group, socio-economic characteristics), geographic (e.g. rural, urban) or experiential (e.g. service users, illness sufferers), which are often determined deductively during the design of the study. An example matrix that defines various subgroups of a study population is shown in [Table 6.1](#), whereby the study population of women is segmented into subgroups by their use of health services, age group and location of residence. Participant recruitment may then be tailored to the various subgroups of the study population, for example a different strategy may be used to recruit young, urban women who are health service users compared with older, rural women who are non-users.

Table 6.1 Example of segmentation of the study population

Table 6.1 Example of segmentation of the study population

Health Service Use	Rural Study Site		Urban Study Site	
	Young women (<30 years)	Older women (30+ years)	Young women (<30 years)	Older women (30+ years)
Service users	2–3 focus groups	2–3 focus groups	2–3 focus groups	2–3 focus groups
Service non-users	2–3 focus groups	2–3 focus groups	2–3 focus groups	2–3 focus groups

Your study population needs to be clearly defined so that you can determine who is eligible to participate in the study. You may have identified your study population broadly at first, for example ‘adolescents’; however, further refinement is usually needed before you can begin to recruit participants. Consider, for example, whether your study population should include male or female adolescents, those in or out of school, younger or older adolescents, or those with certain experiences. These decisions are usually guided by your research question. Your study population may then become refined to ‘rural adolescent fathers’ and the eligibility criteria for the study become fourfold: participants must be male, aged 13–18 years, live in a rural area and have fathered a child. Clearly defining your study population will help you to identify how to recruit participants: it is likely that you will use a different strategy to recruit ‘adolescents’ than to recruit ‘rural, adolescent fathers’.

## Building diversity

Achieving diversity in the study issues is a goal of qualitative research. It is important to understand the study issues in all their dimensions and contextual nuances in order to accurately portray the phenomenon studied.

One way to capture the diversity of issues is to build diversity into your study population from the outset. Diversity can be achieved by ‘theorizing’, in a basic way, the characteristics that may influence the research issues and ensuring that these characteristics are included in the study (Barbour, 2014). Usually this is done in the design cycle, by reviewing the literature and surmising potential influences on the study issues then deciding which of these dimensions are important to include in the study. Therefore, you are deductively building diversity into the study population. For example, previous studies may have shown that marital status has an influence on how women experience depression, therefore you may seek to include women with differing marital status in the study to capture their different perceptions and experiences on depression. In this way marital status becomes one dimension of diversity that is deliberately included in the study from the outset. As you consider how to build diversity into your study population, reflect on whether any perspectives or experiences that are central to the research topic are excluded and revise accordingly. Up to this point you have deductively defined your study population in the design phase of the study. Once you begin to collect data, you will add further diversity by inductively refining the sample of participants selected for the study (as described below).

## **Inductively refining the sample**

It is not until data collection begins that you can initiate the inductive process of refining the sample of participants you select from the study population, using leads from early data collection. As you begin data collection you learn more about the study topic from your participants and key informants, which may lead you to identify new types of people who may provide new or deeper insights into the research issues. You then refine your existing recruitment criteria to include these new types of information-rich people in the study. An important aspect of inductive refinement of your sample is that changes made are empirically guided by your data, thereby progressively strengthening the sample in relation to your study phenomena. ‘Inductive or emergent sampling allows for the inclusion of groups and types of cases not originally specified or included in the study design’ (Guest et al., 2012: 45), and thus strengthening the participant pool

as the study progresses. This process is generally referred to as [theoretical sampling](#) and originates from the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) – see the example below on how theoretical sampling works in a study. Importantly, data collection is not the only time when you can inductively refine your sample of participants, it is also done during analysis when new sources of data may become apparent and are added to the sample and further data are collected.

You may refine the sample in different ways, for example by broadening or narrowing the eligibility criteria or even by adding new types of participants to the sample. You may broaden your original sampling criteria as informed by your early data collection. Suppose you were conducting a study on women's perceptions of risk of HIV infection, and you initially defined the study population as married women, since the scientific literature showed that these women were at the greatest risk of HIV infection in your study location and therefore are the most 'information-rich' for the study. However, during data collection you learn about women widowed as a result of HIV/AIDS who may also have a valuable perspective on risk behaviour but were not included in your original sample because it was focused on married women. You may then decide to recruit some widowed women into the study to capture their perspectives on HIV risk, broadening the range of experiences included in the study and thereby adding depth and richness to the data on this topic. You may also use what you learn from data already collected to narrow your initial sample. For example, you may have defined your study population as 'adolescent males' and during data collection it becomes apparent that only the older adolescent males have experienced the research issues and no fruitful data are being collected from the younger adolescents, so you confine your sample to recruit only the older adolescent males from that point forward. You may also add new types of participants to the study who were identified during initial data collection. Suppose you are conducting a study on how microcredit improves family well-being and had initially defined your study population as women with a microcredit loan, then during data collection it becomes apparent that women are not the sole decision makers about household finances which need to involve their husband. So, you decide to add to your sample men whose wives have received a microcredit loan to provide more comprehensive data about how microcredit is used in households.



A commonly cited example of inductive or theoretical sampling comes from the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) who describe it as part of their grounded theory approach to qualitative research. The extract below describes how theoretical sampling worked in their research on patients' awareness of dying in hospitals. They sampled different types of medical services where dying occurred and collected data via observation. After each episode of observation at one type of service, they reflected on other types of services where dying would occur differently, for example, where the speed or awareness of dying would be different. The next episode of data collection then occurred at a different type of service to the previous. In this way, reflecting on each episode of data collection informs the next, and builds variation into the sample of services. The outcome of this process was a theoretical framework of sampling that provided diversity in patients' awareness, expectedness and rate of dying.

Visits to the various medical services were scheduled as follows. I wished first to look at services that minimized patient awareness (and so I first looked at a premature baby service and then at a neurosurgical service where patients were frequently comatose). Next I wished to look at the dying in a situation where expectancy of staff and often of patients was great and dying was quick, so I observed on an Intensive Care Unit. Then I wished to observe on a service where staff expectations of terminality were great but where the patient's might or might not be, and where dying tended to be slow. So I looked next at a cancer service. I wished then to look at conditions where death was unexpected and rapid, and so looked at an emergency service. While we were looking at some different types of services, we also observed the above types of services at other types of hospitals. So our scheduling of types of service was directed by a general conceptual scheme – which included hypotheses about awareness, expectedness and rate of dying – as well as by a developing conceptual structure including matters not at first envisioned. (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 59)

The inductive process allows the sample of participants to be refined during data collection using leads from data itself. In this way the data collection process becomes circular: it begins with (deductively) defining the study population and then uses inductive leads from data collected to refine or expand the sample of participants included in the study. Data collection then continues by recruiting participants with newly defined criteria, thus working in a circular manner. Taking inductive leads from data collected to inform the sampling process is the turning point at which sampling becomes influenced by both deduction and induction. Therefore, continual refinement of the sample becomes a flexible process whereby the eligibility criteria of study participants does not remain static, but can be adjusted as inductive leads are identified. Typically, the broad characteristics of the study population stay the same, but refinements that are informed by data collection are often made. The inductive refinement of the participant sample is a unique characteristic of qualitative research and a major strength of the sampling process. It allows you to include previously unknown data sources that add richness and completeness to the study data, in addition, refinements made are empirically justified thereby adding rigour to the sampling process.

Using this iterative process to inductively refine your sample takes time, as it requires collecting data, reviewing data during fieldwork (or during data analysis) and adjusting the sampling strategy to capture new information-rich sources as they are identified. It may also require submitting an amendment to the study protocol approved by a research ethics committee if the characteristics of the study population differ significantly from the original approved study.

## **Sampling goals**

Consider your sampling goals before selecting a strategy to recruit study participants. Ask yourself: What type of sample am I seeking? What is the aim of my sampling? For example, do you need a sample of typical residents of a neighbourhood? Do you need to sample people with a specific experience? Do you need to sample people who all have the same characteristics? Do you need to exclude people with certain characteristics? And so on. When your sampling goals become clear, it is easier to select an

appropriate strategy to meet those goals. Some strategies are more suitable for identifying ordinary members of a community (i.e. a ‘gatekeeper’ strategy), while other strategies are more suited for recruiting participants with rare or specific characteristics (i.e. snowball or informal networks). The following is a list of sampling goals (from Patton, 2015) to help you consider the overall purpose of your sampling to guide you in selecting a suitable strategy to recruit study participants:

*To sample for maximum diversity.* Identify participants with a wide variety of opinions, experiences, etc. For example, people who frequently seek healthcare and those who rarely seek healthcare.

*To sample for homogeneity.* Identify participants who share a similar characteristic important for the study topic. For example, participants who are all pregnant women or all medical interns or all small business owners.

*To sample typical cases.* Identify typical people in a certain context that do not need to have any specific characteristics. For example, typical students at a university.

*To sample critical cases.* Identify participants with critical characteristics or experience central to the study topic. For example, women who experienced multiple births or cancer survivors or successful entrepreneurs.

*To sample for theory development.* Identify participants with very specific characteristics to provide data for an emerging theory. For example, when developing an emerging theory about the influences on drug addiction you may have collected data from habitual drug users and recreational drug users, but no data from former drug users who are now clean. Former drug users are then specifically recruited to add data and further develop the theory about drug addiction.

## **Participant recruitment strategies**

Once you have determined the characteristics of your sample, you need to identify ways to recruit participants into your study – we refer to this as participant recruitment. There are many ways to recruit participants for a qualitative study. Here we outline some commonly used strategies: using ‘gatekeepers’, registers, formal and informal networks, snowballing,

advertisements and recruiting participants in mixed method studies.<sup>1</sup> No method of recruitment is completely ideal therefore you may use several strategies in one study. You may use a different strategy to recruit different types of participants in a study (e.g. younger vs older participants); or for different methods of data collection (e.g. in-depth interviews vs. focus group discussions) or in different locations (e.g. urban vs. rural). Each method of recruitment has benefits and challenges (see [Table 6.2](#)), therefore using several methods may offset the shortcomings of any one method by complementing it with another. Suitable recruitment strategies will also be influenced by the characteristics of your study population. For example, some strategies are more suitable for recruiting members of the general community, while others are more effective for subgroups or participants with specific characteristics. The rest of this chapter describes different participant recruitment strategies with examples from research studies.

<sup>1</sup> The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) was introduced in May 2018 for data protection and privacy of individuals within the European Union (EU) and European Economic Area (EEA). This new regulation may prohibit access to personal information stored on registers for participant recruitment when working in the EU and EEA.

## Entering the study community

Recruiting study participants involves entering the study community, perhaps for the first time. Although your primary purpose is to recruit participants for your study, you will also begin a process of building rapport with the study community, to establish a relationship of mutual trust. How you enter a community may be determined by the research method you adopt; for example, if using a participatory research approach (see [Chapter 4](#)) you are likely to enter at the community level and begin rapport development with local residents directly, while if you are working with a gatekeeper you gain entry to a community at a different level and your rapport development may begin with the leaders of a community. Eventually you will recruit study participants and develop rapport with study participants more directly. It is useful to reflect on the way you enter a community and how this influences your *positionality*, that is, the way you

are viewed by your study participants and the community in general (see [Chapter 2](#) for more on positionality). This may impact your rapport development with the study participants and influence the way participants choose to share their experiences with you. Nonetheless, the way you enter a community may be dictated by local protocol in different cultural settings; for example, regardless of your research approach it may be culturally appropriate to meet the community leaders prior to entering a community for study. The research examples described below also indicate how researchers entered their study communities to highlight how this is an integral part of the participant recruitment process.

Table 6.2 Benefits and challenges of select recruitment strategies

Table 6.2 Benefits and challenges of select recruitment strategies

Recruitment strategy	How it works	Benefits	Challenges
Gatekeepers	Utilize trusted community leaders who know the local population to assist with recruiting eligible participants	<p>Respects social hierarchy and protocol</p> <p>Identify eligible community members</p> <p>Advise on cultural appropriateness</p> <p>Trusted advocate for study</p>	<p>Potential selection bias</p> <p>Potential coercion of participants</p>
Registers	Select participants from a register of people who meet the inclusion criteria	Enables recruitment of a diverse sample	Requires permission to access registers

Recruitment strategy	How it works	Benefits	Challenges
Formal and informal networks	Recruit participants from formal or informal networks that represent a concentration of the study population	<p>Concentration of eligible participants</p> <p>Provides a forum for recruitment</p> <p>Enables endorsement for study</p>	<p>Requires permission to access networks</p> <p>Sampling limited to network members</p>
Snowballing	Utilize social networks to recruit eligible participants	<p>Trusted referrals to study</p> <p>Identify hard-to-reach participants</p>	<p>Potential lack of diversity in sample</p> <p>Manage disclosure of private information</p> <p>Time consuming</p>
Advertisements	Advertise the study to invite eligible participants to contact the researchers	<p>Participants self-identify</p> <p>Motivated participants</p> <p>Meet challenging sample criteria</p>	<p>Self-selecting sample</p> <p>Requires strong incentive</p> <p>Potential for low response</p>

Recruitment strategy	How it works	Benefits	Challenges
Mixed method recruitment	Recruit existing participants in another part of the study (e.g. survey or focus group participants)	<p>Established rapport with study</p> <p>Utilize data on participants to recruit for diversity</p> <p>Additional data about participants</p>	<p>Prior involvement may prime participants on study issues</p> <p>Increased participant burden</p>

## Gatekeepers

Working with gatekeepers is a common strategy to recruit study participants. Gatekeepers are people who have a prominent and recognized role in the local community; they typically have knowledge about the characteristics of community members and are sufficiently influential to encourage community members to participate in a study. The most recognized type of gatekeeper is a community leader or village chief. However, a gatekeeper can also be a local service provider (e.g. health or education), a religious leader, a manager of a facility (e.g. hospital, school), or any other type of person or organization that can provide access to the study community. The type of assistance given by a gatekeeper may vary. A gatekeeper may simply endorse the study and not be involved any further, they may nominate an assistant to help you with recruitment, they may mobilize the community to gather at a certain location so that you can recruit participants or they may directly recruit participants on your behalf according to your eligibility criteria.

The benefits of working with a gatekeeper are threefold. First, it may be local protocol to seek the endorsement of a gatekeeper prior to accessing community members. Respecting the social hierarchy of your study community is important in gaining access to the community and respecting cultural norms. Second, a gatekeeper can provide valuable information about community members that can assist in identifying eligible study participants. They can also advise on appropriate social and cultural norms when meeting community members. Third, a gatekeeper becomes a trusted advocate for your study and plays an important intermediary role between you and the study community. They often have a significant influence on whether community members participate in the study or not, which can determine the success of your study. It is often easier to mobilize community members to participate in a study that is endorsed by their community leader or a trusted gatekeeper.

Ideally you would work together with a gatekeeper to recruit participants. One of the drawbacks of using gatekeepers is that they may select participants *they* would like you to include in the study. This situation may be avoided by working together with the gatekeeper, allowing them to use their local knowledge of the community to identify eligible study participants, while you can identify potential selection biases and suggest alternative strategies. Another concern is the possibility of coercion by a gatekeeper, whereby community members feel obliged or pressured to take part in the study if nominated by a gatekeeper (see [Chapter 5](#) on ethical issues in participant recruitment).

It is important to check that participants identified by a gatekeeper meet the eligibility criteria for the study, particularly when recruiting participants from a community gathering, as many people may simply attend out of curiosity. Screening participants for eligibility also provides clear justification for not selecting some people for the study. It is customary to debrief the gatekeepers once fieldwork is completed. Often this involves informing them on the study progress (not necessarily any findings), acknowledging their support, and, if appropriate, offering a small gift of thanks. It is also good practice to identify how the study results will be used and how gatekeepers can learn about the study findings.



The example below, from a study by Ruben and colleagues (2016), shows the critical role of gatekeepers in facilitating access to the study community, leading to greater acceptance of the study and willingness to participate. An important benefit of using gatekeepers in this example is the knowledge they had about community members that was critical for identifying eligible participants. The example also highlights the use of multiple strategies to identify participants for the study. Although this example describes the use of gatekeepers in the Global South, gatekeepers are equally beneficial for gaining access to communities in more developed countries, such as migrant or refugee communities, and they can provide important information about community networks, organizations or venues for participant recruitment (see the example on recruitment through formal networks described later).

I conducted a study in the Liben district of southern Ethiopia, to understand how the sexual experiences of married men and women differ by the type of female genital cutting (FGC) the woman had undergone. I worked with several types of gatekeepers to gain entry into the study community and to assist with participant recruitment. First, I linked with a non-governmental organization (NGO) that had an established presence in Liben, which facilitated my entry into the study communities through introductions to key community gatekeepers. Liaison with the NGO was instrumental in community leaders accepting the study and assisting with participant recruitment. I then met a range of community gatekeepers in my study areas, including community leaders, traditional birth attendants and community health workers. I shared the recruitment criteria which comprised married women who had undergone three different types of FGC, uncut women, and men whose wives fell into each of these categories. The gatekeepers then identified eligible women and men in the community who met the recruitment criteria, informed them about the study and invited them to participate. Traditional birth attendants and community health workers assist women with births and have close relationships with community members; therefore they could easily identify women with the different types of FGC. This personal knowledge was a vital aspect in participant recruitment. Once

recruited, participants were given a time and place for the interview. The involvement of the community gatekeepers also increased participation in the study and ensured that participants would keep their interview appointments. Women who were uncut were much more difficult to identify. I used a snowball technique to identify these women, whereby we identified one uncut participant (through a traditional birth attendant) who told us about a nearby olla (encampment of families) where several uncut women lived with their husbands. Through these techniques I recruited 28 women and 21 men for the study.

Julia Battle, MPH, Emory University, USA

## **Registers**

Purposive sampling may also be achieved by using a register, for example a clinic patient register, membership lists, school enrolment record, and so on. The most effective register to use will have members that meet your recruitment criteria, thereby providing a central list from which you can recruit eligible study participants. Most registers will include many more people than you need to recruit for a qualitative study and therefore you will need a strategy to select a sample of participants from the register. A register will typically have some information about its members, such as demographic characteristics, that can be used to purposively select participants. Although it is possible to randomly select names from a register, random sampling provides no opportunity to seek diversity in characteristics that are important to the study, since diversity is left to chance with random selection. A more effective strategy is to use information in the register itself to purposively select a diverse sample of participants. The specific characteristics used for diversity will vary and depend on the goals of the study (see example below).

A clear benefit of selecting participants from a register is the ability to manage diversity amongst participants, as described above. Another benefit is the ability to return to the register to select additional participants in case those initially selected decline to participate in the study or do not respond.

The challenges in using a register are that you need permission to access these, the register may be incomplete or not updated and those who are not listed in the register are excluded. Therefore, registers need to be carefully considered and their effectiveness assessed in relation to the purpose of the study. The example below, from a study by Shiotani and Hennink (2014), describes the use of patient registers to select study participants.

We conducted a study in rural Gujarat, India, to explain the low treatment adherence to Directly Observed Therapy (DOT) for Tuberculosis (TB). Eligible study participants were those registered in the DOT program, aged 20–50 years and who lived in rural villages. Participants were selected using the hospital register of patients receiving DOT from the main referral hospital in the area. We used the patient register to purposively select patients by the four treatment outcomes defined by the World Health Organization (WHO): cured, completed treatment, default of treatment and treatment failure/relapse. Initially ten patient names were selected from each treatment category, and we were able to use data in the register to select a mix of men and women, married and unmarried, agricultural and non-agricultural workers and tribal and non-tribal ethnicity across a range of local villages. Participants were then invited to participate in the study by community health workers during routine home visits. During household recruitment we found that six patients on our list had died, eight declined to participate in the study and ten were unable to be located due to incomplete addresses but these were replaced with five others from the register. This led to the recruitment of 21 patients who participated in an in-depth interview in their homes. Using the hospital register provided important information about participants' treatment status, demographic characteristics and residential location to enable a diverse sample of participants to be recruited. The register also provided a surplus of eligible patients and was used again to replace those who could not be located due to incomplete addresses in the register. We deliberately over recruited in the initial selection of 40 patients to allow for attrition due to refusals and deaths.

Rubina Shiotani, MPH, Emory University, USA

# Networks

Another strategy to recruit participants is to identify whether your study population are part of any formal or informal networks, such as being users of particular services or members of informal groups. These networks represent a concentration of your study population and a forum from which to recruit eligible participants.

The main benefit of using a network is that it provides a focal point to contact study participants. You may use networks to post a flyer about your study, attend a meeting or send a notice through an internal message system, thereby having greater reach to your study population. Utilizing networks can also be effective in accessing participants with specific characteristics that may be difficult to identify through other means. Another advantage is the implicit endorsement for the study from being associated with a specific network or service. Using networks typically requires the permission and cooperation of an organization who approve the recruitment activities you have planned. Therefore, recruitment through existing services or networks can act as a type of gatekeeper to access the study population.

One of the challenges in using networks for recruitment is that they require permission from network organizers or service managers who may not approve the study activities. Furthermore, recruitment is limited to network members or service users, thereby excluding those outside the network or non-users of the service. This can be overcome by using a variety of networks or supplementing with other recruitment strategies. Below are examples of participant recruitment through formal and informal networks.

## Formal networks and services

Formal networks and services provide a concentration of your study population who may meet on a regular schedule and from which you can recruit participants. Formal networks may comprise professional associations (e.g. Association of American Dentists), cultural associations (e.g. Greek Association), organized support groups (e.g. Breast Cancer

Survivors Forum), or specific types of services (e.g. health or education). For example, a study on women's health in Guatemala used 'well women' clinics to recruit study participants. A study on health promoters in Bangladesh used a hospital where these health professionals worked to recruit them. Another study recruited African American women in the US who had a partner in prison from a range of facilities, including prison waiting rooms, public defenders offices, bail bond agencies, support groups, drug treatment centres and shelters (Cooper et al., 2014). There may also be occasional activities at these services that attract your study population, for example diabetes awareness days or seminars on quitting smoking, and so on, that may attract attendees with specific characteristics of relevance to your study.

You can recruit participants via formal networks in a number of ways. First, you may simply intercept people coming into or out of the service, check that they meet the eligibility criteria, describe the study and invite their participation. If they agree to participate, an appointment is usually made for an interview at a later date, so as not to interrupt their schedule for that day. Second, you may ask permission to place a recruitment flyer at the venue, or attend a meeting and give a brief presentation about the study and invite participation (e.g. during a class or activity). Third, you may seek permission to send a message about the study to an electronic mailing list or ask staff at the service to encourage those eligible to contact the researchers.

The example below from a study by Weber (2012) describes the process of recruiting participants at various formal networks.

My research focused on developing a community program to reduce diabetes in the South Asian community in the USA. I realized that involvement of the local community was critical to the success of the study, so I began by forming a community advisory panel, consisting of leaders of formal community networks, local service providers and prominent community members. This advisory panel was important for developing rapport within the study community, encouraging community participation in the study and advising on effective strategies to recruit study participants. The panel recommended recruiting participants through a network of formal organizations and

community networks, because the South Asian community are very involved in community organizations such as religious groups, commerce networks, professional and social organizations. The panel identified the most prominent organizations to contact from over 70 South Asian community organizations and recommended recruiting younger and older participants from different types of community organizations. I then recruited younger participants (under 40 years) from a variety of organizations, including a social organization for South Asians, a South Asian volunteer organization, a network of South Asian professionals and a professional development group. Participants aged over 40 years were recruited from key religious venues and prominent shopping locations frequented by South Asians. I liaised with the coordinator of each organization to describe the study, seek their involvement and identify the most effective way to recruit participants from the organizations. Recruitment varied and consisted of email invitations, evening presentations, and posting notices at events. We also posted advertisements about the study in local newspapers and magazines received by the South Asian population. We conducted 17 focus group discussions that were used to design a lifestyle activity for diabetes prevention.

Mary Beth Weber, PhD, Emory University, USA

## **Informal networks**

Participant recruitment may also be conducted through informal networks used by your study population. For example, a study in Kenya (Kulb et al., 2015) recruited participants from informal community savings groups to discuss microcredit loans. A study recruiting young men in the UK recruited participants after a weekend football event. Another study on young people in Malawi recruited participants from music stalls in the local market which were frequented by young people at the weekend. Once you identify informal networks, you may send a notice to network members inviting participation in the study, or attend an event or location and conduct impromptu recruitment. The example below from a study by Kōu (2008) in

the Netherlands describes the use of an informal, virtual network to recruit participants.

My research participants were long-term migrants from Estonia living in the Netherlands. This specific group are difficult to find in the general population and there are no formal organizations for Estonian migrants; therefore I used social networking strategies to recruit participants. Being Estonian myself, I began recruitment through my personal network by identifying Estonians who fitted my research criteria. I then used a snowball strategy to recruit more participants through the social networks of participants I already interviewed. In order to prevent large overlaps in social networks and to include a variety of participants I also recruited participants from a social networking website called Orkut. This site hosts a virtual community called 'Estonians in the Netherlands', who exchange information and communicate socially. I initially contacted 40 members on the Orkut site, by leaving a short message about the research in their 'scrapbook' or sending an internal email. Sixteen people replied and I arranged an interview time and place, usually a café or at the participant's home. In total I interviewed 11 participants from this website, because some replied only after the study was completed and a few others cancelled our interview. Using the social networking site was beneficial in expanding the pool of potential participants; however, I saw some limitations. First, membership of Orkut is limited and many Estonians in the Netherlands are not users. Second, many members were not eligible for the study as they had returned to Estonia, were in Estonia, or were Dutch and just interested in Estonia. Third, active membership was necessary for members to be able to respond to the study notice in the short period it was posted. Finally, it was not possible to focus recruitment by any characteristics (e.g. demographics or residential duration) as not all users post these details in their profiles.

Anu Kõu, MSc, University of Groningen, Netherlands

## **Snowballing**

Snowball sampling (also called ‘chain sampling’) is particularly suitable for identifying study participants with very specific characteristics, atypical experiences or ‘hidden’ population groups (e.g. drug users) who may be difficult to identify using other recruitment methods. Snowball sampling involves asking a current study participant or a key informant whether they know anyone else who meets the study criteria, and asking them to refer this person to the research team; then, after interviewing the referred person, also asking them whether they know others in the community with the specific criteria, and so on. The number of participants therefore increases with each new person recruited somewhat like a growing snowball, hence the name of this technique.

A clear advantage of the snowball technique is that it uses social knowledge to identify participants with specific characteristics or experiences, which may be unknown to those outside the social network. It is therefore an excellent method for accessing hidden study populations. Another benefit of snowball sampling is that participants are linked to the study by a familiar, trusted person who can describe what participation entails and alleviate any concerns, thus potentially increasing participation in the study. Although this method may take time to implement, it can be remarkably effective in identifying ‘hard to reach’ participants. For example, a study in Nepal (Hennink and Simkhada, 2004) used snowball sampling to identify young women who had been sex-trafficked to India and returned to Nepal.

A challenge in using the snowball technique is that recruited participants are all likely to be from the same social network and have similar characteristics. To avoid recruiting a socially homogeneous sample, several different snowballs may be initiated, tapping into different social networks and thereby broadening the diversity of participants. Snowballing may also be used together with other methods of participant recruitment to add diversity to the sample. A further challenge of snowball sampling is to avoid causing harm to a referred person. For example, if you contact a referred person directly who has experienced domestic violence and ask them to participate in your study on this topic, you may cause harm as they may not wish to be identified or discuss their experience or risk others knowing about it. Therefore, it is important to ask participants to let others know about the study and allow those people to contact researchers if they are



interested in participating in the study (see [Chapter 5](#) on ethical issues of participant recruitment). Using a snowball technique can take time as participants are identified one at a time, therefore this method may be less suitable for recruiting participants for a group discussion. Although the snowball technique is based on recommendations from study participants already interviewed, it is always recommended to screen each potential participant for eligibility to the study. The example below highlights the use of snowballing in a study by Grund and Hennink (2012).

My study sought to understand whether men in Swaziland participated in riskier sexual behaviours following adult male circumcision. Study participants were men who had been circumcised in the last 12 months and lived in urban Swaziland. Only 8% of men are circumcised in Swaziland; therefore, I needed a recruitment method to identify a 'difficult to reach' target population. I decided not to recruit men from the male circumcision clinics because I wanted a more diverse range of men who were circumcised at different clinics and at different times. The first study participants were recruited from the community by approaching men in different locations (i.e. popular lunchtime restaurants, shopping centres, bus depots, taxi drivers) and inviting them to an interview for the study. Men were recruited from different areas of the city to avoid overlap in recruitment and to ensure some variation in participants. Men were asked if they were circumcised themselves, or if they knew other men circumcised in the past year. Male circumcision is a commonly discussed topic among young men in Swaziland, so the issue was not as sensitive as I originally thought, and most men knew someone who had undergone the procedure. Therefore, I was able to continue recruitment using a snowball technique. I gave my business card to potential participants to share with others, which showed my academic affiliation and local contact information, so that men interested in participating could contact me directly. After a couple of weeks men began to contact me regularly and I was able to conduct 33 interviews with eligible participants. Once interviewed, men felt comfortable encouraging friends to participate, which provided a type of trusted recommendation. Interviewed men were also helpful at suggesting additional locations

where men tended to congregate that would be beneficial for recruitment (e.g. specific workplaces, government offices).

Jonathan Grund, MPH, Emory University, USA

## **Advertisements**

Another participant recruitment strategy is to place advertisements in local newspapers, community venues, electronic message boards, or places that may catch the attention of your study population. The main benefit of using advertisements is that it allows participants to self-identify their eligibility criteria, which is beneficial for recruiting participants with very specific characteristics that may otherwise be hard to identify, but limiting in that you may not achieve variation across participants if this is the only recruitment method used. Another benefit is that people who respond are already interested in participating in the study. So using advertisements typically attracts eligible and motivated participants.

A key challenge of this recruitment method is that the response to advertisements is often low. A substantial incentive may be needed to motivate people to contact the researchers and you should make allowances for high attrition as recruited participants may drop out at short notice. For these reasons, advertisements are often used in addition to other recruitment methods to increase participation, such as together with snowballing or informal networks. The example below describes the use of advertisements in addition to other recruitment strategies, in a study by Haandrikman and Hutter (2012).

My study was conducted in a small village in the Netherlands and focused on how people select a life partner. My target population was both men and women, with specific criteria on age, living arrangements and length of their partnership. When I discussed my research with contacts in the village they indicated it may be difficult to recruit participants, so I decided to publicize the study by putting advertisements in local newspapers to attract participants. I contacted a well-known local organization that is a focal point in the community

for a historical museum, community activities and newsletters. Together we wrote a press release, which was placed in ten local newspapers. The organization also provided a space in their museum where I could conduct the focus group discussions with participants. In the following weeks I had little response from the advertisement and so I began to distribute flyers around the area, including at an elderly care home, school, church, health centre, sport centre, day care centre and local swimming pool. I also identified an online social network called Hyves and put the notice on the village Hyves website. At the same time I contacted local people I knew in the village (as I was born in a nearby village), and others who had friends in the village, to identify people I could contact and invite to the discussion. Although these recruitment strategies did not yield many participants, I was able to conduct five focus group discussions. This was fewer than I had planned, but I gained valuable information. I learned later that many people had seen the advertisement or flyer, but were not interested in participating. People told me ‘this is a closed community’ and ‘people do not talk about such things here’. Others felt that I was being nosy about their personal life; they were concerned about what I might ask them and were uncertain of what I would do with the information. Anonymity was a real issue in the small village community because most people knew each other.

Karen Haandrikman, PhD, University of Groningen, the Netherlands

## **Mixed method recruitment**

The study design may also provide a structure for recruiting participants. In studies that use multiple research methods (see [Chapter 3](#) on mixed methods study designs), participants may be selected from those who participated in another component of the study. For example, if a study includes a quantitative survey and qualitative in-depth interviews, participants for the interviews may be selected from the pool of survey respondents. Typically, this would involve asking survey respondents at the time of the survey if they would be willing to be contacted at a later date to participate in a qualitative interview. Participants for the qualitative

interviews would then be selected from those who agreed to be contacted. Since the number of survey respondents will be much larger than the number needed for the qualitative interviews, a strategy for sampling participants is needed that reflects the principles of qualitative research. While it is possible to use random selection of the survey respondents for the qualitative interviews, a more effective strategy is to use purposive sampling to actively seek variation in the interview participants. This may involve using survey responses to purposively select participants with diverse characteristics that are relevant to the qualitative component of the study. For example, if the qualitative interviews focus on women's childbirth preferences then the survey data may be used to select women at different parities (e.g. no children, 1 child, multiple children), so that variation on key characteristics is built into the selection of participants.

Recruiting participants in mixed methods research may also be used in a study using multiple qualitative methods. In-depth interview participants may be selected from those who have participated in a focus group discussion for the same study. This involves asking the focus group moderator to identify participants with specific characteristics or experiences based on what was revealed in the discussion, who may be contacted later to participate in an interview. Alternatively, focus group participants may be asked to complete a brief survey after the focus group and asked if they would be willing to be contacted at a later date to participate in an in-depth interview. The survey responses may then be used to select participants with certain characteristics for the in-depth interviews. For example, in a focus group discussion on women's business management, some participants may have described running a successful business while others experienced bankruptcy. Recruiting focus group participants with diverse experiences may provide important perspectives in the sample of in-depth interview participants.

A benefit of recruiting participants in this way in mixed methods studies is that eligible participants have already established a relationship with the research team through their involvement in one part of the study, so they may be more willing to be recruited to another part. Another advantage is that you are able to use data about potential participants to conduct more refined purposive sampling that captures core characteristics relevant to the

study goals and achieve a diverse sample of participants. Additionally, you have more data about the participants a priori which may be beneficial in developing the research instruments and in later data analysis.

A limitation of this sampling strategy is that participation in one part of the study may prime participants about the research issues, so that their contributions are no longer spontaneous as they may have been influenced by others, as in a focus group discussion prior to an in-depth interview. The example below describes how participants were selected in a mixed methods study in Bolivia by Antayhua (2010).

The purpose of my study was to assess the use and perceptions of maternal health services amongst rural mothers in the Esteban Arce province of Bolivia. I used a mixed method study design, comprising a quantitative survey followed by in-depth interviews with a small selection of the survey participants. I chose a mixed methods approach because I wanted to understand the patterns of maternal service use in the rural areas and also to explore in depth women's perceptions of the maternal healthcare they had received. I first conducted a quantitative survey with rural mothers, aged over 18 years who attended a club de madres (mother's club) organized by a local non-profit organization. The survey collected information on women's knowledge and use of maternal health services in the region. When I completed each survey I thanked the participant by giving her a small sewing kit, I let her know that she might be invited for an interview at a later date and asked if she would be interested in participating. I collected survey data from 43 women. I then used information from the survey to guide the selection of women for an in-depth interview. I selected three core topic areas from the survey: the mother's experience with pregnancy services; her delivery type; and her use of healthcare services. I then categorized all survey respondents by whether their experience of pregnancy, delivery and use of healthcare services was 'good', 'medium' or 'poor'. For the in-depth interviews I wanted to include participants with a range of experiences, so I used the categorization to purposively select five women from each category, selecting a total of 15 mothers. I then returned to the club de madres and invited those

pre-selected women to participate in an in-depth interview. Recruiting for the in-depth interviews after women had already participated in a survey helped to build rapport with the women as well as targeting a diverse group of women for the in-depth interviews.

Alicia Antayhua, MPH, Emory University, USA

## **How many participants? The principle of saturation**

Selecting an adequate sample size for qualitative research is challenging. Qualitative studies typically have a small sample that is purposively selected to achieve diversity on the study issues. The focus is more on the richness of data rather than the number of participants *per se*. Therefore, a large sample size is unnecessary to meet the goals of qualitative research.

The most common guiding principle for assessing the adequacy of a purposive sample is *saturation*. Saturation was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as part of their influential grounded theory approach to qualitative research, but the concept of saturation is applied more broadly across many approaches to qualitative research. In this broader application, saturation refers to the point in data collection when no more new issues are identified, data begin to repeat with no added understanding of the issues, and so further data collection becomes redundant. Suppose, for example, you are collecting data on job-seeking strategies amongst unemployed men and you have recruited a diverse pool of men to interview. From the first six interviews you identify eight different job-seeking strategies, the next three interviews provide no more strategies but you learn more about the context of the strategies already mentioned, by the tenth interview you only hear the same strategies repeated with no additional information about these strategies. At this point you have reached data saturation, as data are now repeating with no added understanding of the issues. Continued data collection is therefore redundant because you have captured the variation and context in job-seeking strategies in ten interviews, so any further interviews would simply add time and cost without adding to data richness or understanding of the issues. Sample size in qualitative research is

therefore guided by the adequacy of data, in terms of richness and diversity, rather than the number of participants.

An important aspect of saturation is that it is embedded in an inductive process of data collection (described earlier), whereby you are concurrently recruiting participants, collecting data and reviewing data to assess whether saturation has been reached. This inductive process enables you to use the data being collected to guide further data collection by identifying new types of participants to recruit and further exploring issues in subsequent data collection, thereby contributing to data richness. This process also allows you to monitor whether saturation has been reached and data collection should cease, or whether you are continuing to add new insights to the study issues and still require more data. Assessing saturation during the data collection cycle requires reviewing data as it is being collected to monitor data richness and understanding of issues raised. There are several ways you can review data during fieldwork. If you are collecting data yourself, you will quickly learn about issues raised and notice redundancy. If data are being collected by a field team, you may listen to interview recordings or review written transcripts to become familiar with issues raised or you may conduct regular debriefing sessions with the interviewers to discuss issues raised and assess data completeness. If data are simply collected as planned in the design cycle without this inductive component to identify saturation, it is difficult to know whether your data were sufficient to uncover the diversity and richness in the study topic, as you have not allowed the inductive process to inform the study. Therefore, the iterative process is necessary to identify an appropriate sample size.

*What is an adequate sample size to reach saturation in qualitative research?* Several methodological experiments using in-depth interviews have shown that saturation was reached at: 9 interviews (Hennink et al., 2016), between 7 and 12 interviews (Guest et al., 2006), between 8 and 16 interviews (Namey et al., 2016), and at 17 interviews (Francis et al., 2010). These experiments demonstrate that saturation can be reached at a small sample size (i.e. under 20 interviews), occurs at different points in the various experiments and is influenced by a range of parameters. [Figure 6.1](#) shows the results of one of these experiments with saturation (Hennink et al., 2016). Using data from 25 in-depth interviews about patients'

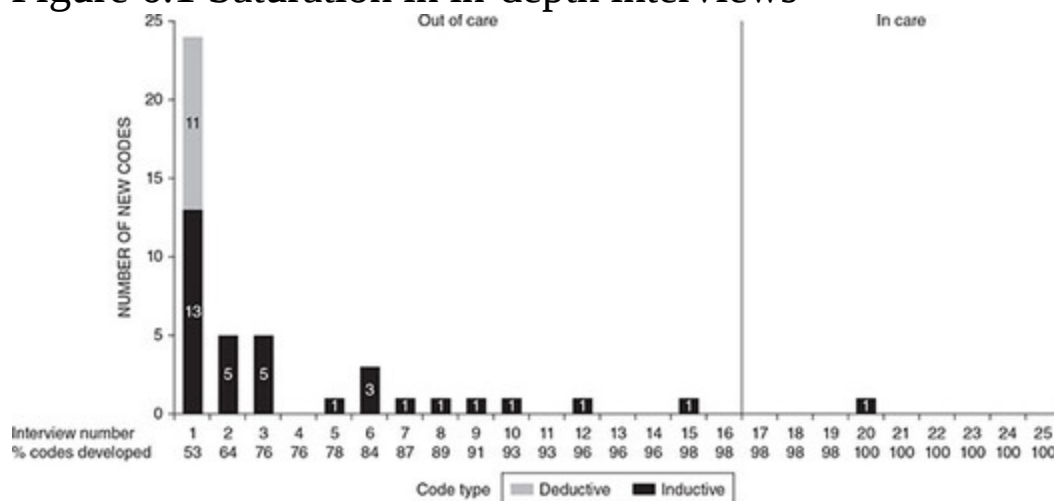
experiences of HIV care, the authors charted the number of new issues (codes) identified in each successive interview. The figure shows that most new issues (76%) were identified in the first three interviews, with the first interview alone providing over half (53%) of all new issues in the study, and each successive interview adding a few new issues each until most of what was said was only a repetition of earlier issues, despite having two study populations (in care and out of care patients). By nine interviews the authors determined that saturation was reached because over 90% of new issues had been identified at this point, and the remaining 16 interviews revealed only four new issues. Therefore, a sample of nine interviews was sufficient to capture the diversity of issues raised in these data. However, the authors went further to ask whether nine interviews was sufficient to comprehensively *understand* all of the issues raised or only to *identify* that these issues are present in data. They found that nine interviews were sufficient to identify the range of common thematic issues in these data, but much more data were needed (e.g. 16–24 interviews) to develop a richly textured understanding of those issues, appreciate complexities and uncover nuances in the issues. Therefore, saturation may be reached quickly if you simply intend to identify the range of issues present in data or it may require more data if you wish to fully understand the depth and complexities of those issues. This suggests that an adequate sample size for saturation depends on a range of parameters and is likely to differ from one study to the next. Therefore, providing universal recommendations on sample sizes needed to reach saturation would be ineffective. Instead we present the range of parameters that influence saturation that you can apply to your own study to estimate saturation and thereby sample size.

Similar experiments have been conducted to assess saturation in data from focus group discussions. These studies showed that saturation can be reached in relatively few focus groups – three to six (Guest et al., 2016) or four groups (Hennink et al., 2019) were sufficient to identify the majority of issues in focus group data. However, saturation was also influenced by the nature of the study and the composition of focus groups (e.g. homogeneous, stratified), whereby more focus groups were needed to reach saturation. Therefore, sample sizes needed to reach saturation may be different for each focus group study.



Reaching saturation is influenced by a range of parameters, including the study purpose, study population, nature of the data and the saturation goals. [Table 6.3](#) shows these parameters and describes how each can influence the sample size of your study. Saturation (and thereby sample size) is ultimately determined during data collection when you can assess the issues raised, their variation, the depth and richness of the data, and the point at which you reach data repetition and redundancy. However, in reality we need to identify the sample size of a study much earlier, when developing the research proposal. In the proposal you need to predetermine the sample size of your study, which means you are effectively estimating the number of participants you might need to reach saturation. In a study proposal, the justification for the proposed sample size is often more important than the actual number. An estimated sample size that is well supported by the research purpose, segmentation of the study population, sampling strategy and experience of the researchers is strongly justified regardless of whether the actual sample size is 15, 20 or 25. The parameters of saturation in [Table 6.3](#) can be used to guide and justify your estimated sample size for a study proposal. These parameters can equally be used to justify the basis on which saturation was achieved in a completed study. Sample size estimates on a study proposal also need to be flexible enough to allow the inductive process to be used during data collection so that actual saturation can be determined later. Often this is achieved by proposing a range of participants for the study (e.g. 10–15 participants) rather than a fixed number (as was shown earlier in [Table 6.1](#)).

Figure 6.1 Saturation in in-depth interviews



Source: Reproduced with permission from Hennink et al. (2016: 8)

Table 6.3 Parameters influencing saturation and sample sizes

Table 6.3 Parameters influencing saturation and sample sizes

Influences on saturation	How it affects sample size
Study purpose	A study aiming to identify broad thematic issues (e.g. issues to include on survey instrument) will likely reach saturation quickly thus require a smaller sample size; while a study aiming to understand complex phenomena or develop theory will likely need more data to reach saturation so require a larger sample size.
Study population	A homogeneous or narrowly defined study population will likely reach saturation quickly so require a smaller sample size; while a heterogeneous study population or having several study populations will likely need more data to capture the diversity of issues in each and thus require a larger sample size.
Sampling strategy	A study using an inductive process of sampling to gain depth and diversity will likely reach saturation quickly and need a smaller sample size than a study not using an inductive process; alternatively an inductive process may uncover new data sources that increase the sample size.
Data quality	A study generating ‘thick’ data with detailed insights on the study issues (which may result from experienced qualitative researchers) will likely reach saturation quickly and require a smaller sample size; while a study generating ‘thin’ data with little contextual depth (which may result from less experienced qualitative researchers) will likely require more

Influences on saturation	How it affects sample size
	data to capture the issues and reach saturation so a larger sample size is needed.
Study focus	A study focusing on explicit, concrete issues will likely reach saturation sooner and need a smaller sample size than a study focusing on more conceptual or complex issues which likely requires more data thus a larger sample size.
Saturation goal	A study with the goal of seeking saturation in only core issues will likely reach saturation sooner and require a smaller sample than a study with the goal of seeking saturation more broadly across all issues in the data.

Each parameter influencing saturation acts as a fulcrum that needs to be ‘weighed up’ to assess how it may affect the estimated sample size of the study. The sample size is therefore determined by the combination of all parameters, rather than any single parameter alone. For example, a study intending to identify broad thematic issues in a homogeneous study population suggests a smaller sample size, but if it has several sub-populations and is being conducted by less experienced qualitative researchers, this would increase the overall sample size needed for saturation. Each study therefore needs to be assessed by its specific characteristics and how these may influence saturation to determine an appropriate sample size.

## Evaluating quality

How do you evaluate the quality of sampling and participant recruitment in qualitative research? Using purposive sampling, actively seeking diversity, using an inductive process and assessing saturation are core principles that guide sampling and participant recruitment in qualitative research. There are many different ways to recruit study participants in qualitative research,

therefore transparency in the description and justification of the recruitment process is important. Consider whether participant recruitment was refined during data collection, demonstrating inductive influences on the recruitment process. The list below provides some suggestions for evaluating the quality of participant recruitment based on the approach to recruitment described in this chapter, so it will be more effective for assessing recruitment in some types of research than others.

### *Appropriate*

- Is the sample size proposed *a priori* well justified?
- Are recruitment strategies suitable for the study population, study location or cultural context?
- Are multiple recruitment strategies used and justified?
- Are appropriate criteria used to justify saturation?

### *Coherent*

- Is the study population well justified for the research topic?

### *Transparent*

- Are the criteria for the study population clearly defined?
- Is the process of purposive sampling well described?
- Are the recruitment methods described in sufficient detail?
- Are limitations of the study population or recruitment strategies noted?
- Is the process of assessing saturation clear and transparent?

### *Interpretive*

- How was purposive sampling used?
- How was the sample inductively refined during data collection?

### *Saturated*

- Were participants recruited until saturation?
- How was saturation determined?
- How was diversity in study participants achieved?

## *Ethical*

Was participant recruitment conducted ethically?

### Key points

- Qualitative studies have small sample sizes that are selected using purposive sampling.
- Sampling involves a process of deductively defining the study population then inductively refining the sample during data collection.
- Common strategies for recruiting participants include using ‘gatekeepers’, formal and informal networks, snowballing and mixed method recruitment.
- Several recruitment strategies are often used in a single project, perhaps targeted at different types of participants, different methods of data collection or to broaden the pool of participants.
- Sample size is guided by the principle of saturation, which occurs when you have a diverse sample of participants and data begin to repeat themselves without learning anything new on the study issues, so that further data collection becomes redundant.

## **Exercises**

1. Define your study population and decide what an adequate sample size would be using the parameters shown in [Table 6.3](#).
2. Identify potential recruitment strategies and justify why they would suit your study.
3. Now imagine that the recruitment strategy you selected is not possible once you reach your field site and select an alternative recruitment strategy.

### Further reading

## On methods

Flick, U. (2014) *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (5th edn). London: Sage Publications. Chapter 13 provides a good description of the nature of participant recruitment in qualitative research.

Hennink, M., Kaiser, B. and Marconi, V. (2016) 'Code saturation vs. meaning saturation: How many interviews are enough?', *Qualitative Health Research*, 27 (4): 591–608. This paper provides empirical data on the parameters of reaching saturation.

McDougall, C. and Fudge, E. (2001) 'Planning and recruiting the sample for focus groups and in-depth interviews', *Qualitative Health Research*, 11 (1): 117–26. This article describes recruitment for different qualitative methods.

Patton, M.Q. (2015) *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (4th edn). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. A good source for a range of strategies on purposive sampling.

Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., McNaughton Nichols, C. and Ormston, R. (eds) (2014) *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers* (2nd edn). London: Sage Publications. Chapter 4 provides a good overview of recruitment strategies for qualitative research.

## On field practice

Grace, C., Begum, R., Subhani, S., Kopelman, P. and Greenhalgh, T. (2008) 'Prevention of type 2 diabetes in British Bangladeshis: Qualitative study of community, religious and professional perspectives', *British Medical Journal*, 337: a1931. This article provides a detailed description of different study populations and the recruitment strategies used for each.

Hamilton, R.J. and Bowers, B.J. (2006) 'Internet recruitment and e-mail interviews in qualitative studies', *Qualitative Health Research*, 16

(6): 821–35. This article highlights methodological and practical issues of recruiting participants via the internet.

Hinton, L., Guo, Z., Hillygus, J. and Levkoff, S. (2000) 'Working with culture: A qualitative analysis of barriers to the recruitment of Chinese American family caregivers for dementia research', *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, 15: 119–37. This paper examines cultural barriers to participant recruitment.

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## 7 In-depth Interviews

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## Objectives

After reading this chapter you will:

- understand the key characteristics of in-depth interviews;
- know the principles of designing an interview guide;
- know how to prepare for in-depth interviews;
- know how to conduct in-depth interviews;
- know the importance of establishing rapport, probing and motivating in in-depth interviews;
- know how to evaluate the quality of an in-depth interview.



# What is an in-depth interview?

An in-depth interview is a one-to-one<sup>1</sup> method of data collection that involves an interviewer and an interviewee discussing specific topics in depth. In-depth interviews may be described as a conversation with a purpose. The researcher's purpose is to gain insight into certain issues using a semi-structured interview guide. If conducted well, this can feel like a conversation for the interviewee. An in-depth interview, however, is *not* a two-way dialogue, as only the interviewee shares their story and the interviewer's role is to elicit the story.

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes in-depth interviews are conducted with two interviewees at the same time.

During an in-depth interview the interviewer asks questions and motivates the interviewee to share their perspectives. However, the interviewer and interviewee are not only asking and responding to questions; they also react to each other's (perceived) appearance, identity and personality. This situation influences what and how the issues are discussed in the interview. Therefore, in-depth interviewing is described as 'a *meaning-making partnership* between interviewers and their respondents', which indicates that in-depth interviews are 'a special kind of *knowledge-producing conversation*' (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006: 128). The interviewer and interviewee thus co-create knowledge and meaning in the interview setting and thereby co-construct reality.

The in-depth aspect of the method is important as it reinforces the purpose of gaining a detailed insight into the research issues from the perspective of the study participants themselves. This reflects the emic perspective (or insider's perspective) that is characteristic of qualitative research (see [Chapter 2](#)). To achieve both the in-depth and emic perspectives, in-depth interviewing involves:

- using a *semi-structured interview guide* to prompt the data collection;
- establishing *rapport* (a trust relationship) between the interviewer and interviewee;
- asking questions in an *open, empathic way*;

- *motivating* the interviewee to tell their story by *probing*.

These steps reflect the core process of in-depth interviewing, which we describe in this chapter. We discuss how to develop an interview guide, prepare for data collection, establish rapport with interviewees, and conduct the interview itself.

## When to use in-depth interviews

Typically, in-depth interviews are used when seeking information on *individual, personal experiences* from people about a specific issue or topic. For example, in-depth interviews may be conducted to identify:

- how people make *decisions*;
- people's own *beliefs* and *perceptions*;
- the *motivation* for certain behaviours;
- the *meaning* people attach to experiences;
- people's *feelings* and *emotions*;
- the *personal* story of a participant;
- in-depth information on *sensitive* issues;
- the *context* surrounding people's lives.

In-depth interviews are thus primarily used when you seek to capture people's individual *voices* and *stories*. You may also use the method when researching sensitive issues that require confidentiality and a more intimate setting for data collection, for example research on issues such as sexuality, induced abortion or domestic violence. In-depth interviews are also used to understand the context in which people live, such as the economic, socio-cultural or lifestyle context of an individual. For a comparison of when to use in-depth interviews versus focus group discussions see [Chapters 3](#) and [8](#).

## Purpose of an in-depth interview

Wengraf (2001) highlights the type of information that can be collected by in-depth interviews. He identifies that in-depth interviews can be used to

identify the following:

- *Narratives* about people's lives. This is the 'story' that an interviewee shares and is usually recorded and transcribed for analysis (see [Chapter 10](#)).
- The *subjectivity* of the interviewee. This is the identity and background characteristics of the interviewee that influence a person's story. Identifying subjectivity allows researchers to better interpret an interviewee's particular story (e.g. an interviewee describing workplace discrimination can be better understood if we know they are from a minority group).
- The *context* in which the interviewee lives. In-depth interviews are commonly conducted in people's homes where they may feel most comfortable, and therefore one can identify the context in which they live. Often this perspective is gained by combining observation (see [Chapter 9](#)) and in-depth interviewing. The economic, physical, social and cultural context can be observed. For example, a researcher conducting a study on religion and reproductive health in India and Bangladesh observed the homes of the interviewees during the in-depth interviews, and noticed the presence of religious symbols, reflecting religiosity of the interviewees.

In contrast, focus group discussions do not collect narratives or personal stories of participants, but collect information on a range of *opinions* from participants. In focus group discussions the stories often focus on other people's experiences rather than on individual experiences of the group participants. For example, if discussing unsafe sex practices, it would be easier to talk about friends not having safe sex rather than to talk about one's own experience of unsafe sex. In focus group discussions, the stories of the participants cannot be linked to their background characteristics. This is also not the objective of focus group discussions, which are more concerned with collecting information on the *community perspectives*. As focus group discussions are often segmented by age or gender, a kind of *group subjectivity* can be discerned, whereby you gain the perspectives of a particular group (e.g. adolescents' views on smoking, men's views on childrearing). Finally, while the context identified in in-depth interviews deals with that of an individual interviewee (e.g. their economic, social or

cultural context), focus group discussions produce information on the norms and values that exist within the community more broadly.

Here, we have described the purpose of in-depth interviews in comparison with focus group discussions (see [Chapter 8](#)), the two qualitative research methods that are used most often, and sometimes in combination with observation ([Chapter 9](#)). However, we acknowledge the existence of other types of interviews and their different purposes. Key informant interviews, for example, also aim at getting to know narratives and subjectivity, like in-depth interviews, but focus less on personal issues and aim at getting to know the narratives from an institution or group of people represented by the key informant (e.g. a community leader, health provider, etc.). Biographical interviews aim at going very in-depth in the personal history of a person and situating that person in time (see also Wengraf, 2001).

Although these types of interviews each have a different purpose, many of the principles on how to conduct in-depth interviews that we describe in this chapter, also apply to these other types of interviews as well. Common principles include the importance of developing an interview guide; asking open questions; probing and establishing rapport; and the need for reflexivity.

## **The cyclical nature of data collection**

The process of data collection within the data collection cycle is cyclical in nature, as described at the beginning of [Part II](#). A key characteristic of qualitative data collection is to use the key issues that are identified in one interview to refine questions and [topical probes](#) in the following interview. In this way you make inductive inferences and are able to go deeper into the issues with each subsequent interview. Data collection thus proceeds like a spiral. This spiral process continues until you reach saturation, with no more new information emerging about the research topic. To initiate the spiral process, you ideally need to transcribe each interview when it is completed to identify key issues and make inferences and then use these for the next interview. However, in practice fieldwork often takes place in a limited time period so that all interviews are often conducted at once, with transcription taking place at a later stage. In this situation inferences are

usually made from the interviewer's recall of the dialogue in an interview or from listening to the recording. It is important to make your inductive inferences explicit and to reflect on them, so it is useful to keep notes or make a short summary of the issues that emerged from the interviews. Additionally, the interviewer may note down key issues on the interview guide during the interview and use them as new topical probes in the following interview. Thus, as the data collection proceeds, you continue to make the inferences and use these in subsequent interviews. It is important to note that the interview guide remains largely the same, and usually only small changes are made such as refining a question or adding a probe, or by writing a note on the interview guide as a reminder for the next interview.

## **Developing an interview guide**

An interview guide is a list of questions used by the interviewer, mainly as a memory aide during the interview. As the name suggests, the interview guide simply guides the interview. It is not called a questionnaire, nor is it used in the same way as a questionnaire. A questionnaire is a structured research instrument for quantitative research, with predominantly closed questions that people are asked to respond to. Note that even the concept of a 'respondent' reflects the survey style approach of a questionnaire, whereby people *respond* to the questions posed by the researcher. However, in an in-depth interview guide, participants do not respond as such, but they *participate* in an interview and tell their own story. In this chapter, we therefore refer to people interviewed as participants.

## **Structure of the interview guide**

Depending on the type of research questions, the purpose and objectives of the research and the fieldwork approach you use, an interview guide is more or less structured. For example, in an exploratory study, an interview guide is usually less structured (referred to as a semi-structured interview guide). In a mixed methods fieldwork approach, in which qualitative research is mixed with quantitative research, an interview guide might be more focused. A typical interview guide uses the following structure: introduction, opening questions, key questions and closing questions. This

structure is the same as that used in a focus group [discussion guide](#). Each of these sections of an in-depth interview guide is described below.

## Introduction

An interview guide may include some introductory points to remind the interviewer what to tell the participant at the beginning of the interview. During the introduction the interviewer typically introduces themselves, explains the purpose of the research, what will be done with the data collected, and outlines the outcome of the research, for example an article or report, or an intervention. In addition, the interviewee should be informed about ethical issues, such as confidentiality of the interview and anonymity of the data. Permission is also sought for audio-recording and the interviewer also indicates what the researchers will do with the recording. After providing all the information, the interviewer then asks if the participant is willing to be interviewed and asks for consent (see [Chapter 5](#) for further ethical issues).

After the introduction, the interview guide usually includes some general questions about the background of the interviewee. For example, information about their age, educational level and religion can be collected. These questions are commonly closed questions. They have a dual purpose: they provide some background on the interviewee, which enables the interviewer to gain some context about the participant, and they begin the process of building rapport in the interview. These questions are easy to answer, so the interviewee is able to become comfortable in the interview setting and with the interviewer. For example, in in-depth interviews in India about having children, we often begin by asking background questions, about the pregnancy histories of the woman, the number of children they have, the names of the children, ages, their education received and so on.

## Opening questions

A series of general opening questions typically follows the introduction. The aim of these questions is to continue building rapport with the

interviewee so that they feel comfortable enough to start telling their story once you come to the key questions (see below). These opening questions are usually broadly related to the key topics on the interview guide. For example, in the study about having children in India, we may ask a series of questions about women's work and responsibilities, childcare, health of women and children, and so on. Therefore, these are not the key questions for the research study, they are broader but still related to the research topic.

## **Key questions**

The central part of the interview guide includes the key questions. These are the essential questions on the research topic which are designed to collect the core information to answer the research questions. These questions are deliberately placed in the central part of the interview guide to allow time for rapport to be established between the interviewer and interviewee.

Rapport is extremely important as it enables the interviewee to feel free and safe to share their stories and experiences on the research topics.

Interviewers usually use many probes during this phase of the interview to gain detailed information, examples, explore nuances in what is shared and to understand the issues from the perspective of the interviewee.

## **Closing questions**

It is important to include closing questions on the interview guide. Too often novice researchers stop an in-depth interview abruptly once they have completed asking the key questions on the research topic and the interviewee has finished telling their story. Even though you may have collected the information needed for the study it is not good practice to simply end the interview without asking some closing questions. While discussing the key questions the interviewer and the interviewee are still 'connected', and the interviewer needs to slowly reduce the rapport that has been established and create a distance again before leaving the interviewee. This is especially important when your research deals with sensitive issues. It would simply not be ethical to leave the interviewee in an emotionally vulnerable state or with painful memories. In short, one has to 'fade out' from the interview. Closing questions are broader, general questions, for

example asking about the interviewee's plans for the future or related to the general topic of the research. A closing question is not 'Do you have any further issues to discuss?' There needs to be several closing questions to give enough time to 'fade out' from the interview, and one can then conclude by asking if the interviewee has anything further to add. You then finish the interview by thanking the interviewee. [Figure 7.1](#) shows an example of an interview guide, adapted from that written by a master's student, Loes Kendle (2006), for a study on women's experiences of having children in Cambodia. This interview guide uses the structure described above, includes probes (described later), and the research topic is suitable for in-depth interviews as it seeks women's individual experiences of having children.

Figure 7.1 Example of an in-depth interview guide, Cambodia



## Interview Guide

### Introduction

This research is being conducted to get to know the views of women about pregnancy and having children. I am conducting this research for my master's course at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. I am especially interested in the opinions of married women who have at least one child, and I am interviewing other women from the area as well. The questions I would like to ask you relate to the topics of pregnancy and having children. Everything you tell me will only be used for this research project, and will not be shared with anyone outside the research team. Also your name will not be used, to make sure that no one can identify you with any answers. You have already consented to the interview with the consent form. Do you have any questions before we begin?

### Background information

No. of interview:

Age:

Number of children:

Urban or rural residence:

Education:

Education of husband:

Occupation of husband:

### Opening questions

- 1 Can you tell me about the people you live with?  
*Probe:* Parents, in-laws, other relatives
- 2 What do you do during a normal day?  
*Probe:* How often leave the house, meeting other people
- 3 What do your children do during the day?
- 4 Who are the people you talk to the most?  
*Probe:* Family, neighbours, how often, what exactly
- 5 Can you tell me about the time when you were first pregnant?  
*Probe:* pregnancy history of all pregnancies, live children
- 6 Can you tell me about the time when you had your first period (bleeding)?  
*Probe:* When, did changes occur in relationship with men, special ceremony
- 7 Are there certain practices you do or don't do when you are having a period (menstruating)?  
*Probe:* Abstinence, foods, drinks, why, who told them
- 8 Can you tell me about the time that you got married?  
*Probe:* What age, major changes, arranged

### Questions about having children

- 9 What do you think is the best number of children to have?  
*Probe:* Sons and daughters, husband's opinion
- 10 Would you at this point like to have any more children?  
*Probe:* How many more, sons, daughters, what does husband want
- 11 Who should make the decision about whether to have another child?  
*Probe:* Herself, husband, why
- 12 With whom do you usually talk about pregnancy and having children?  
*Probe:* Husband, mother, mother-in-law, friends, other relatives
- 13 Do you know when it is the best time for a woman to get pregnant?  
*Probe:* Information source
- 14 What would be ideal time gap between having children, and why?  
*Probe:* Information source

### Questions about contraceptives

- 15 Can women control when they get pregnant?  
*Probe:* Traditional, modern methods
- 16 Do you know any contraceptive methods?  
*Probe:* Know how to use them
- 17 Where can a woman go to get contraceptive methods?  
*Probe:* Pharmacist, clinic, health workers
- 18 Do you know any adverse effects of using contraceptives?  
*Probe:* All forms of labour possible, health problems
- 19 What do you think about contraceptives: should women use them?  
*Probe:* Self, other, husband
- 20 With whom do you normally talk to about contraceptives?  
*Probe:* Husband, mother, mother-in-law, other relatives, friends
- 21 Do you know what a woman can do when she is pregnant but does not want the baby?  
*Probe:* Did friends tell about it, or family
- 22 What do you think are the reasons why women choose to have an abortion?
- 23 What do you think are the reasons why some women don't want to use contraceptives?  
*Probe:* Herself, neighbours
- 24 What reasons would you have for using contraceptives?  
*Probe:* Stopping, or spacing, use in future?

### Closing questions

- 25 What do you think is the main role of the women in the family?  
*Probe:* Role of men, change in relationship, mother and father
- 26 What are your hopes for your children in the future?  
*Probe:* Education, profession

*Source:* Adapted from Kendle (2006)

The questions in an interview guide have to follow a logical order; however, they should be logical for the interviewee rather than the researcher. If an interviewee gets confused about the questions because of the order in which they are asked, this will reduce the quality of the data collected. You would typically check this issue during the piloting of the interview guide. It is also important to note that even though the topics in the interview guide are placed in a certain order, the questions may not necessarily be asked in this order in the actual interview; instead the interviewer follows the order in which the topics arise as the interview develops. For example, an interviewee may tell their story starting with an issue that the interviewer included in question 1, and then they may continue with an issue included in question 5, and so on, so the interviewer needs to simultaneously follow the natural flow of topics initiated by the interviewee and keep track of which questions have been covered from the interview guide. The interview guide is therefore used as a checklist to ensure that the main topics have been covered that will answer the research questions. During fieldwork, the interviewer often relies more on the guide in the early interviews, and after some time the topics and questions become internalized and interview questions can be asked with little reference to the guide. The interview guide then functions more as a check list to make sure all questions and probes have been covered by the end of the interview.

## **Question design**

The design of an interview guide actually starts during the design cycle and then continues during the data collection cycle. The design of the questions in the interview guide reflects the concepts that are embedded within the research questions and the conceptual framework of the study. It is important to check the coherence between the research questions and conceptual framework of the study, and the questions on the interview guide to ensure that the interview questions are a valid operationalization of the concepts (e.g. from the design cycle). While preparing the interview guide, you often go back and forth between the research questions and conceptual framework to the design of the interview questions and then

back again. To ensure the coherence, you can also structure the interview guide by subheadings of topics or concepts from the conceptual framework.

We describe an example to clarify this process. If you were conducting a research project to identify people's attitudes towards having children, you might not ask about attitudes directly in the interview guide, given that attitudes may be a theoretical concept for some people and therefore difficult to respond to in an interview. Attitudes are conceptual and therefore need to be operationalized in the guide. Asking 'What is your attitude towards having children?' may not be easily answerable. However, you can identify people's attitudes by asking about certain components embedded within attitudes. Following Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) definition of attitudes as 'the evaluation of perceived consequences of the intended behaviour', you might ask about the perceived consequences of having children in order to derive people's attitudes towards having children. So, in your interview guide you would ask: 'What do you perceive would be the consequences of having children?' The response to this question may then reflect certain attitudes, for example, an adolescent may reply 'I would be expelled from school and my parents would be angry', another person may reply 'I would lose my freedom to travel whenever I wish', and a third may reply 'I would feel very fulfilled to be a mother.' However, this question might still be too abstract for some people, and you might find it better to ask simply 'What do you think about having children?' or 'What will happen if you have children?'

You thus translate the more abstract scientific research questions into more colloquial interview questions. The phrasing of questions in the interview guide will depend on the characteristics of the participants and how they will understand the questions. If an interviewee asks the interviewer 'What do you mean?' it is a signal that the question was not carefully designed or appropriate for the study population. A question should be immediately clear to the interviewee; therefore, questions are often phrased in colloquial language or use local phrases that will be easily understood by the interviewees. For example, in-depth interviews in the context of India use the phrase 'being with a stomach' rather than talking about pregnancy, as this is the concept used by people themselves when discussing pregnancy. Questions and wording therefore also need to reflect the cultural context of

the interviewees. Colloquial phrases relevant to the research topics can be identified during pilot interviews or from information provided by key informants and while conducting interviews.

Not all research questions can be translated into questions in the interview guide. For example, if you are interested in identifying the cultural schemas that influence having children you would not ask directly in an interview ‘What is your cultural schema about having children?’ Furthermore, asking about feelings in a direct way might not work either. For example, when we asked, ‘What do you feel about having children?’, a typical reaction was ‘What is there to feel? I did not feel anything.’ For such conceptual research questions you can derive information about the constructs of cultural schemas or feelings through the narratives of interviewees by simply allowing interviewees to tell their story. From the multiple narratives, the researcher can indirectly derive the existing cultural schemas. Similarly, narratives of the interviewees often reflect feelings and emotions, for example ‘I was so happy to ...’, or ‘I felt sad when ...’. We discuss these issues further in the analysis of textual data in [Chapter 11](#).

## Open questions and topical probes

Questions in an in-depth interview guide are open, short and simple, and focused on one issue at a time. Open questions are phrased in such a way that they do not elicit a simple yes/no answer, nor should they be ‘leading’ questions, ‘directing’ the interviewee’s story into a certain direction (see later examples). A question that can be answered with ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response (typical survey questions), is *not* an open question. For example, the questions ‘Do you want to have children?’ and ‘Do you know about contraception?’ can be answered ‘yes’ or ‘no’. This last question also seems to test the knowledge of an interviewee, like a teacher testing the knowledge of a student, which is not the idea of an in-depth interview. Through open questions, one thus wants to invite the interviewee to share their perceptions and tell their story in detail. For example:

What do you think about having children?  
(Probes: desire/no desire? how many? girls/boys? when? why?)

This is an open question as it enables the interviewee to describe how they feel about having children from their own perspective. In addition, the question includes a series of **topical probes** that remind the interviewer to ask about related issues if they are not raised spontaneously by the interviewee. For example, the topical probes above prompt the interviewer to ask about certain topics on their desire for children, number of children, gender, timing of children, etc. *Topical probes* are essential for designing in-depth interview questions. The open style of question allows the interviewee to respond by telling their own story or experience, and the probes that follow remind the interviewer to ask about specific topics to ensure that detailed information is collected on all issues of interest. If the question is asked in an open way and the interviewee is well motivated to tell their own story, they might cover a lot of topics including those listed as topical probes. Therefore, you may not always use every topical probe when interviewing and will be guided by the information shared by the interviewee.

Topical probes are not designed as sub-questions of the interview question because this would lead to far too many questions in the interview guide. For example, avoid designing the question and topical probes as shown below, as this will lead to an interview guide that resembles a closed questionnaire, rather than an open interview:

1. What do you think about having children?
  - a. Do you have a desire for children?
  - b. How many children do you want to have?
  - c. Do you want boys or girls?
  - d. When do you want children?
  - e. Why do you want children?

Topical probes typically originate from theory related to your research topic and from issues identified in a literature review. They therefore provide only indications of potentially important issues. Good-quality, in-depth interviews, however, will produce new ideas and new concepts of which the researcher was not aware before the interviews were conducted and that were not included in the conceptual framework of the study. One could claim that an in-depth interview that only produces information that is

already known to the researcher or is already included in the literature is not a good-quality interview, possibly because the questions on the interview guide were not open enough. Well-performed in-depth interviews produce new insights, add new concepts to existing theories and/or create new theories.

Topical probes are different from [motivational probes](#) (described later). Motivational probes are short verbal reactions of the interviewer to encourage the interviewee to continue to speak (e.g. ‘aha’, ‘is it?’, ‘how is that?’, ‘can you tell me more?’). Motivational probes are used during the conduct of the interview itself and are not included in the interview guide.

## Pilot-testing

It is often difficult to predict how interviewees will interpret the questions included in your interview guide. The interview guide is therefore pilot-tested. If the interviewees speak another language, the interview guide has to be translated prior to the pilot-testing. The issues related to translating a research instrument are discussed in [Chapter 8](#). Typically, researchers conduct a few pilot interviews, preferably with people who share the same characteristics as the actual interviewees but perhaps who live outside the study community. During pilot-testing you may focus on assessing the following issues:

- Did the interviewees understand the questions immediately?
- Were concepts, sentences and words adapted to the context of the interviewee?
- Do some questions need to be rephrased?
- Was the order of the questions logical for the interviewee?
- Can the research question be answered with the information that is gathered?
- Was the interview guide too long/too short?

After the pilot-testing the interview guide is usually revised before actual data collection begins.

## Preparing for data collection

Preparing to conduct in-depth interviews involves seeking permission to conduct the research and establishing initial rapport with the study population. These issues are discussed in [Chapters 5](#) and [6](#). A next step in preparing for in-depth interviews involves making an appointment with the interviewees to conduct the actual interview. You need to select a suitable location for the interview. This is usually determined by considering what type of place would make the interviewee feel most at ease and where they may be able to talk freely. In-depth interviews often deal with people's personal experiences and may be conducted on sensitive issues; therefore, in-depth interviews are often conducted at the home of the interviewee. In this situation the researcher can see the interviewee in their own environment, which can be useful for collecting additional information on the context of the interviewee's home context. Interviews may also be conducted at the interviewee's workplace or in a public location such as a café.

It is also important to consider whether the interviewer and interviewee will be able to communicate with few distractions in the location selected. The presence of other people will influence the information that an interviewee is willing to share during the interview. Keep in mind that the presence of another person may not always be obvious. For example, other people may be present in an adjacent room and be able to hear the interview if the door is open. Interviewing in a noisy place (e.g. in a restaurant) may also be difficult as the background noise may lead to an unclear recording of the interview. Setting a suitable time for the interview is also essential: interviewees need to have enough time to sit, relax and talk in the interview rather than feeling they have to rush to another appointment.

While making an appointment for the interview you can indicate that it is important that you meet in a place where you will not be disturbed by others. When conducting interviews in participants' homes it is sometimes difficult to avoid the presence of others or being interrupted during the interview. What can you do in this situation? Sometimes it is possible to ask the interviewee directly whether it is possible to conduct the interview together alone in the room. When interviewing Indian women in their

homes, men were often present, so we indicated that ‘the interview is about women’s issues’ and asked, ‘whether it would be possible for the men to leave?’ This was an acceptable way to gain some privacy for the interviews. However, asking people to leave is not always possible, and can be rude in some situations, especially if the interview is conducted in the interviewee’s home. If other people are around it can help to begin with very general questions; other people will soon get bored and may leave of their own volition after the first ten minutes or so. If these strategies do not work and it is not possible to be alone with the interviewee, it is better to make another appointment at another time and perhaps at a different location.

Taking a notebook to the interview is useful to make small notes on observations of the context of the interview, or interesting points that come up during the interview itself. Always check the recording equipment before the interview, check that the batteries are charged, and check whether there is enough space on the recorder for a 90-minute interview. Even though these checks sound very logical, all qualitative researchers have at least one experience of an interview situation where the batteries were flat or the recording device failed to work.

## **Reflecting on subjectivity and positionality**

The characteristics of the interviewer, such as their identity or background, influence how the interviewee responds in qualitative research (this is described in [Chapter 2](#)). During data collection, how you portray yourself (your positionality) and your own characteristics (your subjectivity) can influence the information collected and therefore the quality of the data. As soon as the interviewer and interviewee meet, the appearance, gender and attitude of the interviewer will determine how they are perceived by the interviewee and therefore influence the information that the interviewee is willing to share. For example, an interviewer dressed in jeans and a t-shirt sends a different message than an interviewer dressed in a suit and tie. It is hard to make general recommendations regarding how to present yourself as interviewer, as it will be dependent on the research setting, research topic and the type of interviewee. As a general rule, you should dress appropriately for the socio-cultural situation of the research, so that an interviewee does not find you threatening or offensive. This sounds logical,



but we can make mistakes, particularly if not sufficiently aware of the socio-cultural context where the research will be conducted. For example, if conducting interviews among poor people in Indian villages, it is not advisable to dress in jeans, wear sunglasses and the latest style Nike shoes; neither is it a good idea to dress in a silk saree and wear lots of gold jewellery. The unspoken message you give through this style of dress is 'I am an outsider, I am from the city, I am much more modern, I am richer than you.' Perhaps a less obvious example would be an adult woman wearing a long skirt in an Indian village. Although this is quite 'normal' in Western society, people in a village may find that this is an immature way to dress because typically long skirts are worn by adolescent girls. People in the study population may therefore interpret you by your dress in a rather different way than you intended. In sum, the silent messages you send with your appearance, clothes and behaviour, are (re)interpreted by the study population and do influence the relationship you are able to establish with the interviewees, and therefore the information you are able to gather. It is always good to check with your local partners what is an appropriate way to dress as interviewer.

In addition, your positionality, that is, how you present yourself in terms of your role or title, can also influence the interviewee. Positionality refers to the power relations between interviewer and the interviewee (Hopkins, 2007, 2009; Rose, 1997; Sheppard, 2002). For example, it will make a huge difference whether you introduce yourself in an interview as a university professor or as a researcher who is interested in the life of people. From the very first moment, this will determine the power relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, and therefore the information you can collect. Furthermore, you need to reflect on whether it would be possible for a man to interview a woman and vice versa. During the interviews, you become aware of the power relations between you and the interviewee, and how it may influence what the interviewee shares about their life and experiences. Does this mean that a researcher or interviewer can select any role to play while conducting in-depth interviews? You cannot change certain personal characteristics, such as being a woman or man, having a white, brown or black skin, or your physical features. However, there are other characteristics that one can decide to highlight or not. Ethical issues are of course important here: it would not be ethical, for example, for a childless

female researcher conducting research on reproduction to pretend that she has children herself. Reflecting on both your subjectivity and positionality is important before, during and after conducting in-depth interviews. Before and during the interviews you need to be aware of, and reflect on, how you present yourself to the study population and how you can establish rapport. For more information on power relationships between interviewer and interviewee and different styles of interviewing, see Wengraf (2001). For more information on the different roles that can be played by the interviewer and interviewee, see the dramaturgical approach to interviewing described by Berg (2007).

Finally, it is good practice to reflect on what you, as a researcher, want to gain from the interview and what you think the interviewees may gain from participating in the research. Of course, you are seeking new and interesting information as a researcher, but what can you say the interviewees will gain? It is essential to be honest about the objectives of the research and what interviewees can really gain from their participation in your research. Although some studies may pay participants in qualitative research, a basic principle in qualitative research is not to pay interviewees for the interview as this may influence the information that is provided. Instead it is common practice to take a small gift for the interviewee to be given after the interview is completed. An often-overlooked benefit for the interviewee is the opportunity to share their views and story (Peel et al., 2006). People like to talk and to be listened to, so the actual interview experience can be enjoyable for participants.

## **Conducting the interview: Skills of the interviewer**

The application of techniques in in-depth interviewing requires good social skills and flexibility on the part of the interviewer. It is not an easy task to interview someone well. The interviewer needs to conduct multiple tasks during an in-depth interview, sometimes simultaneously, including the following:

- Get acquainted with the interviewee through small-talk.
- Establish rapport and create a safe, comfortable environment for the interviewee.

- Pose questions in an open, unthreatening way and in a friendly colloquial manner.
- Listen and respond to the interviewee by asking follow-up questions and probing.
- Show empathy towards the interviewee.
- Motivate the interviewee to tell their story in detail.
- Take note of the social context, and observe the environment of the interviewee.
- Observe the body language and subtle reactions of the interviewee.
- Be sincerely interested in hearing about the life of the interviewee.
- Have respect for the beliefs and lifestyle of the interviewee.

These social and communicative skills are needed in the process of conducting an in-depth interview. These processes relate to establishing rapport with the interviewee, maintaining rapport during the conduct of the interview, and to motivating the interviewee to tell her/his story by using motivational probes.

## **Establishing rapport**

When meeting an interviewee for the first time, it is important not to rush straight into asking your interview questions but to take time to become acquainted with the interviewee, so that you both become comfortable. This is the first stage of building rapport. Making small-talk, chatting about the weather, drinking coffee or tea, etc., all are daily routines that serve the function of establishing rapport between the interviewer and interviewee. If you are conducting research in another country or research within a subgroup of the population who speak a different language, then understanding the local language (or dialect) of the interviewee will certainly contribute to building rapport. Even using only a few words in the local language (e.g. greetings or some major concepts of the study) can show goodwill on the part of the interviewer and have a positive influence on rapport. It can also be helpful for the interviewer (if different from the researcher) to state that the researchers are not from the same culture as the interviewee and are not familiar with the cultural norms and want to hear about these as much as possible in the interview. Therefore, an atmosphere

is created in which the interviewee is invited to tell the interviewer more about their life and culture.

Another issue that can influence the development of rapport is the seating arrangement in an interview. Would you conduct the interview at a dinner table, seated at the corners of a table or on the ground? The simple presence of a table between the interviewer and interviewee can have an influence on rapport development, which can be positive or negative. A table creates more distance between an interviewee and interviewer and it can also suggest an official atmosphere. Sitting at a 90-degree angle from the interviewee can sometimes be very effective as you do not face each other directly, which some people find a little threatening, yet you can still make eye contact and encourage interviewees to talk. The most important issue is that the seating arrangements make the interviewee feel at ease.

The photographs in [Figures 7.2](#) and [7.3](#) provide examples of seating during in-depth interviews to demonstrate how this can influence the conduct of the interview. The interviews shown in photos in [Figure 7.2](#) were conducted outside the participant's place of work. In the first photo, the interviewer and interviewee are seated opposite each other, both are seated on chairs. Can you identify who is the interviewer and the interviewee? Both seem to be really engaged in the interview and the rapport seems to be high. How can you see this? For example, the interviewee has eye contact with the interviewer, is seated in the front of his chair and leaning forward.

The second photograph shows another seating arrangement where the interviewer and interviewee are also seated opposite one another but with a small table in-between them. Can you describe the power relationship in both photographs? The interviewee in the first photograph takes an active part in the interview, leaning forward towards the interviewer and telling his story. In the second photograph, the interviewer and interviewee are more distant from each other – see by the table between them and their body language. This, and the gender difference, and the fact that the interviewee seems to be still at work, *can* imply that your interview will be less deep than you would like it to be. Therefore, be aware of your seating and how this can possibly influence the quality of your interview.

Figure 7.2 Seating and positionality in in-depth interviews, Kenya



*Photo: M. Hennink*

## Increasing and maintaining rapport

During the interview itself, rapport is established, enhanced and then reduced towards the end of the interview. The idea is that interviewer and interviewee meet as strangers, establish rapport and trust during the interview and then leave as strangers. During the interview itself one can often observe the body language of participants as an indicator of rapport (e.g. leaning forwards, eye contact), but more often you simply feel a connection or a 'click'; experienced interviewers will simply know when they have rapport. When rapport is established the interviewee may feel more comfortable to share their thoughts or personal feelings with the interviewer than earlier in the interview.

At the end of the interview, the interviewer and interviewee will part again as strangers. This may feel strange, especially in interviews where a lot of rapport was developed or when personal and sensitive issues were shared. This is where the closing questions on the interview guide (described earlier) are important, as they help the interviewer to 'close' the interview and gain some distance from the participant.

The series of photographs shown in [Figure 7.3](#) illustrate the process of rapport development in an interview. In the first photograph, the interviewer (seated on the left) is asking the first questions. Her body posture shows attentiveness towards the interviewee, her facial expression is open and questioning, and she is leaning forward. However, the body language of the interviewee (seated on right) signals that she is not yet comfortable in the interview situation. We can see this by her 'closed' posture; for example, her arms are crossed, she does not appear relaxed and her facial expression shows some tension or suspicion. In the second photograph, the interviewee is 'opening up' and appears to be thinking about how to tell her story. The body posture of the interviewer is also different now, she is leaning more backwards as if to provide space to the interviewee to tell her story, yet she is still very attentive to the interviewee. In the third photograph, you can see that rapport is now established, they are both leaning towards each other, the interviewee is telling her story, she is smiling and making eye contact with the interviewer and appears to be comfortable in the interview.

Figure 7.3 Body language and rapport in in-depth interviews,  
in the Netherlands



*Photo: A. Bailey*

## **Asking and motivational probing**

The interview guide is the research instrument in an in-depth interview, as it *guides* the interview, but the interviewer is also a research instrument because they need to listen and react to what the interviewee says, perhaps formulating additional spontaneous questions in response to issues raised by the interviewee.

A key point to remember is that an in-depth interview is an interview; it is not a dialogue, which involves a two-way exchange of information. The focus is on eliciting the story of the interviewee, not the reactions of the interviewer to that story or the interviewer's experiences. This can be difficult as it may seem natural to want to contribute as in an actual dialogue, and you might be tempted to share your own opinion or to react to the stories or interviewees or give your own interpretation. However, the steadfast rule is to keep yourself out of the interview! Sometimes, interviewees do ask what the interviewer thinks about a certain issue, and it is quite acceptable to reply by saying 'this interview is about your ideas and thoughts, I would like to hear your own story. But after the interview I can give you my own thoughts.' This prevents the interviewer's opinion influencing the views of the interviewee.

As an interviewer you also need to respect the views and stories of the interviewees, even if they are clearly wrong or differ from your own views. In in-depth interviews there are no wrong or right answers; the stories of the interviewees are the individual perspectives of your study population, and this is exactly what you intend to achieve with qualitative research. For example, an interviewee may state that 'the contraceptive pill has serious side effects because women can become sterile'. As an interviewer you may know that this is not correct, but it is not your task to indicate your opinion *during* the interview, because you want to know the perceptions of the interviewees themselves. Once the interview is over you may wish to share information (see [Chapter 5](#) on ethical issues).



Although the questions in your interview guide will be designed to be open and informal, the way in which open questions are asked is also important. Wengraf (2001) identifies several ways of posing questions in interviews that can have a very different effect on the interviewee, for example courtroom questioning, survey questioning and questioning in a criminal interrogation (Wengraf, 2001: 154).

Questions need to be asked in a non-directive way without leading the interviewee in any way. An extreme example would be asking a question such as ‘I guess you don’t know about condoms?’ Of course this is an extreme example, but in reality we ask questions with a particular emphasis that reflects our own views or prejudices, sometimes perhaps in a more subtle way, for example ‘You haven’t *even* heard about condoms?’ or ‘*Haven’t* you heard about condoms?’.

In addition to asking the questions in the interview guide, the interviewer also responds to what the interviewee is saying. This requires careful listening skills, to listen closely to the interviewee and prompt them further. In good in-depth interviews, the interviewer hardly needs to ask questions, but is still subtly guiding the interviewee to tell their story. As the interviewee tells their story, the interviewer only directs with short prompting questions such as ‘Why is that?’, ‘Can you explain?’, ‘Tell me more’ or ‘How come?’ One characteristic of a good interview is that the interviewee is talking much more than the interviewer. This means that the interviewer has to motivate the interviewee to share their thoughts. This is done by using motivational probes, which are utterances or a few words to encourage an interviewee to continue.

Different types of motivational probes may be used. The simplest motivational probe is the *ah-ha* probe where the interviewer makes encouraging sounds, such as ‘ah-ha’, ‘mmhm’ or ‘OK’, to signal that the interviewer is listening, acknowledges an interviewee’s comments and encourages them to continue. Keep in mind that interviewees in other cultures might use different utterances, such as ‘acha’ (‘is it?’ in Hindi) or ‘matte?’ (‘and then what?’ in Kannada), or very specific humming sounds to encourage a speaker to continue. In addition to verbal utterances, interviewers can also use nodding, eye contact and body language (e.g.

leaning forward) to motivate an interviewee to continue talking. Again, be aware of the socio-cultural context of your study population, as body gestures differ in other cultures, and in some societies it may be considered disrespectful to have eye contact with an elderly person. Another strategy for motivating an interviewee is the *reflective* probe which involves repeating or paraphrasing an interviewee's remark to seek clarification of an issue. For example, 'Ok, so what you are saying is ... is that correct?' The *expansive* probe can also be used to ask for more information or to request an example of the issue. For example, 'Can you tell me more about that problem?' or 'Can you give an example of that situation?' An effective, but often underused, strategy is the *silent* probe, where the interviewer remains silent for about five seconds to allow the interviewee to continue or expand on what they are saying. It is valuable for new interviewers to realize that silence in an interview is not always bad. Silence can make new interviewers nervous, but silences and pausing in interviews have a function in giving space to the interviewee to think, reflect and consider the issues being discussed, so that more data is actually collected. These types of motivational probes are described more fully in Hennink (2007).

In-depth interviews are often conducted on sensitive issues, and it is possible that an interviewee may become emotional during the interview. If this happens, the interviewer needs to be empathetic and provide space for the interviewee to feel comfortable again. This may involve taking a break from the interview or asking if the interviewee would like to stop the interview (see [Chapter 4](#) on ethical issues). However, keep in mind that you are a researcher and not a trained counsellor, so your ability to give assistance may be limited in cases of extreme distress. Research projects on sensitive issues such as induced abortion, violence, death, HIV/AIDS or sexuality often have a counsellor available to whom an interviewee can be referred for professional support.

## Closing the interview

An in-depth interview typically lasts between 60 to 90 minutes; it is difficult for an interviewer or interviewee to remain focused longer than this in an intense interview. Often you find that just when you switch off the recorder, the interviewee provides the most interesting information. This

may not simply be because the recorder is switched off, but also because the interviewee may feel the greatest rapport at the end of the interview and has been able to reflect on issues discussed in the interview. In general, you would not include this as part of your study data but write down the information in your [field notes](#) as it may become useful in data analysis. This information is also often used as a new prompt in the next interview, as it becomes a kind of inductive inference from this particular interview to be used in the next.

When completing an interview where you have achieved good rapport it can feel rather strange and empty to say goodbye to the interviewee and leave as strangers again. Sometimes it can be useful to repeat some aspects of the research that you covered in the introduction (e.g. what will be done with the data, or what will be the output of your research), as this helps to create some distance whereby you feel comfortable to leave the interviewee. You might also consider sending the final report to the interviewees as is done in participatory action research (see [Chapter 12](#)) or hold a community meeting to share the outcomes of the research with the interviewees before the report is written. This can help to validate some of the study findings.

Once the interview is completed, it is useful to immediately begin transcribing the interview and reviewing the issues raised. Through this informal review, usually conducted during fieldwork, you make the inductive inferences from the information gathered that guide you on issues or details to ask in the next interviews, and thus you can go much deeper into relevant issues in the subsequent interviews. In practice, you often have little time in the field to actually do this; however, based on the notes taken during the interview or a short summary of the major findings in an interview, you can make the inductive inferences to be included in the next interview. You then continue to collect data until no more new information is found, which is called the point of information saturation (see [Chapter 6](#)).

## **Interviews through telephone or internet**

It is becoming more common for interviews to be conducted by telephone or internet, for example, by Skype. There may be reasons to do so, for

example due to financial reasons and not being able to travel to the interviewees, or the fact that interviewees are difficult to reach, physically or time-wise, or in a situation where a participant does not want to reveal themselves because of the sensitivity of a topic. However, for interviews to be *in-depth*, we believe that the golden rule is to conduct interviews in person. The value of face-to-face interviews should not be underestimated. A face-to-face interview, in a location familiar to the interviewee, where you can establish rapport through social interaction, probe and hear the story of the interviewee, observe the body language and notice changes in language and tone and get to know the context of the interviewee are important benefits of in-person interviews. Other formats add more distance to the interview situation and make it more difficult to observe the social context and body language. It might well be that, through telephone or internet, you conduct an *interview*, but *not* an *in-depth* interview.

Opdenakker (2006) provides a useful review of the quality of interviews conducted via telephone, internet and Messenger. He identifies differences between these three interview formats and face-to-face interviews and indeed reflects on missing social clues and language in interviews that are not in-person. A nice example he gives is about an interview through Messenger that uses emoticons, about which, as the author nicely reflects, interpretations differ quite a lot between cultures.

## Strengths and limitations

The strengths and limitations of in-depth interviews are summarized in [Table 7.1](#).

Table 7.1 Strengths and limitations of in-depth interviews

Table 7.1 Strengths and limitations of in-depth interviews

Strengths	Limitations
Gain in-depth and personal level data on experiences, life stories, feelings, etc.	One-to-one interview, no feedback from others

Strengths	Limitations
Useful for sensitive topics	Need skills to establish rapport, motivate, listen and react to interviewees
Get contextual information	Flexibility needed to change topic order in interview guide to follow interviewee's story
Get personal stories, experiences of people	Transcription of interviews is time consuming

## Evaluating quality

### *Interpretive*

Are the research questions interpretive in nature, and can they best be answered by conducting in-depth interviews?

Are the interview questions phrased as open questions? Do they enable the story of the interviewee to be heard?

Is most of the talking in the interview done by the interviewee?

### *Appropriate*

Is the application of in-depth interviews appropriate to answer the research questions?

### *Coherent*

Is there logical coherence between the tasks conducted in the design cycle and the design of the interview guide (data collection cycle)?

### *Valid*

Is the interview guide a valid operationalization of the research questions and conceptual framework as formulated in the design cycle?

### *Transparent*

Are all actions and decisions regarding the interview guide and the conduct of the interview described in a transparent way?

### *Reflexive*

Are you reflexive on the inferences that you have made during data collection? Are you reflexive about your subjectivity and positionality during data collection?

### *Cultural*

Are the interview questions posed in culturally appropriate and colloquial language?

### *Saturated*

Were interviews conducted until saturation was reached?

### *New*

Do the interviews produce new information?

### *Ethical*

Were interviews conducted according to ethical principles?

### Key points

- The research instrument for conducting in-depth interviews is the interview guide. It can be more or less structured depending on the research questions and objectives, theory, paradigm and field approach.

- There should be a coherent link between the four tasks in the design cycle (i.e. research questions and objectives, theories, conceptual framework and selection of research methods) and the design of the interview guide in the data collection cycle.
- Interview questions operationalize the research questions and therefore follow logically from these. Interview questions are phrased in colloquial language, followed by topical probes.
- Topical probes are included in the interview guide as markers for potential follow-up questions. Topical probes are usually identified from research literature and theory. They are usually not put as direct questions to the interviewee, unless the interviewee does not address the issues concerned. The topical probes usually function as checks for the researcher, to make sure that the interview touches on all relevant issues.
- Interview questions are open and non-leading questions that invite the interviewee to tell their story.
- Establishing rapport means building a trustful relationship between interviewer and interviewee.

## Exercises

1. Formulate your own research question(s) that fits the application of in-depth interviews. Why are in-depth interviews the appropriate method to apply?
2. Formulate an interview guide for your own research. Check whether the interview guide, research questions and conceptual framework link to each other. Show the interview guide to a fellow researcher and discuss whether it is appropriate for in-depth interviews. Adapt the guide accordingly. Conduct two pilot interviews, and again adapt the guide accordingly.
3. For your own research, how would you establish an initial rapport with the study population? How do you present yourself? Reflect on your positionality.
4. Where will you conduct your interviews? What would be the ideal seating for you and the interviewees? Why?

5. Take one or two of the open questions in your interview guide. How will you pose the question(s) to the interviewee? Practise with a fellow researcher and pose the questions in different styles: like a teacher, a judge, a survey researcher and a qualitative researcher.
6. Conduct an interview. After the interview, reflect on how it went. Transcribe the text and share the transcript with a fellow student/researcher. Reflect together on the interview.

Further reading

## On methods

Berg, B.L. (2007) 'A dramaturgical look at interviewing', in *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (6th edn). Boston: Allyn & Bacon, pp. 89–143. This is a very nice chapter if you are interested in a dramaturgical view on interviewing.

Wengraf, T. (2001) *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-structured Methods*. London: Sage. This is a very nice book if you are interested in learning more about the process of interviewing, e.g. the power relationships between the interviewer and interviewee.

## On field practice

Opdenakker, R. (2006) 'Advantages and disadvantages of four interview techniques in qualitative research', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 7 (4): Art 11. Available at: [www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/175/392](http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/175/392).

Sturges, J.E. and Hanrahan, K.J. (2004) 'Comparing telephone and face-to-face qualitative interviewing: A research note', *Qualitative Research*, 4 (1): 107–18.



These articles explore different ways of interviewing. They compare different styles of interviewing and lay out the advantages and disadvantages of one style over the other.

Peel, E. (2006) ‘“It’s no skin off my nose”: Why people take part in qualitative research’, *Qualitative Health Research*, 16: 1335–49. This article describes the emancipatory effect of participating in qualitative research.

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## 8 Focus Group Discussions

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## Objectives

After reading this chapter you will:

- understand the key characteristics of focus group discussions;
- know the principles of designing a discussion guide;
- recognize the importance of group composition and group size;
- identify techniques for moderating a group discussion;
- understand how to use probing in a group discussion;

- learn techniques to promote discussion;
- know how to recognize rigorous focus group research.

## **What is a focus group discussion?**

A focus group discussion is an interactive discussion between six to eight pre-selected participants, led by a trained moderator and focusing on a specific set of issues. The aim is to gain a broad range of views on the research topic over a period of 60–90 minutes, and to create an environment where participants feel comfortable to express their views. The name of the method actually highlights its key characteristics: a *focus* on specific issues, with a predetermined *group* of people, conducting an interactive *discussion*. Focus group discussions have become a mainstream qualitative research method; however, the term ‘focus group’ has become widely used outside of research circles to refer to any type of group meeting without following the methodological principles of focus group research. This chapter describes using focus group discussions for academic research.

A well-conducted focus group discussion can uncover unique perspectives on the study issues due to the group environment in which data are collected. The group context of data collection means that you can identify a range of issues, and the group interaction generates a different type of data than an in-depth interview. For example, several focus group participants may raise an issue, whereupon other participants may challenge the issue, which leads participants to justify the issue or provide examples to elaborate their point, and then further group discussion on the topic may reveal subtle nuances or details related to the issues. The group context also enables issues to be validated by others and tempers extreme views, so it is an effective means to identify community norms, views and behaviours (Patton, 1990).

## **When to use focus group discussions**

Focus group discussions lend themselves to a wide range of research applications. As with other qualitative research methods, focus group discussions can be used for exploratory, explanatory or evaluative research

as well as to design and add contextual explanations to quantitative studies. [Case Studies 8.1](#) and [8.2](#) describe the use of focus group discussions in policy and evaluation research, respectively. Focus group discussions are particularly suitable for the following.

- *To explore* new topics about which little is known or where issues are unclear, because the method allows participants to identify a range of issues.
- *To evaluate* a programme, service or intervention and understand its success or failure.
- *To seek diversity* in the study issues, through the group format of data collection.
- *To identify norms* in the study population, as the group can validate typical behaviours and neutralize extreme views so that normative behaviour is identified.
- *To understand processes* (i.e. decision-making) by observing how issues are discussed or how a strategy or outcome is decided.
- *To design quantitative research* by identifying relevant issues for quantitative instruments or providing contextual explanations to quantitative research findings (see [Chapter 3](#) for more details).

Focus group discussions comprise a group of people, therefore the group environment makes it an ideal method for seeking a range of views on the research issues, when discussion about the issues is desired and for exploratory research whereby issues can be quickly identified by a group of people (Hennink, 2007). The group environment is also suitable for identifying community or cultural norms, because a group of people can identify and validate normative behaviours. The group environment, however, lacks confidentiality, so focus group discussions are not ideal for seeking personal information from participants or for collecting individual-level information because data are the product of interaction between group members which may influence the contribution of individual participants. Focus group discussions may therefore not fully represent the perspectives of individual participants in the same way as if data were collected in an in-depth interview. Although participants often do share personal experiences in a focus group they should do so voluntarily, rather than as an explicit purpose of the discussion. If personal or individual-level data are sought, in-

depth interviews are more suitable. In-depth interviews offer a different dynamic, with the entire interview focused on one participant. This context offers greater confidentiality to discuss personal experiences and sensitive topics, which would be less suitable for a group environment. See also [Chapter 3](#) for a comparison between focus group discussions and in-depth interviews.

Focus groups *can* be used to discuss sensitive topics depending on the emphasis of the study topic. For example, in a study about suicide, participants may be selected because they have considered suicide, so a group environment may offer solidarity in discussing the issue, especially if the focus group comprises an existing support group where participants are familiar to one another. Similarly, a study on induced abortion may use focus group discussions to identify community attitudes on the topic, while in-depth interviews may be used to discuss an individual's personal experience of having an induced abortion. Therefore, it is not the study topic *per se* but the emphasis of the topic that will help to determine whether focus group discussions are suitable for certain sensitive topics.

## Case study 8.1

### Focus group research for policy in the Netherlands

Focus group discussions have become an important tool for the government in the Netherlands to identify and monitor public opinions, trends and social cultural patterns within society.<sup>[1](#)</sup> In this context, focus group discussions are used in conjunction with quantitative opinion polls to achieve several objectives:

<sup>[1](#)</sup> For instance, Sociaal-Cultureel Planbureau (1999) *Continu Onderzoek Burgerperspectieven*, Netherlands Institute for Social Research, The Hague, the Netherlands.

*To provide a societal antenna.* Focus group discussions are a valuable tool for keeping the government informed about key and emerging issues within society. For example, regarding the global economic and financial crisis in 2008–09, focus group research found that some groups of citizens were more concerned about their financial situation than others. Also, many citizens underestimated the effects of the crisis on the national economy. These results allowed the government to develop appropriate actions in response.

*To mirror government policies and improve communication.* Focus group discussions are also able to identify whether the public understands government policies and the communication of these policies. For example, group discussions with citizens revealed that they had little knowledge about the government measures in response to the economic and financial situation in the Netherlands. The public felt that government budget cuts should focus on reduced expenditure by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation; the sentiment was to ‘save our own country and interests first’. In response, the government was urged to actively provide accountability and communicate about the importance of international responsibilities and that these are in the interests of the nation itself.

*To promote dialogue and debate around policy issues.* Results of the focus group research additionally make clear which images and arguments dominate the public agenda. The arguments of citizens are then used to give direction to public dialogue and debate by the government.



*To set the policy agenda.* Focus group research is also valuable for identifying emerging issues within society that are used for policy agenda setting. For example, focus group discussions revealed that the most important issue amongst citizens in the Netherlands is the decline in respect among citizens and anti-social behaviour. Although citizens felt that this issue was the responsibility of the government when it involved a criminal act, they themselves experienced increasing levels of aggression between citizens and emphasized the need for societal solutions related to education and improving social norms in the public domain. This information enabled the government to identify how to respond while developing new policy. For instance, in the case of traffic behaviour, focus group research contributes to educational campaigns focused on making people more conscious of the positive and negative impact of their own driving behaviour on other participants in daily traffic. The campaign was entitled 'Drive with your heart' (see poster above).

Government Information Service, Ministry of General Affairs, Ministry of Traffic and Water Management, The Hague, the Netherlands

## Case study 8.2

### Focus group research for evaluation in Malawi

Malawi has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world, with poor access to health services being a major contributor to maternal deaths. Focus group discussions were used to identify community needs to improve maternal mortality and to evaluate a community intervention.

*Focus groups for community needs assessment.* Focus group discussions with rural communities identified that the main issue contributing to high maternal deaths was the lack of transport to health facilities. In rural areas it could take more than six hours to reach the nearest health services, too long for women experiencing pregnancy and labour complications. Community members suggested the introduction of bicycle ambulances to reduce the travel time to local health services. Although bicycle ambulances already existed (see photo below), they were not accepted by the community because the stretchers attached to the bicycle were associated with those used in a hospital to transport deceased patients to the morgue. In order to overcome this association with death, community members suggested that the bicycle ambulance needed to be clearly related to the living not the deceased. They suggested making a step for patients to get on to the stretcher and a place to carry the patient's luggage. They felt that these features signalled that the bicycle ambulance was a service for the living: 'only living people use a step and need luggage to go to the hospital'. New-style bicycle ambulances were then designed to reflect the preferences of the community.





*Focus groups for evaluation.* Focus group discussions were also used to evaluate the community perceptions of the new-style bicycle ambulances. From clinical data it was evident that there was an increase in the number of women referred to health services from rural areas and that many were transported by the new bicycle ambulances. Focus group discussions identified community perceptions of the new bicycle ambulances. Participants revealed that the use of bicycle ambulances reduced the travel time to local health facilities, and having the ambulance on standby within the community enabled them to immediately assist pregnant women experiencing difficulties. However, the greatest benefit described was the community involvement in directly assisting women in their community to reach health services, which led to a greater sense of empowerment amongst community members. As the community maintained the bicycle ambulance themselves, they also felt a strong ownership of the service. An additional benefit of the bicycle ambulance was the increased involvement of husbands in transporting their wives to health facilities during pregnancy or when experiencing labour complications.

Sibande and Hutter (2012)

## **The cyclical nature of data collection**

Qualitative data collection is a cyclical process as depicted in the data collection cycle. This cyclical process is initiated during data collection when you begin to learn about the study issues. You can use what you learn to refine the discussion guide and/or the recruitment of participants to explore issues in greater depth. For example, the initial discussion topics and types of study participants are usually defined in the design cycle of the study. Once data collection begins, you are able to identify specific issues from the first focus group discussion that you can ask about in subsequent group discussions to explore the issues in greater depth, understand their context and identify nuances. This process enables richer data to be generated as data collection progresses. You may also learn about new sources of data and deliberately recruit these types of people into subsequent group discussions. Using such inductive leads (or inferences) from early data collection to guide further data collection is an important part of the data collection cycle and makes the process circular. This circular process allows you to explore the research issues in much greater depth. Initiating an inductive process involves reviewing data as you collect it to identify issues raised. This can be done in several ways: you can attend the group discussion yourself or listen to the recording immediately after each group; you can also read the written transcript of the discussion if this is prepared directly after each group; or you can conduct a verbal debrief with the moderator after each group to review the core issues discussed and how this may influence subsequent group discussions.

The cyclical nature of data collection, which is characteristic of qualitative research, also allows you to identify when to stop data collection. As data are being collected you can identify the point at which no more new information is being identified. This is the point of saturation at which further data collection serves no purpose (see [Chapter 6](#)). This requires you to reflect on data as they are being collected to identify when data saturation is reached and where adjustments to the discussion guide and recruitment of participants may be valuable to enrich data collected.

## **Developing the discussion guide**

A discussion guide is a list of topics or, more commonly, a series of actual questions used by the moderator to guide the discussion and keep it focused

on the study topic. The guide essentially serves as a memory aide for the moderator to ensure that key topics are covered during the discussion period. Even though the topics or questions on the discussion guide will be structured in a logical sequence, issues will often be raised in the discussion in a much more haphazard way and so the moderator needs to be flexible enough to follow topics as they are spontaneously raised by participants in order to conduct a fluid discussion. Therefore, the discussion guide often acts as a checklist to ensure that all the issues were covered during the discussion, rather than a rigid format of questions.

Initially the outline of topics to include on the discussion guide is identified during the design cycle (see [Part I](#)) of the study. Therefore, the initial questions in the discussion guide often reflect underlying theory, concepts or issues from the scientific literature. Although the initial discussion guide is developed with deductive reasoning, it is typically further refined inductively during data collection; therefore the discussion guide may be moderately refined during the process of data collection. For example, as you conduct the first focus group discussions you begin to learn more about the research issues. You may then add a question to your discussion guide or write a note in the guide to remind you to ask about certain issues in the next group discussion. In this way you are able to use the inductive leads from earlier focus groups to go deeper into the issues with each subsequent focus group discussion.

Some approaches to fieldwork (e.g. anthropology and ethnography) use only an inductive approach in developing a research instrument; however, our fieldwork approach links the conceptual design of the research (the design cycle) with the data collection phase (the data collection cycle) to highlight the influences of both deductive reasoning and inductive leads on the development of the focus group discussion guide.

## **Structure of the discussion guide**

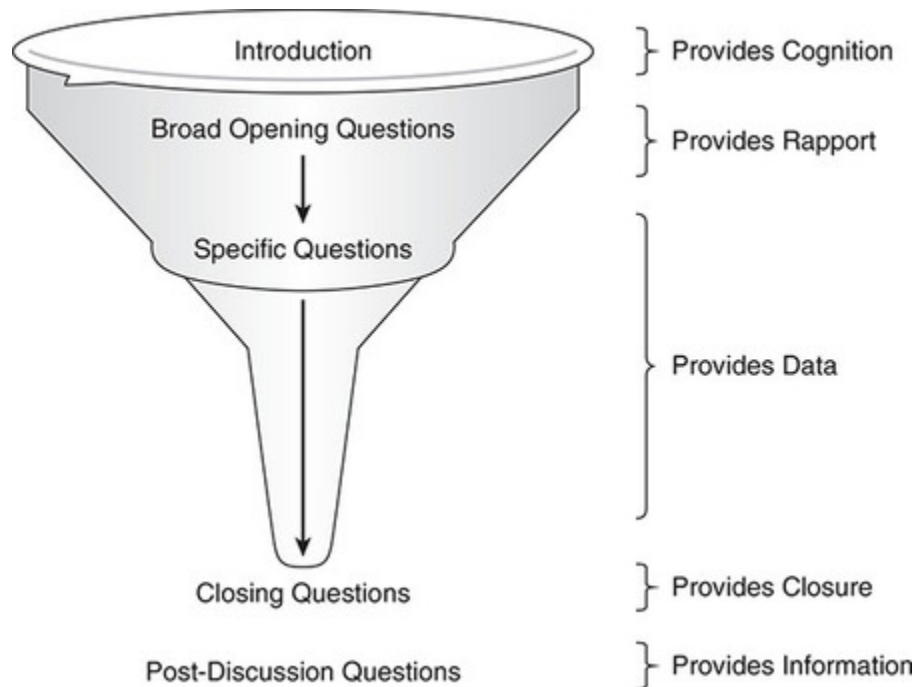
The structure of a discussion guide is important. A well-structured discussion guide will help the moderator to introduce the topic, open the discussion, develop group rapport, focus on key topics and bring the discussion to a close. An effective discussion guide has a clear structure and

follows a logical sequence, even if this does not eventuate in the discussion. A discussion guide typically includes an introduction, opening questions, key questions and closing questions; and each type of question has a different purpose. The discussion guide often follows a funnel structure (see [Figure 8.1](#)), beginning with broad opening questions, moving to more specific key questions and finishing with closing questions.

At the top of the funnel are the introduction statement followed by opening questions. The introduction statement provides cognition to participants so that they know what to expect of the group discussion. This is followed by some broad opening questions that develop rapport and make participants feel at ease, and also begin to open the discussion on the research topic. Then some transition sentences are included to transfer participants' attention towards the next topic. As the funnel narrows, more specific questions are included that focus on the central issues of the study. The purpose of these questions is to provide data for the study. These questions are placed in the centre of the discussion guide to give participants time to feel comfortable in the group setting, so that they contribute more to the group discussion resulting in higher quality data. The final part of the discussion guide includes the closing questions which provide closure to the discussion. There may also be a post interview stage where you can provide information to participants and respond to any questions.

Next, we discuss each type of question (based on Krueger and Casey, 2015) in turn.

Figure 8.1 Funnel design of the discussion guide



## Introduction

During the introduction the moderator typically conducts a number of tasks, such as making introductions, providing information about the study, making participants feel at ease, reviewing ethical issues and explaining how the discussion will be conducted. These issues are described in detail later in this chapter. It is useful to include on the discussion guide itself some instructions on points to cover in the introduction. This may take the form of bullet points or a written narrative, as shown in [Figure 8.2](#).

## Opening question

The purpose of the opening question is to ‘break the ice’ and make participants feel at ease. Opening questions are often brief and focus on inviting everyone to contribute – for example, ‘Let’s start by introducing ourselves and telling everyone the course you are taking’. Information from these questions is rarely analysed.

## Introductory questions

The purpose of introductory questions is to ‘warm up’ the discussion with broad topics to develop group rapport. Introductory questions may involve asking the group to define a term or describe a process that is central to the research objectives – for example, ‘We often hear the term “disability”. What does disability mean to you?’ or ‘What is the process of marriage in this community?’

Figure 8.2 Example focus group discussion guide

## Micro-Finance and Health Project

Thank you all for coming today. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am a researcher from \_\_\_\_\_. We are conducting a study in Burkina Faso on microcredit and women's health. We feel that it is very important to speak to women directly about their experiences, so we are holding these discussion groups with women like yourselves in this area. In our discussion we will be talking about experiences with getting a micro-credit loan, how loans are used and how they affected households.

Please don't feel shy in the discussion as we would like to hear all your different views. Your opinions are very valuable to us and we are here to learn from you. There are no right or wrong answers, we are simply interested in your experiences, so please feel comfortable to share what you think about the topics we discuss.

During the discussion my assistant \_\_\_\_\_ will be taking notes of the points we discuss, but she cannot write down everything we say, so we would like to ask you if we can record this discussion. The reason for the recording is so that we don't miss anything you say and so the rest of the research team can also hear your views exactly. Our discussion will remain completely confidential, only the research team will listen to the recording, it will be securely stored and not accessible to anyone outside the research team. The information you give us will only be used for this research project to improve women's health from micro-credit. **Do we have everyone's permission to record our discussion?** (Check that all consent to recording and answer any questions). Also, we request that everything you hear today is kept confidential and not shared with anyone outside this group.

Let me tell you a little about how we would like to run this group discussion today. Your participation in this group is voluntary, so if you prefer not to be part of this discussion you are completely free to leave at any time. However, we value your opinion and hope that you will stay and share your views. We will not be going around the group for every question, so just join in when you have something to say or if you want to respond to someone else's point, but it is also important that only one person talks at a time so that we capture everything on the recording. We want to hear as many different views as possible, so feel free to disagree with others and share your own views, but please also respect the views of everyone else here. Our discussion will last about one hour. Please help yourselves to the refreshments. **Are there any questions before we start?**

Let's begin by introducing ourselves.

*Please go around the circle and tell us your first name and how many people live in your household.*

### Introduction Questions

*I would like to begin by talking about women who receive micro-credit loans.*

- 1 How common are micro-credit loans to women in this community?
- 2 How does the community view women who receive a micro-credit loan?
- 3 What are the main reasons women seek a micro-credit loan?
- 4 Which type of women are more likely to seek a micro-credit loan?
- 5 How do men feel about their wife getting a micro-credit loan?

### Household Decision-making

*Let's now discuss household decision-making about the micro-credit loans.*

- 6 In a household, who decides how to use the micro-credit loan? (probe for examples)
- 7 If women use micro-credit to start a business, who decides how the business profit is spent? (probe: role of husband/wife)
- 8 What causes conflicts in households with a micro credit loan? (probe for examples)
- 9 What are the business profits from micro-credit loans commonly used for? (probe: business vs household expenses).

### Micro-Credit for Health Activities

- 10 How can micro-credit loans lead to **better** health of women and their family? (probe: who benefits most? Why?)
- 11 How can micro-credit loans lead to **worse** health of women and their family? (probe: examples, reasons)
- 12 What types of healthcare are accessible with micro-credit that were not possible without it? (probe: services, drugs, health sources)
- 13 Which types of healthcare are still not affordable even with a micro-credit loan? (probe: illnesses, medicines, services)

### Benefits and Challenges of Micro-Credit

*We are coming to the end of our discussion, I have just a few last questions.*

- 14 Overall, what do you think are the greatest benefits for women in receiving a micro-credit loan?
- 15 What do you think are the greatest difficulties for women who have a micro-credit loan?
- 16 Finally, what advice would you give to your daughters about getting a micro-credit loan?

Thank you for your time and contribution to this research

*Source:* Adapted from a project by Hennink and McFarland (2013)

## **Transition sentences**

The purpose of a transition sentence is to move from the introductory questions to the key topic areas of the study, or to transition between topics on the discussion guide. Transition sentences may take the form of a question or a brief statement before a new series of questions – for example, ‘Now that we have discussed your understanding of heart disease, I would like to move on to discuss the risk factors for heart disease’ followed by a question on the next topic such as, ‘What types of things put people at risk of developing heart disease?’

## **Key questions**

The aim of key questions is to generate discussion on the key topics of importance to the study. These are the essential questions that will generate the research data. They are often organized under several topic headings and placed about one-third to half-way through the discussion guide when participants are more comfortable in the group setting. They usually include the greatest number of probes to elicit detailed responses and discussion. Key questions may also be phrased as statements – for example, ‘We heard in another group discussion that it is common for married men to have girlfriends. Why does this happen?’ Information from key questions is analysed in the greatest depth.

## **Closing questions**

The discussion concludes with more general or summary questions to close the discussion. Some of these questions will provide valuable information; therefore sufficient time should be left for this section. Different closing strategies may be used – for example, ranking the issues discussed (e.g. ‘Considering all the aspects of the health service that we have discussed, which do you feel are the most important?’) or providing a brief summary



of the major themes discussed and asking participants if this accurately reflects the group discussion.

An example of a discussion guide for a focus group, illustrating all these types of questions, is given in [Figure 8.2](#).

## Question design

There are some similarities between the design of questions for a focus group discussion and those for an in-depth interview (see [Chapter 7](#)). However, the primary difference is that the questions for a focus group discussion are designed to be asked to a group of people and to promote discussion, while questions on an in-depth interview guide are for a single interviewee. This difference influences the wording and number of questions in a focus group discussion guide.

In common with questions in an in-depth interview guide, focus group discussion questions should be clear, short and simple, avoid jargon and specialist terminology, be one-dimensional and phrased in an informal conversational style. However, three aspects of question design for a focus group discussion guide are unique: the questions should promote discussion, direct personal questions are avoided, and fewer questions are included than in an in-depth interview guide. These aspects of question design are highlighted below. Questions for a focus group discussion guide have the following characteristics:

*Clear, short, simple.* Effective questions are clear, short and simple so that participants can easily understand and respond. Simple questions do not mean simple answers are given, but they help participants keep focused on the question during the discussion.

*Open.* Questions are phrased to allow participants to respond from any perspective, and highlight issues that they feel are important. Avoid dichotomous questions (i.e. those that elicit a yes/no response) as they will not promote discussion. For example, rather than asking ‘Has anyone used the new library?’ rephrase this as ‘What are your experiences of using the new library?’

*Avoid jargon.* Avoid technical or professional jargon; instead use colloquial language that participants can easily relate and respond to.

*One-dimensional.* Avoid ‘double-barrelled’ questions (i.e. questions with several parts) as participants may respond to different parts of the question, which leads to a confused discussion, instead focus on one issue per question.

*Conversational style.* Use informal, conversational language to create a non- threatening environment and make participants feel at ease in the group discussion.

*Non-personal.* Avoid asking direct personal questions, as the lack of confidentiality in a group may make participants feel uncomfortable. For example, rather than asking, ‘Have you ever experienced domestic violence?’ rephrase this as, ‘What types of domestic violence are common in this community?’ Participants may still choose to share their own experience, but they will do so of their own choice.

*Promote discussion.* Phrase questions to promote discussion, use **group probes** (see later section on probing) or include a group activity to promote interaction.

*Few in number.* Limit the discussion guide to about 12–15 questions. Each question is being asked of a group of people, so sufficient time should be allowed for group discussion, debate and for new issues to be raised. Having to ask too many questions puts pressure on the moderator to cover all issues and leads to superficial coverage of issues which reduces data quality.

The discussion guide typically includes a question followed by a number of topical probes (see the examples in [Figure 8.2](#)). Probes remind the moderator to prompt the group discussion on specific issues or topics related to the question, if they were not raised spontaneously in the discussion. These types of topic probes are most important for the key questions on the discussion guide, where information essential to the study will be gathered. See [Chapter 7](#) for a fuller discussion of topic probes.

## Translation

Some focus group discussions will be conducted in a different language from that of the researchers. In these situations, we recommend that you

train a moderator familiar with the language of participants and also translate the discussion guide into the language of the discussion. Using a translated discussion guide takes a lot of pressure off a moderator who would otherwise need to translate each question spontaneously during the group discussion. Prior translation of the discussion guide also allows you to give some forethought to the translation of questions and the appropriate colloquial language to use. It is critical to ensure that the translation is in an informal style of language. This can be achieved by asking local professionals who speak the language (e.g. teachers, nurses) to do the translation, rather than using a professional translation service that may produce a more formal translation.

It is extremely important to check the quality of the translated discussion guide. Back-translation is a common strategy for checking translations, whereby translated text is translated back into the original language and checked for accuracy. For example, a discussion guide translated into Spanish would be translated back into English and compared to the original English-language discussion guide. What is most critical, however, is that the translated questions convey the meaning of the question, rather than simply being a literal translation of the words. For a more detailed description of producing a translated discussion guide, selecting an appropriate language and checking meaning-translations, see Hennink (2007).

## **Piloting the discussion guide**

It is often difficult to predict how participants will respond to questions in the discussion guide, particularly if these have been translated into another language. Therefore, piloting the discussion guide is critical. This involves asking the discussion questions to a group of people with similar characteristics to the study population (if possible), assessing how the questions are understood and considering any revisions. During the pilot you may review the following:

- Was sufficient information given in the introduction to the group discussion?
- Were all questions understood as intended?

- Do any questions need to be reworded to improve clarity?
- Do the questions promote a discussion?
- Does the structure of the discussion guide flow well?
- Does the topic order need to change?
- Will the information gained help to answer the research questions?
- Are there enough/too many questions for a 60–90-minute discussion?

Keep in mind that the moderator is an important component in the delivery of questions, providing clarification and in probing during the discussion, so the combination of question design and delivery by the moderator also needs to be assessed in the pilot. Piloting can therefore also be an opportunity to provide feedback to the moderator.

## **Preparing for data collection**

As you prepare for data collection, consider the composition and size of the focus groups, decide on the group format, select a suitable location to hold the discussions and identify a moderator with suitable skills. These issues are discussed below.

## **Moderator's skills**

Moderating a focus group discussion requires a broad range of skills. While some skills are similar to those needed for an in-depth interview (see [Chapter 7](#)), additional skills are needed to manage a group of participants, facilitate their interaction and manage group dynamics. All these skills require training and practice.

An effective moderator needs strong interpersonal skills to foster a positive group environment that is conducive to discussion. These interpersonal skills include having an open, sociable and friendly demeanour; showing genuine interest in participants' views; being empathetic and respectful; accepting that participants have expertise to share; and remaining neutral during the discussion. Strong communication skills are also imperative. Effective listening and questioning skills are needed for a moderator to understand participant views, assimilate multiple ideas during a fast moving

discussion, assess their relevance to the study goals and formulate clear impromptu follow up questions to move the discussion forward. These skills enable a moderator to build on the natural flow of the discussion and maintain rapport rather than relying too heavily on the discussion guide. Formulating impromptu questions that promote a discussion is a critical skill in moderation.

Group management skills are paramount to keep the discussion focused on the research issues, move it through the discussion topics, allow sufficient time to explore each issue, and finish the discussion in the allotted time. In addition, a moderator needs skills in both promoting discussion as well as knowing when *not* to intervene in the discussion to allow the group process to proceed without direction. Moderators need confidence to allow disagreement amongst participants and the skills to use divergent views to promote discussion, rather than quickly suppressing potential conflict. Similarly, a moderator's skill in challenging participants' views can be very effective in stimulating debate and discussion. Finally, a moderator needs skills in managing group dynamics to enable a productive discussion. This requires the ability to identify, manage and use the different personalities in a group to benefit the group discussion, and noticing participant's non-verbal signals to manage the discussion. Overall, an effective moderator is skilled in multi-tasking as they need to be simultaneously listening, asking, observing, processing, tracking and timing.

## **Group composition**

Group composition refers to the characteristics of participants in each focus group. Group composition needs to be considered carefully as it can have a strong influence on the group dynamics during a discussion. An effective group composition can create a comfortable environment for productive discussion, while ineffective group composition can lead to participants feeling inhibited or judged by others in the group and to provide only superficial information. These influences will be discussed below. Two aspects of group composition need to be considered to create a comfortable group environment: homogeneity amongst participants and familiarity between participants.

## Homogeneity among participants

Effective focus groups comprise participants with relatively homogeneous socio-demographic characteristics or some degree of shared experience of the discussion topic. Group homogeneity is desirable because participants are more likely to share their views and experiences with others who are similar to themselves, while participants who feel that others in the group are of a higher status or have greater knowledge of the discussion issues will be more reluctant to contribute to the discussion. Therefore, group homogeneity fosters an open, productive discussion among participants. An additional benefit of conducting group discussions with participants of similar demographic characteristics is that during data analysis you can clearly identify whether issues cluster by different types of participants (i.e. by group).

Group homogeneity is most commonly sought in the socio-demographic characteristics of participants, such as age and gender, by conducting separate group discussions comprising, for example, young women, older women, young men and older men. Take care to select only a limited number of characteristics to achieve homogeneity as too much specificity will create difficulties in participant recruitment and require too many group discussions. It is common to separate the groups by gender. However, whether men or women interact differently in mixed sex groups remains an area of debate in focus group research, and for this reason alone groups are often separated by gender (Fern, 2001; Hennink, 2007; Krueger and Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1997). Similarly, we advise careful consideration in conducting a group discussion with participants from vastly different socio-economic groups, life stages or different authority relationships, because this may create a hierarchy and inhibit some participants from contributing. The demographic characteristics of the moderator can also influence the group dynamics; therefore it is common practice to match the characteristics of the moderator with those of participants as far as practical. Homogeneity among participants can also be achieved in terms of participants' level of knowledge or experience on the discussion topic (e.g. women who all experienced premature birth, men who are all teenage fathers). Participants with similar experiences of a particular issue can

foster a strong sense of identity with other group members and foster a dynamic discussion.

## **Familiarity among participants**

The level of familiarity between participants can influence their contribution to the group discussion. There may be various levels of acquaintance among group members ranging from a group of complete strangers, to a group where participants are somewhat familiar with each other (e.g. residents of the same neighbourhood or workplace) or a group who are well acquainted or part of an existing group (e.g. social, community or support group). It is possible to conduct a group discussion with participants at various levels of familiarity, depending on the discussion topic; however, you need to be aware of the effect that different levels of familiarity may have on participant's contribution to the group discussion.

Recruiting a group of strangers is often the preferred type of group composition, and there are several advantages in this composition. There is greater anonymity amongst a group of strangers, which means that participants may contribute more freely to the discussion. A group of strangers may also generate more detailed information because describing one's views or experiences to strangers typically involves providing a greater amount of context and explanation than among acquaintances. Leask and colleagues (2001) found marked differences in the group dynamics amongst focus groups comprised of strangers compared with pre-existing groups where participants were familiar to each other. They found that discussion amongst groups of strangers was more animated, open and enthusiastic, and captured more diverse and nuanced views of the topic compared with pre-existing groups where participants were familiar to one another. In contrast, the discussion in pre-existing groups was quieter and less elaborate, requiring more probing by the moderator; participants were also more likely to agree with each other and there were fewer personal anecdotes shared than in the groups of strangers.

The main drawbacks in conducting a group discussion among strangers are the greater likelihood of non-attendance and the longer time it takes to

develop rapport during the discussion. In some study contexts it is extremely difficult to recruit a group of strangers, particularly in high density neighbourhoods, such as urban slums or in rural villages, because everyone simply knows everyone else. In these situations, you can reduce the level of familiarity between participants (if this is desired) by ensuring that participants are not close family members or immediate neighbours (see Hennink, 2007, for further strategies). It is also preferable that the moderator is a stranger to participants as familiar persons may be identified with particular views or opinions that influence participants' responses.

Participants can also be recruited from pre-existing groups and therefore have a high level of familiarity with one another. For example, focus group participants may comprise a social group or a support group. The advantages of using pre-existing groups are that recruitment is easier, participation may be higher due to a shared obligation to attend the group discussion, and less time may be needed to develop rapport as participants already know each other. Perhaps the greatest issue with pre-existing groups is in the shared knowledge participants have about each other, which can be both a benefit and a limitation. The high level of shared knowledge about other group members can lead to a greater level of detail in the group discussion as group members remind others about additional details or identify discrepancies in what other participants have said, leading to more detailed and accurate information. However, the reduced confidentiality in pre-existing groups may lead participants to withhold some information from the discussion or provide less detail simply because others in the group already know these details, thereby limiting the depth and quality of information obtained. There is also a risk of over-disclosure in pre-existing groups, whereby one participant may inadvertently share the personal views or experiences of another participant, which that other participant may not have wished to share. Over-disclosure may also occur after the group discussion if group members reveal issues discussed to their shared social or professional networks.

## **Group size**

An ideal focus group discussion includes six to eight participants, but groups may range from five to nine participants. If you have fewer than six



participants it is difficult to sustain a discussion and gain a diversity of perspectives, and with more than eight participants there is limited opportunity for each participant to actively participate and it becomes difficult for the moderator to manage the discussion. Group size will also be influenced by the purpose of the research, topic of discussion, and type of participants. In some study contexts you may consider over-recruiting participants to account for those who drop-out so you still achieve the desired group size.

A group of five to six participants may be sufficient when participants are likely to have significant knowledge or experience on the research topic, or when discussing complex or controversial topics. For example, a group discussion amongst parents of children with a disability is likely to generate an intense discussion on the topic and therefore require fewer participants. One of the drawbacks of a small group discussion is the limited range of issues and experiences shared, as six participants will inevitably contribute a smaller pool of experiences. Small groups may also be more vulnerable to group dynamics, because if only two members are reticent or dominant the effect will be more pronounced in a small discussion group. Conversely, a group of eight or nine participants would be appropriate when the discussion topic is broad and participants may have less experience with the research issues. In these situations, each participant is likely to make only brief contributions to the discussion, so a greater number of participants will be required to gather sufficient information and generate a discussion. Larger groups are also suitable when conducting exploratory research to identify a broader range of ideas, opinions and experiences around the research topic.

For details on the number of groups to include in a study, see [Chapter 6](#) on sampling and participant recruitment.

## **Group location**

You can conduct a focus group discussion in any type of location, both indoors and outdoors, as long as the location is quiet, private, comfortable, free of distractions and easy for participants to locate. [Figure 8.3](#) shows an example of a focus group discussion held outdoors. You will often need to

find a balance between the ideal type of location for a group discussion and what is available at the study site. A quiet location is important to avoid distractions and to achieve a clear recording of the discussion. Microphones can be very sensitive in picking up background noise even in what appears to be a relatively quiet location. Discussion groups held outdoors have problems of visual distractions, lack of privacy and the risk of onlookers affecting the group dynamics. To avoid these issues, you can locate an outdoor group away from central community areas or locations where there may be significant pedestrian traffic. For detailed guidance on conducting outdoor focus groups, see Hennink (2007).

In addition to the physical environment, consider whether the location has any associations that may influence participants' contribution to the discussion. For example, a group discussion held at the home of a prominent local politician may influence participants to voice opinions that align with the host's political party rather than expressing their own views. This may occur even if the politician is not part of the discussion group.

Regardless of the group location, it is critical to arrange seating so that participants are in a circle. There are important benefits to seating participants in a circle. Sitting in a circle enables participants to have maximum eye contact with each other, which helps to foster an interactive discussion. If participants are seated in a classroom set-up all facing a moderator, this can foster the expectation of an informational session rather than an interactive group discussion. Therefore, selecting a venue with flexible seating is optimal as it allows you to arrange seating to maximize group interaction. Sometimes you can improvise by arranging ground covers or movable seats into a circle, as shown in [Figure 8.4](#).

Figure 8.3 Focus group discussion held outdoors, Uganda



*Photo: M. Hennink*

Figure 8.4 Circular seating arrangement for focus group discussion, Burkina Faso



*Photo: M. Hennink*

## **Conducting focus group discussions**

Perhaps the most challenging and rewarding part of focus group research is conducting the group discussion. The moderator is the key person who will conduct the group discussion using the discussion guide. This section discusses how to conduct the group discussion, in particular describing strategies for generating discussion, using probing techniques and the challenges of managing the group dynamics.

## **Roles of the focus group team**

A focus group team comprises a moderator and a note-taker. The role of the note-taker is to write down the key issues discussed during the group discussion in sufficient detail to reconstruct the main flow of the discussion. The note-taker's summary should be a detailed record of the discussion issues. It can also include notes on non-verbal information such as body language, interruptions and so on. A note-taker may take notes freely or use a template to record the issues discussed. Example templates include a three-column table with one column to record the questions asked, a second column to note issues raised and a third for the note taker's comments (Hennink, 2014). Similarly, a two-column table may be used to capture 'notes and quotes' (Krueger and Casey, 2015) with notes on key issues in one column and short quotes from the discussion in another column.

The note-taker's role is important not only as a back-up if the recording device fails or is inaudible but also if the group refuses permission to record the discussion, as the note-taker's notes then become the only record of the discussion points. During the group discussion it is helpful for the note-taker to sit outside the discussion circle, not only to take notes unobtrusively but also to deal with any disturbances or latecomers without disrupting the group itself (see [Figure 8.5](#)). The note-taker can also remind the moderator if any key issues or topics were overlooked in the discussion.

Figure 8.5 Seating position of the note-taker in focus group discussion, Pakistan



*Photo:* Reprinted with permission from Hennink (2007: 167).

The moderator is the key person who conducts the group discussion. The moderator has the challenging task of managing the group discussion so that the information gained meets the research objectives. The moderator has numerous tasks, which can be divided into four groups.

### Introductory tasks:

- welcome and thank participants for attending;
- introduce the study team (e.g. note-taker, assistant);
- introduce the study in broad terms;
- identify how the information will be used;
- outline the process of the discussion and 'guidelines' for group conduct;
- indicate the length of discussion (e.g. 60 or 90 minutes);
- respond to participant questions.

### Ethical tasks:

- confirm consent for participation;
- assure anonymity of participants;
- outline confidential data use and storage;
- seek consent for recording the discussion.

### Group cohesion tasks:

- develop rapport with participants (e.g. friendly introduction, informal style);
- create comfortable, permissive environment;
- use positive body language;
- use an opening question to introduce all participants;
- begin with easy questions and encourage contributions.

### Facilitating discussion tasks:

- encourage contributions from all participants;
- manage group dynamics (e.g. quiet/dominant participants);
- encourage discussion between participants;
- seek a variety of views and experiences;
- use probing to seek depth and detail in responses;
- use open body language to encourage discussion;
- listen to issues raised and ask follow-up questions for more detail;
- keep the discussion focused on research topics;

- determine whether responses provide sufficient information on each topic;
- invite new issues and opinions;
- vary moderation techniques to focus or open the discussion;
- monitor the timing and pacing of the discussion.

First, the moderator needs to provide information about the purpose of the study and attend to ethical issues, such as seeking permission to record the group discussion. A moderator's introduction sets the tone of the group discussion, therefore using an informal, friendly manner can make participants feel at ease and begin to develop group rapport. A moderator needs to outline how the group will be conducted and provide guidelines for the group discussion to enable a productive discussion. Participants should be encouraged to speak at any time, but to let one person speak at a time so all points are clearly recorded. It should be stressed that there are no right or wrong answers; it is the individual views of each participant that are important, and it is acceptable to disagree with others in the group if they have a different opinion. The moderator can also emphasize that they are not an expert in the topic and their role is simply to facilitate the discussion. Participants also need to be encouraged to share their comments with the whole group rather than the person seated next to them to discourage fragmentation of the discussion.

The central role of the moderator is to develop group rapport and facilitate the discussion. A moderator needs to put participants at ease, encourage all members to share their views, stimulate debate between participants, probe for depth and clarity in the issues, listen to contributions and ask follow-up questions, monitor the reactions of participants, remember earlier points, anticipate the next topic of discussion, and remain aware of the timing of the discussion. Managing a group discussion may seem like a simple task but requires a great deal of skill to facilitate an effective discussion and confidence to negotiate the group dynamics. The moderator also needs to pay attention to pacing the discussion, which involves moving participants through the discussion topics so that each topic is covered in sufficient detail, but also sensing when the group has naturally exhausted one topic and is ready to move to the next. Moderating the group discussion is the

most critical and challenging part of focus group research and requires a range of skills and experience.

The group moderator needs to ensure that the discussion remains focused around the central research issues, yet allow sufficient divergence to identify new and unanticipated issues to emerge from the discussion. The moderator should encourage and manage a discussion, yet they should not dominate the discussion. The moderator needs to facilitate and channel the natural flow of the discussion, but not force it along a predetermined path. (Hennink, 2007: 177)

In many respects the role of a moderator is similar to that of an interviewer in an in-depth interview (see [Chapter 7](#)), in terms of developing rapport, collecting detailed data, pacing the session and remaining focused on the research issues. However, a focus group moderator has different challenges in that they are managing a *group* of participants, which means that additional skills are required in phrasing questions to the group, managing group dynamics, and probing an entire group.

The moderator's imperative is to collect usable data and therefore a moderator needs to be familiar with the research objectives in order to make rapid decisions during the discussion on whether to pursue certain issues raised, return to the issues later or redirect the discussion to other issues of relevance to the research objectives. Even though the discussion guide will be designed to direct and focus the discussion, it is the moderator who manages the discussion around the key topics on the guide and those raised by participants.

In some studies, the discussion may need to be conducted in a language unfamiliar to the researchers. Inexperienced researchers may consider conducting the group discussion themselves through an interpreter. However, you need to carefully consider the effect of using an interpreter on the group dynamics; if questions and responses are funnelled through an interpreter it will quickly stifle any spontaneous group discussion and reduce the discussion to a question and answer session. We suggest that a



more effective approach is to train a moderator from the study country or location to conduct the discussion in the language of the study participants. See Hennink (2007) or Maynard-Tucker (2000) for further guidance on training focus group moderators.

## Promoting discussion

Focus group discussions are a form of interviewing known as [non-directive interviewing](#) where the purpose is to move away from interviewer-dominated data collection towards promoting a more spontaneous discussion between participants that replicates everyday social interactions. The ‘hallmark of focus groups is their explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group’ (Morgan, 1997: 2). Group interaction is beneficial for two main reasons. First, an interactive discussion allows participants greater control over the issues raised compared to responding directly to questions from an interviewer. Participants are essentially probing each other when they enter into a discussion, by asking others for more detail, explanation or justification about an issue raised. This is extremely beneficial for the research as it is more likely to uncover unexpected issues, provide a deeper understanding of the issues and produce richer data as a result. Furthermore, probes from another participant are often more natural than a question from the moderator. The second benefit, and perhaps the more important, is that an interactive discussion between participants can ‘reach parts that other methods cannot reach – revealing dimensions of understanding that often remain untapped by the more conventional one-to-one interview or questionnaire’ (Kitzinger, 1994: 107). A dynamic discussion can lead to participants agreeing with one another, which provides you with confirming data about the issue, or they may disagree with one another and the ensuing dialogue involves each participant outlining their differing perspectives. This provides you with nuances of the varying perspectives that are not accessible in any other type of interview format. Therefore, an interactive discussion (with little moderator involvement) can lead to unanticipated issues and perspectives arising spontaneously. This is where focus group discussions provide a unique approach to collecting qualitative data.

Promoting a discussion between group members is a vital element of any focus group, but it is mistaken to believe that this task is left only to the moderator. Although the moderator's role is critical, all elements of the study design contribute to enabling a discussion and make the moderator's role easier. Enabling discussion begins with selecting a research topic that is suitable for a group discussion; managing group composition so that participants feel confident to discuss issues; developing a discussion guide with questions phrased to foster discussion; holding the discussion in a location that makes participants feel comfortable; and seating participants in a circle to foster interaction. All these design elements make small but important contributions to enabling a discussion *in addition* to the skills of the moderator. Therefore, if a group discussion fails, all elements of the study design need to be reviewed – not only the role of the moderator. Below we describe techniques that can be used by the moderator to foster an effective discussion that yields information useful to the research objectives. These techniques include the moderation style, [active listening](#), probing, using activities to stimulate discussion and avoiding the [deference effect](#).

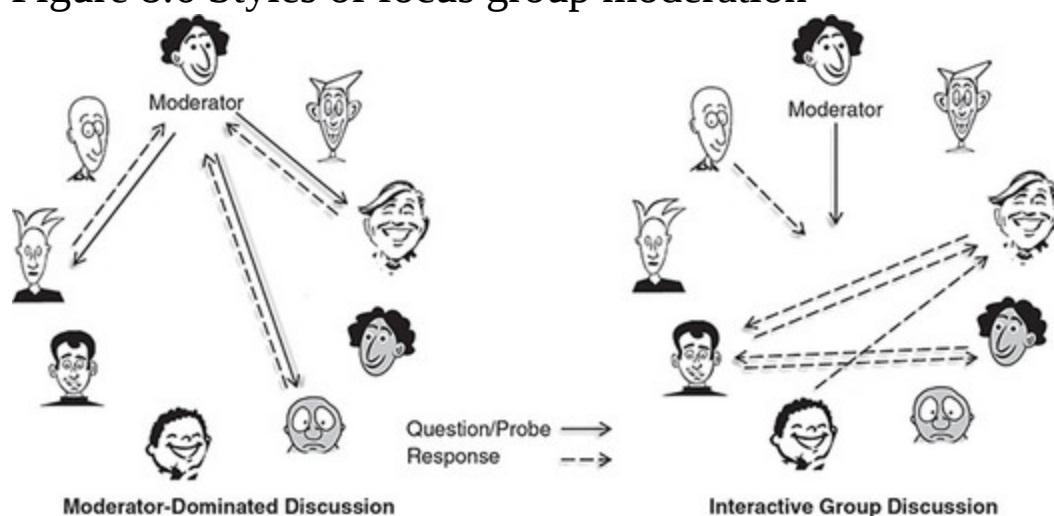
## Moderation style

An essential role of the moderator is to facilitate an interactive discussion between participants in order to access the spontaneous type of information outlined above. One of the ways this can be achieved is in the style of moderation used and in the creation of an informal comfortable group environment. A spontaneous discussion is less likely to occur if you use a more directive style of group moderation, where the discussion is dominated by the moderator (Flick, 2009; Hennink, 2007; Krueger, 1988). A focus group discussion should not be reduced to a question and answer session that involves serial questioning of each participant by a moderator, as this will quickly create a sterile environment and stifle any spontaneous discussion. It is important to remember that a focus group is not an in-depth interview with multiple participants but an interactive discussion between participants. [Figure 8.6](#) shows a diagrammatic representation of a moderator-dominated group discussion involving serial questioning of participants in turn versus an interactive group discussion between

participants with little moderator involvement. Although the moderator's role is reduced in an interactive discussion, they are still managing the discussion by asking questions, encouraging detailed responses, keeping the discussion focused on the key research issues and managing group dynamics. A focus group discussion is therefore working effectively when the moderator has limited input yet is subtly managing the discussion.

At times the level of moderator involvement may vary throughout the group discussion. A moderator may use a more directive style during the beginning of the group discussion to provide focus and direction to the discussion, while a less directive approach can be used during the central part of the discussion so that group interaction is enabled and the discussion flows more naturally for spontaneous views to emerge. Experienced moderators will be aware of the influence of different styles of moderation on the type and quality of information obtained.

Figure 8.6 Styles of focus group moderation



Source: Adapted from Hennink (2007:178)

## Active listening

Listening is an important skill for facilitating a group discussion; however, more attention is often given to asking questions rather than to the role of listening in a group discussion. *Active listening* is a critical skill in

facilitating a group discussion. It has two components: a) passive listening to comments made by group participants; and b) active questioning based on what is heard. Listening involves the moderator empathetically listening to participants' dialogue by 'leaning back' from the discussion and allowing it to proceed without interruption or direction. A moderator may make positive utterances (ah-ha) or gestures (head nodding) to show interest in the discussion but not direct it as such. This allows a discussion to proceed naturally, whereby participants raise and discuss issues that are shaped by their own interests. Listening provides the moderator exposure to a range of issues to explore more fully. Active questioning then follows, which involves the moderator asking follow-up questions and probing to go deeper into the issues raised in the participants' dialogue. The skill of active listening therefore 'allows the moderator to follow issues of importance to the participants, explore these more fully, and maintain the natural flow of the discussion' (Hennink, 2014: 74). It enables the moderator to focus on participants' own issues and discover unanticipated issues, rather than focusing only on the questions on the discussion guide. Active listening also allows the moderator to sense how to direct the discussion, such as allowing a dynamic discussion to continue or redirecting the discussion if a topic has been exhausted. Active listening therefore involves a range of skills in passive listening, processing issues raised, sensing the interests of the group and active questioning of issues relevant to the research goals.

Active listening can be enhanced by noticing participant's non-verbal communication and using this to draw participants into the discussion. Most moderators become aware of non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, body posture or gestures that signal a participant's interest in a topic, their desire to contribute, or level of agreement with the issue being discussed. A moderator may use these cues to invite contributions, for example if a participant is nodding attentively towards a speaker, the moderator may say 'I see you are nodding, do you have a similar view to share?' or to a frowning participant 'Do you have a different view of this issue?' thereby facilitating more natural contributions and interaction between participants. 'A moderator's attentiveness to non-verbal signals can dramatically increase participation in the discussion in a more natural way than calling on individuals at random for a contribution' (Hennink, 2014: 76)

## Group probing

Probing is a valuable technique used by the moderator to promote discussion, gain greater detail from participant's responses and clarify points raised. A probe can be a word or action used by the moderator to encourage discussion. A moderator typically uses ample probing in the beginning of a group discussion to encourage detailed responses; however, a balance needs to be found with over-probing, which can be counter-productive as participants may then feel that the moderator is seeking a specific response that has not yet been voiced.

A range of probes can be used by the moderator. In a group discussion you can probe an individual speaker or you can probe the group and stimulate a discussion. Probes for individual speakers are the same as you would use in an in-depth interview. For example, the 'ah-ha' probe encourages a speaker to continue, and 'reflective' or 'expansive' probes seek greater detail from a speaker (see [Chapter 7](#)). However, in a group setting the moderator has the added opportunity to probe the group as a whole to promote an interactive discussion between participants. A range of group probing techniques are outlined below and described more fully in Hennink (2007, 2014).

*Group probe.* Seek further information from the entire group by highlighting an issue raised by one participant and seeking input from others – for example, 'Sarah has described the importance of \_\_\_\_\_, how do others feel about this issue?'

*Group explanation probe.* Ask the whole group to explain an issue where there is clear agreement or divergence – for example, 'Everyone seems to agree that the age of marriage should be 18 years. Can you all explain the reasons for this?' This is useful when participants just say 'I agree' without sharing their own views. Alternatively ask: 'There seem to be several different views on the age of marriage. Can you all explain the reasons for this difference?'

*Ranking probe.* Ask the group to rank the issues raised and then ask for justification for the ranking – for example, 'We have identified several problems in this community. Can you rank these in order of importance?' Then ask: 'Why is this issue ranked first?'

*Participant gesture probe.* Draw a participant into the discussion by noticing their body language or facial expression – for example, ‘Nick, you look concerned, perhaps you’d like to share your thoughts on this issue?’ Or (when participants nod in agreement) ‘I see you are nodding. Would you like to share your experience too?’

*Probe for diversity.* Ask for different views to seek diversity in opinions – for example, ‘Does anyone else have a different opinion or experience?’ or ‘You are shaking your head, do you have a different opinion?’ or ‘It seems like everybody has the same opinion. What other views do people have in the community?’

*Silent probe.* Remain silent for about five seconds after a participant has spoken, to enable the speaker to expand their point or another participant to contribute.

*Activities as probes.* Conduct a short group activity to stimulate discussion. Allow sufficient time for the activity and related discussion. [Figure 8.7a](#) shows a ‘pile sorting’ activity where women in India were asked to rank cards of different pregnancy-related illnesses by their perceived severity of the illness. [Figure 8.7b](#) shows a ‘body mapping’ activity amongst adolescent girls in Nepal to understand their biological knowledge of menstruation. See later section about using activities.

## Managing group dynamics

Perhaps one of the most challenging tasks of a moderator is to manage the various personalities of participants in the group to ensure that everyone is given an opportunity to contribute to the discussion. This may require encouraging quiet participants to contribute their views and ensuring that dominant personalities do not monopolize the discussion. Most group discussions will have at least one quiet participant, a dominant participant, a rambling participant or a self-appointed expert. Some strategies for managing these common personalities are described below.

*Quiet* participants will often remain silent during the discussion or provide only short responses to the discussion issues. Quiet participants can be easily overlooked by a moderator; however, their opinions are equally important. It may take some effort for a moderator to draw out the views of

quiet participants, but this can often be achieved by using gentle probing, open body language and eye contact to welcome their contributions. A moderator may indirectly encourage quiet participants to contribute, for example by asking “Does anyone else want to share their views on this issue?” A moderator can also encourage a quiet participant by acknowledging their contribution and asking other group members to react or share their views, for example, ‘Thanks for that point Maria, what does everyone else think about this issue?’ Sometimes an entire group may be quiet. In this situation the moderator can take more time to develop rapport with the group and reinforce the importance of their views so they feel comfortable to contribute.

A *dominant* participant usually emerges in every group discussion. They often monopolize the discussion by being the first to respond to issues or by taking more time than others to contribute their views. The challenge for a moderator is to allow the dominant person to make their point, but not to allow them to dominate the discussion and restrain the contribution of others. An effective strategy to manage a dominant participant is for the moderator to use body language to signal reduced interest once they have made their point, by reducing eye contact, turning a shoulder towards them or looking down at the discussion guide. If these strategies fail then a moderator may need to use verbal cues to redirect the discussion to allow others to contribute to the discussion – for example, ‘Thank you for your opinion, John’, then turn to the rest of the group and ask, ‘Does anyone else have a different opinion?’ After some time this approach is usually successful in equalizing the contributions of group members. In some group discussions the other participants may begin to moderate a dominant participant by cutting them off or interrupting them to state their own views.

Some participants may state that they are *experts* on the discussion topic, proclaim more knowledge than others on the issues and offer their opinions as facts. Although these participants are seldom true experts, they can quickly create a hierarchy within the group and intimidate other members to feel that their contributions are less valued. It is important that the moderator disempowers the self-appointed ‘expert’ by stressing that everyone in the group is an expert on the issue and this is why they have been invited to the discussion.

Finally, a *rambling* participant is one who feels very comfortable in the group environment and monopolizes the discussion time by giving overly long accounts of their experiences, which may be of marginal relevance. As there is limited time in the group discussion to cover all issues and seek the views of all participants, the moderator needs to manage a rambling participant, for example by avoiding eye contact, redirecting the discussion, or by interrupting them to enable others to also contribute to the discussion.

## Using activities

Using activities during a focus group can be an effective strategy to promote discussion, develop rapport, and generate additional data (Hennink, 2014). Doing an activity can change the group dynamic by making participants feel at ease thereby contributing to group cohesion and rapport. Activities can also prompt discussion by the moderator asking participants to share their thoughts, for example why they ranked items in a certain order, which can uncover participants' silent reasoning and motivations. Therefore, activities offer an alternative way to collect data that indirectly taps into participants' thoughts, values or feelings, which may be difficult to access through traditional questioning strategies (Hennink, 2014). Activities also provide non-narrative data, such as a list, drawing or ranking generated by participants, which can be analysed alongside the narrative data from the discussion surrounding the activity.

Group activities take time; therefore we recommend carefully considering the added value of including an activity in the focus group versus simply asking questions. If an activity is included, the number of questions on the discussion guide needs to be reduced to allow sufficient time to conduct the activity and ask related questions. Some examples of activities used in focus group research are shown below.

*Free listing.* Focus group participants in the United States were asked to write a list of important components of a healthy lifestyle, to understand perceptions of healthy eating and physical activity (Quintiliani et al., 2008).

*Ranking.* Women participants in a focus group in India were asked to rank cards listing different pregnancy-related illnesses by their



perceived severity, to identify perceptions of various illnesses (Kausar, 2001). See [Figure 8.7a](#).

*Drawing.* Adolescent participants in a focus group in Nepal conducted a ‘body mapping’ activity where they were asked to draw a sketch of the body and to describe the process of menstruation and menstrual management (Kasturi, 2017). See [Figure 8.7b](#).

*Pile sorting.* Focus group participants in Brazil were asked to sort picture cards into two piles: activities they thought could transmit HIV and activities that could not transmit HIV, to explore participants’ understanding of HIV risk (Singer et al., 2011).

*Body silhouettes.* Focus group participants in India were shown various body shape silhouettes and asked to discuss their opinions on each body shape, to understand perception of obesity and body image (Griffiths and Bentley, 2005).

*Contraceptive samples.* Focus group participants in the UK were shown actual contraceptive products and asked to share their views, to observe reactions to the various methods (Cooper et al., 1992).

*Family planning posters.* Focus group participants in the UK were shown posters promoting family planning services, to identify views of effective health promotion images (Pearson et al., 1996).

*Health service logo.* Focus group participants in Pakistan were asked to discuss the sign of a local health clinic, to understand community perceptions of the clinic name and logo (Hennink et al., 2000, 2002).

*Vignettes.* Focus group participants in India were read a scenario (shown in [Figure 8.8](#)) about different types of women, then asked which woman has the highest/lowest risk of transmitting HIV, to identify HIV risk perceptions (Bailey, 2008).

Figure 8.7a Pile sorting activity during focus group discussion in India.



*Photo: Reprinted with permission from Farah Kausar*

**Figure 8.7b** Drawing activity during focus group discussion in Nepal.



*Photo: Reprinted with permission from Kasturi, (2017)*

Figure 8.8 Example vignette for focus group discussion

Let's discuss different types of women. Suppose you have sexual relations with three women. One is a prostitute. One is a lover. One is your wife.

- 1 Which of these women has the highest risk of HIV transmission? Why is this?
- 2 Which of these women has the lowest risk of HIV transmission? Why is this?
- 3 How can you determine whether a woman has AIDS?

Source: Bailey, 2008: 228

## Deference effect

As a moderator you need to be aware of the *deference effect*, whereby participants say what they think a moderator wants to hear rather than voicing their own opinion about an issue (Bernard, 1994). The deference effect will lead to a poor quality discussion and affect data validity. If participants all tend to agree on an issue or the discussion lacks diversity of opinions, it is possible that participants are being influenced by the deference effect. Some strategies for avoiding this are for the moderator to stress that individual opinions are valued, to encourage both positive and negative views, and for the moderator to refrain from sharing their own viewpoint so that participants are not aware of the moderator's stance on the issues.

## Post-discussion information

Once the group discussion is completed, it is good practice to provide an opportunity for participants to ask any questions about the study and for the moderator to answer questions they may have deflected during the group discussion. This is also a good time to collect any individual information from participants before they leave the venue. It is common to collect demographic information from each participant through a brief (one- or two-page) questionnaire. This questionnaire can also be used to ask personal or sensitive questions related to the research topic, but which would be inappropriate to ask in the group setting. A post-session questionnaire may be preferable to a pre-session questionnaire as it avoids

the potential of influencing the discussion by raising issues related to the discussion topic before the group discussion begins. The information collected on this questionnaire is useful during data analysis in interpreting the findings related to a particular group.

## Virtual focus groups

Focus group discussions are most commonly held in-person (as we have described in this chapter), but with increasing technology virtual focus groups provide an alternative format. We recommend conducting in-person focus group discussions whenever possible to enable most effective group interaction and thereby generate richer data. Here, we briefly highlight different types of virtual focus groups, and their strengths and limitations compared with in-person groups. For further details on virtual focus groups see Krueger and Casey (2015) and Hennink (2014).

Virtual focus groups are typically conducted via the telephone or internet, so participants do not actually meet in person. Focus groups conducted by telephone (also called ‘telefocus groups’) use teleconference facilities that may have video conferencing technology to allow participants to see each other during the discussion. Telefocus groups are conducted in much the same way as in-person groups, with participants joining the discussion remotely and a moderator asking questions and facilitating the discussion. A note-taker is usually present and the discussion may be recorded. Focus groups conducted via the internet (also called online groups) are either synchronous (real time) or asynchronous (not in real time). *Synchronous* groups involve participants logging on at the same time to conduct a real-time discussion using a chat room format (Bloor et al., 2001). This involves a moderator typing a question and participants responding by sending a written comment to the group. Participants may react and respond to the comments of others in real time, thus reflecting some of the dynamics of an in-person discussion; however, written responses may be shorter than verbal contributions of an in-person discussion (Hennink, 2014). *Asynchronous* groups are not conducted in real time and use a bulletin board format whereby the moderator posts a question and participants log in at different times to write a response (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). This format becomes a series of postings by participants, and the discussion board may remain

open for several days. Asynchronous groups allow participants more time to consider their responses, and may be useful for participants in different time zones (Hennink, 2014; Krueger and Casey, 2015).

Virtual focus groups have some advantages over in-person groups. They vastly extend the geographic reach of a study, so are particularly useful for study populations that are geographically dispersed, in remote locations, or have mobility difficulties. Virtual focus groups offer relative anonymity to participants compared to in-person groups, and allow greater comfort and convenience as participants can join from their own location, all of which may increase participation in the group. Participants in a virtual focus group may be less likely to dominate a discussion, thereby improving group dynamics (Barbour, 2007). Virtual groups are also cost effective as they eliminate costs for participant travel, venue rental and refreshments, and can be quickly reconvened if needed without added expense to a study. Online groups involve participants writing their responses, so they have the added advantage of generating an immediate transcript of the discussion, reducing the time and cost of transcription (Mann and Stewart, 2000).

Virtual focus groups have important limitations due to their use of technology to conduct a discussion. Virtual groups require participants to have access to certain technology and familiarity on how to use it; they may also be disrupted by technical failure such as losing an internet connection. These issues are particularly relevant for studies in resource poor settings or amongst low literacy populations. Online focus groups often lack visual contact with participants, making moderation more challenging than in-person groups. A moderator is less able to gauge participants' interest without seeing their facial expressions or body language, making it more difficult to encourage participant contributions, facilitate interaction and promote a discussion *between* participants. As a result, virtual focus groups may be shorter than in-person groups, potentially influencing data quality (Ross et al., 2006). Participants in virtual focus groups may also be more prone to distraction and disengagement from the discussion, as they are able to conduct other activities simultaneously.

## **Strengths and limitations**

The strengths and limitations of focus group discussions are summarized in [Table 8.1](#). The main strength of the method is that data are collected in a group environment, which provides a large volume of information from a variety of perspectives. However, the group setting can also provide challenges as you need a skilled moderator to conduct the group and manage group dynamics.

Table 8.1 Strengths and limitations of focus group discussions

Table 8.1 Strengths and limitations of focus group discussions

Strengths	Limitations
<i>Social setting:</i>	<i>Skills required:</i>
Replicates social interaction	Requires skilled moderator
Comfortable environment	Less controlled environment
<i>Application:</i>	Need comfortable environment
Useful for exploratory, explanatory and evaluation research	<i>Group dynamics:</i>
Suitable for group activities	Some participants may dominate or not contribute
Suitable for mixed methods research	Influence of social pressure
<i>Group environment:</i>	Hierarchies may develop
Generate large volume of information	Non-confidential setting
Identify a range of views	<i>Data and analysis:</i>
Limited researcher influence	Few issues discussed
Participants identify issues	Responses not independent
Identify new issues	

Strengths	Limitations
Issues debated and justified	Not suitable for individual level data
Social moderation of issues	Data analysis time-consuming and costly

*Source:* Adapted from Hennink (2007, 2014)

## Evaluating quality

Several components of focus group discussions can be reviewed to assess overall quality: the method selection, design of the discussion guide, group composition, moderation and the data produced. The questions below provide some suggestions for evaluating the quality of focus group discussions based on the approach described in this chapter.

### *Appropriate*

Are focus group discussions an appropriate method for the study purpose?

Are questions open and designed to promote discussion?

Is the number of questions appropriate?

Is the group size appropriate?

Is there evidence of group interaction?

### *Coherent*

Does the discussion guide operationalize concepts from the design cycle?

Is the discussion focused on the research issues?

### *Reflexive*

Do researchers reflect on characteristics of the moderator, group location or conduct of the discussion?

### *Transparent*

Is participant recruitment well described?

Is the location and conduct of the discussion groups described?

### *Interpretive*

Are 'thick' data collected, with depth, detail and nuance?

Was the discussion guide developed or refined inductively?

Is there evidence of probing and follow-up questions?

Do the data retain the 'voices' of participants?

### *New information*

Were new issues or concepts identified from each focus group discussion?

### *Saturated*

Did data collection reach saturation?

### *Culturally sensitive*

Are questions in the discussion guide culturally appropriate?

### *Ethical*

How were ethical issues managed?

### Key points

- A focus group discussion includes six to eight participants. It involves a *focus* on specific issues, with a predetermined *group* of people, conducting an interactive *discussion*.
- Focus group research is useful for exploratory, explanatory and evaluation research, and is particularly useful for exploring new



topics, gaining a range of perspectives and understanding social or cultural norms.

- A discussion guide is a list of topics or actual questions used by the moderator to prompt the discussion and keep it focused on the research topic.
- The discussion guide is often developed from the deductive conceptual framework of the study and then refined inductively once data collection begins – therefore, initiating the circular process in the data collection cycle.
- A discussion guide may follow a funnel structure, beginning with broad questions, moving to more specific questions and finishing with summary closing questions.
- Two aspects of group composition influence group rapport: homogeneity among participants and familiarity between participants.
- A focus group discussion can be conducted either indoors or outdoors, as long as the location is quiet, private, comfortable, free of distractions and easy to locate.
- A focus group team comprises a moderator and a note-taker. The moderator facilitates the group discussion and promotes group rapport.
- A moderator needs to manage group dynamics, in particular participants who are quiet or dominant.
- Probing is a valuable technique used by the moderator to gain greater detail from participant's responses, to clarify points and to promote discussion.
- Using activities can be effective for promoting discussion, developing rapport and generating additional types of data.

## Exercises

1. Design a focus group discussion guide relevant to your study topic. Review whether the questions included are suitable to promote discussion.

2. Consider the composition of the focus groups in your study. How will you achieve group homogeneity? What level of familiarity between participants is appropriate for your study?
3. Consider who will moderate the discussion groups for your project. What skills do they need?
4. Conduct a mock focus group discussion to practise managing group dynamics. What would you change in your moderation style?
5. Transcribe the group discussion and review whether you learnt anything new in the focus group that you may use in the next group discussion.

Further reading

## On methods

Barbour, R. (2007) *Doing Focus Groups*, Sage Qualitative Research Kit vol. 4 (edited by U. Flick). London: Sage Publications. A useful overview of the process of conducting focus group discussions.

Greenbaum, T. (2000) *Moderating Focus Groups. A Practical Guide for Group Facilitation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. A useful text focusing specifically on moderation techniques.

Hennink, M. (2007) *International Focus Group Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. A comprehensive text on conducting focus group research in international settings.

Hennink, M. (2014) *Focus Group Discussions*, Understanding Qualitative Research Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press. This book focuses on conducting, writing and assessing focus group research, with chapters dedicated to writing and presenting focus group results.

Hennink, M. (2017) 'Cross-cultural focus group discussions' in R. Barbour and D. Morgan (eds), *A New Era in Focus Group Research: Challenges, Innovation and Practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

pp. 59–82. This book chapter describes the methodological issues in designing, conducting and analysing cross-cultural focus group research.

Krueger, R. and Casey, M. (2015) *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (5th edn). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. An accessible book for understanding the fundamentals of focus group research.

Maynard-Tucker, G. (2000) ‘Conducting focus groups in developing countries: Skill training for bi-lingual facilitators’, *Qualitative Health Research*, 10 (3): 396–410. This article provides useful information on field training for focus group research.

## **On field practice**

Colucci, E. (2007) ‘Focus groups can be fun: The use of activity-oriented questions in focus group discussions’, *Qualitative Health Research*, 17 (10): 1422–33. A useful article for ideas on activities for focus group discussions.

O’Donnell, A.B., Lutfey, K.E., Marceau, L.D. and McKinlay, J.B. (2007) ‘Using focus groups to improve validity of cross-national survey research: A study of physician decision making’, *Qualitative Health Research*, 17 (17): 971–81. A good example of using focus group discussions to design a quantitative survey.

Vissandjee, B., Abdool, S.N. and Dupere, S. (2002) ‘Focus groups in rural Gujarat, India: A modified approach’, *Qualitative Health Research*, 12 (6): 826–43. This article describes useful recommendations for increasing the cultural appropriateness of focus group discussions.

Wilkinson, C.E., Rees, C.E. and Knight, L.V. (2007) ‘“From the heart of my bottom”: Negotiating humor in focus group discussions’, *Qualitative Health Research*, 17 (3): 411–22. This article focuses on

how focus group participants use humour in the discussion, which can be insightful during data analysis.

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## 9 Observation

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## Objectives

After reading this chapter you will:

- understand the method of observation;
- be able to determine when to conduct an observation;
- know what to observe;
- be able to distinguish between different types of observation;
- know how to prepare for and conduct an observation;
- know how to record an observation.

## What is observation?

Observation is a research method that enables researchers to systematically observe and record people's behaviour, actions and interactions. The method also allows researchers to obtain a detailed description of social settings or events in order to situate people's behaviour within their own socio-cultural context. Therefore, 'observational methods used in social science involve the systematic, detailed observation of behaviour and talk: watching and recording what people do and say' (Mays and Pope, 1995: 182). Observation is also 'used to understand and interpret cultural behaviour' (Mulhall, 2003: 306).

The act of observing may sound simple; however, it involves conducting multiple tasks. During an observation you are systematically watching, listening, questioning and recording people's behaviours, expressions and interactions as well as noting the social setting, location or context in which the people are situated. You need to decide what, when and whom to observe and how to record your observations. The focus and location of your observations are guided by your research questions or the purpose of the observation. In any social situation many things occur and conducting an observation may seem like watching an unfolding drama, with characters, events and a storyline.

The method of observation falls under the interpretive paradigm (see [Chapter 2](#)) and is often used within ethnographic research. Anthropologists, who extensively use observation in ethnographies, comment that observation is not just a method but also an intrinsic way to critically reflect on our theoretical ideas and presumptions of the study population (DeWalt and De Walt, 2011). Using observation in this way, researchers are able to obtain a [thick description](#) of the social setting, the activities and the people

studied. The term ‘thick description’ originates from Geertz (1973), who emphasized the need to situate people’s behaviours and actions within local frameworks in order to understand culture not by searching for universal laws, but by examining interpretations and looking for meaning.

Observation is also extensively used in other disciplines and study designs. You can use observation both for academic research and more applied research. For example, in applied research, observation may be used to understand commuters use of new services or spaces such as bus stops or ticket machines. Observation can be used as a standalone method when the research questions require a detailed investigation of the context. These observations usually occur over a long period of time and in multiple setting to systematically document the activities, actions, interactions and behaviour in the settings. Observation can also be combined with other qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, in order to provide complementary data to understand issues from different perspectives.

In this chapter, we describe when to use observation and the different types of observation. We then describe the common focus of observation on people, their actions and on social situations or places. We describe how to prepare for conducting an observation. Finally, we discuss the process of recording observations through field notes, [structured observation](#) protocols and a field diary.

## **When to use observation**

There are several benefits in using observation in social science research, for example, it can be used to:

- explore a new topic of research;
- provide context to a study through observation of the social setting;
- describe a specific place or social setting or people’s actions and interactions;
- understand how people utilize spaces;
- understand or explain people’s actions in context;
- discover silent social norms and values;
- complement other methods of data collection;

- provide a contextual understanding to the findings of other research methods (e.g. in-depth interviews or surveys).

Observation is particularly useful for providing an introduction to your study context, especially when starting a new project or when working in a new social context. It can also be beneficial for initial rapport development within your study community. When you first enter your study community you often conduct **non-participant observation** (described later), where you observe but do not participate in activities. At this stage you are observing the community from an outsider's (or etic) perspective (see [Chapter 2](#)), and observation of small actions can be striking. You may then conduct *participant observation* (see later) by interacting while observing the people or activities related to your research topic. When entering a community it is beneficial to know that the observed (community) are also observing your activities in the setting. In such a situation it is always useful to engage in small talk and try to initiate contact with the study population. This will help build rapport, normalize the presence of the researcher in the setting and provides an opportunity to make uninterrupted observations. For example, in a study on nurse education and training in India (Bailey, 2018) the research team were walking and observing the nursing institute and the various facilities. They were constantly aware that the nursing students were also observing them from a distance. The research team included an Indian man in his mid-thirties and a tall Dutch man in mid-twenties. The research team then started to make small talk with the nurses and explained the reason for their visit to the institute. This initiative of the research team helped them in building rapport, make observing daily routines easier and slowly blend into the setting.

Observation can also be used to identify the silent norms and values in a particular cultural setting. A simple example is observing how people greet each other and what this can tell us about the social dynamics within a culture. In some cultural settings men and women do not touch each other when they greet – they may greet verbally, fold their hands, nod or bow – while in other cultural settings men and women may shake hands or kiss each other. What people actually do depends on the social setting and their cultural norms. For example, in a professional setting people may not shake hands to greet each other every day, but simply say 'hello' or 'good



morning'. However, when meeting a new colleague or greeting a visiting colleague they may shake hands, to indicate a more formal situation. In a more casual social setting, such as among friends or family, people may greet each other with a kiss; however, the kiss may be on one cheek, or one kiss on each cheek starting with the left, or three kisses on the cheeks starting from the left. These simple gestures all reflect social protocol that can be observed and documented in your observation notes. Observing these practices can also benefit your rapport building activities as you learn what is appropriate (or not) in the social setting of your study. It is useful to discuss local protocols with a collaborator from the study community. For example, an Indian man observed that his Dutch and French friends greeted each other by giving three kisses on the cheeks and assumed that all Europeans greet each other in this way. However, when visiting Germany, he greeted his hosts at the airport in the same way, but quickly realized that something was wrong: 'When I started to kiss, I felt the other person drifting away. I immediately knew something was wrong, that this was not the right way of greeting in this country, in this situation.' Similarly, when you enter your study community you also observe the norms and codes of conduct within the community, such as how people dress, interact and behave.

Observation can be used as a stand-alone method, but it is also useful for complementing other methods of data collection. Observation is often used to provide supplementary data to other research methods used in a study. The advantage of combining observation with other methods is that you can include more of the context into the data collected from other methods. Some contextual aspects may not be verbalized in interviews and focus group discussions, and therefore observations add value to the narrative data. Mulhall (2003) refers to this as putting together a jigsaw puzzle, whereby each component of data collected provides the pieces of the jigsaw which together complete the 'picture on the box' to provide a comprehensive picture of the social situation or the issues under investigation. For example, if you are conducting interviews on how young mothers use public places with prams or buggies, you could conduct an interview with young mothers about this topic, and in addition you could observe young mothers in public places. For example, you may go to a shopping mall or a public park to watch how they use these spaces (picnic

tables, elevators, play areas, car parks, etc.) and observe some of the problems they face. Therefore, by combining observation with interviews you gain a different perspective on the issues and situate the behaviour within a larger social or physical setting. Observation can also be combined with focus group discussions to further understand the issues discussed in the group. For example, if you have conducted a focus group discussion to identify the barriers to using a local health centre, you may complement the focus group data with observation by travelling with people to the health centre to observe their travel experiences. Observation can also be useful to clarify unclear findings from other data sources in a study. For example, an evaluation study of health facilities in Pakistan (Hennink et al, 2002) used a survey with service providers and clients, together with observation at the clinics. Survey results indicated that a high proportion of service providers felt that there was adequate privacy in the clinic counselling area, while the majority of clients stated that there was no privacy in the counselling area. These seemingly contradictory findings were clarified during an observation at the clinic, where it was observed that client counselling was conducted within the clinic waiting area, behind a glass screen approximately five feet high. Providers felt that this screen offered privacy, but clients stated that they could see and hear the counselling of other clients while they were in the waiting area. Therefore, using observation provided a clearer context to the issues of privacy in the clinic setting.

## **The cyclical nature of data collection**

Qualitative data collection is a cyclical process as depicted in our data collection cycle. This cyclical process begins during data collection as you start to learn about the study issues. You can use what you learn from early observations to refine your observation plan, or the selection of sites to explore issues in greater depth. For example, the initial behaviours, study participants and places to observe are usually defined in the design cycle of the study. From the first observation sessions, you start to identify issues relevant to your study, then in the next set of observations you can conduct a more focused observation of specific behaviours, activities or actors to get a deeper understanding of these aspects. This process enables richer data to be generated as data collection progresses. You may also learn about other

sites of observation, activities to observe or notice other times of the day when the activity changes – these early observations will help you to refine your observation plan and may also influence whether or not you would participate in the activities or remain as an observer (non-participation). Using inductive inferences from early observations to guide further data collection is an important part of the data collection cycle, and makes the process circular. Initiating an inductive process involves reviewing data as you collect it to identify issues raised. This can be done in several ways: you may be the observer and thus become familiar with issues in this way or you can review the field notes of the observers immediately after each observation; you can then use what you learn to identify any changes you can make in conducting further observations to go deeper into the issues.

The cyclical process of data collection, which is characteristic of qualitative research, also allows you to identify when to stop data collection. As you conduct observations you can identify when no more new insights are being made, which is the point of saturation at which further data collection becomes redundant (see [Chapter 6](#)). Reaching saturation requires you to review and reflect on data during the fieldwork process to identify whether to make adjustments to the observation plan to enrich data collection and to assess when saturation is reached.

## **What to observe**

What do you observe when using the method of observation? Typically, you focus on different aspects in an observation, observing people, their actions, interactions and body language, and observing places and social settings in which the actions occur. Both dimensions make up an observation; however, depending on the purpose of your observation, you may focus more on certain aspects than others. As a first time user of this method it may seem difficult to observe and record all activities happening in the setting. In such a situation you may decide to focus on one aspect and then move on to other aspects. For example, if you are observing how university students make use of the library, you could first focus on how they enter the building and then the manner in which they deposit or withdraw books, then the interaction between the librarian and the student. When you focus on different elements in the observation you can achieve more systematic

observations of each part of the activity. Repeated observations focusing on some key aspects can yield richer data.

## **Actions and interactions**

A common reason for conducting observation is to understand people's behaviour within their own socio-cultural setting. This is done by focusing on the actions and interactions of people while they are in their own social setting. Observation involves watching what people do (or not do), listening to what they say and how they say it, and observing how people interact. So rather than asking people about their behaviour, as you do in in-depth interviews, you watch their behaviour. When using interviews, we ask people about their behaviour and why they behave in a particular way. This approach can yield one type of data, but there is also the risk of post hoc rationalization of certain behaviours, whereby participants then adjust how they describe their behaviour as a form of justification or rationalization. With observation you are able to view what people actually do, so you learn about how people really behave and also how certain behaviours are influenced by the situation or context in which they are conducted. For example, when we interviewed participants to ask about whether they took tablets as prescribed by community health workers, they all said that they took the tablets as instructed. However, when observing their actual behaviour and listening to their daily conversations, we found that most people did not take the tablets at all but discarded them in the garbage bin. Therefore, we can use observation to identify discrepancies between what people say and what they actually do. Another example shows how some behaviours may be modified depending on the social situation in which they occur. A researcher in Uganda observing the family life of a middle upper class family noticed that the girls in the family used a modern way of greeting visitors (with a handshake) when their parents were absent. However, when their parents were present, they greeted visitors in the traditional or formal way by kneeling down to welcome or bid farewell to visitors. If the researcher had asked the girls how they greeted visitors, they might have said that they always shake hands, but this observation revealed what they actually do, and how this differed in different situations (i.e. when parents are present or not). Observation thus gives you access to more

nuanced information which you may not get by just asking. Observing the same behaviours at different times and in different contexts may also reveal variability from which you can start to make hunches of possible associations or explanations in your field notes.

Observation is also a useful method to identify how people interact with each other in different social situations. For example, students observed how different people interacted in a shopping mall in the Netherlands on a weekday morning. They first observed that the people present at that time of day and during mid-week were mainly elderly people, mothers with young children, retailers and some entertainers (musicians). They also observed how these different actors used the walkways around the mall and how they interacted with the retailers and with other customers. From these observations, the silent norms about how to behave in a shopping mall became apparent: for example, people walk on the right side of the mall; when an elderly person or a wheelchair user enters a shop people step aside, and similarly when a mother with a stroller enters a shop people assist by holding open a door, etc. Observation of the space people keep when interacting with each other can show you the importance of personal space in different cultural contexts. It can also show how some people claim more space than others, possibly reflecting inherent power structures in societies. For example, the concept of ‘manspreading’ where men in public transport sit with their legs wide apart and encroach the adjacent seats may reflect a gendered use of public spaces. Similar behaviours that are repeatedly observed can highlight innate power dynamics that exist in everyday behaviours.

[Figure 9.1](#) shows the interaction between a travelling salesman and a customer in the fishing docks in Goa, India. The salesman has many small items for sale that are being viewed by the customer. What do you observe in this photograph? What is happening? How do the two people appear to act or interact? If you observe closely, you will see a large steel suitcase to the left of the salesman, a transistor radio and a small metal cash box. The customer appears to be viewing the wares at this stage, as there is no apparent exchange of money or eye contact in this scene.

Figure 9.1 A travelling salesman, India



*Photo: A. Bailey*

## **Body language**

A further aspect of observing people is to notice their body language, as this can reveal further information about behavioural norms. Body language includes how people look at each other, and the facial expressions and posture they adopt when interacting with people and places. Qualitative researchers are interested in capturing all dimensions of the social situation and the people who inhabit the social spaces. Noticing body language can give us cues on how our study participants act or react in a particular situation, what emotions they show through their actions, expressions and how body language changes when interacting with different people. There are three parts to observing body language: facial expressions, posture and gestures. In some situations, we may need to observe all three to understand the context and interaction between individuals.

Facial expressions can depict a range of emotions, such as anger, sorrow, joy and surprise, depending on the context. For example if you are observing passenger behaviour at a bus terminal you will see a range of emotions, for example some people may show sadness at leaving loved ones behind. Sadness may be observed through overt facial expressions such as crying or through actions such as putting the head down, staying close to the person leaving, holding hands, making less eye contact with people around. Facial expressions can change during an observation period, for example if you are observing how patients behave in a waiting area of a lab or test facility. They could arrive looking tense, which can be observed through the body language, such as hunched shoulders, little eye contact with others and sitting close to the person accompanying them. Then once they have given blood they become even more tense with the uncertainty, they do not make eye contact with people around them, frantically browse posters, and when they get called in to hear about their results they may show even more tense expressions and finally when they come out, depending on the results, they may show facial expressions of joy, sorrow, relief or confusion. The degree of facial expressions and the accompanying gestures can differ in various cultures and contexts. In some western cultures when people meet friends their facial expressions of joy could be combined with bodily contact in terms of a hug or a kiss. In other cultures, where men and women are not allowed to show emotions in public but perform culturally appropriate gestures, they may nod, bow at each other or touch the feet of the person.

The second element of observing body language is the posture. Posture is largely defined as the manner in which people position themselves by sitting, standing, lying and so on. When conducting an observation of people this may be the first thing you notice and make a note on how many people are standing or sitting in the setting. The manner in which the person is sitting or standing can tell us a lot about how that person is experiencing the place or setting. For example, if you are observing how men and women use public spaces in Mumbai, India, you will notice how men stand at street corners smoking, with a relaxed body language, not reacting to anything around them, they may congregate with other men and drink tea or chat. In the same setting, you may observe women, they are conscious of the men on the street by making furtive glances at the men, they walk swiftly to their

destination, they do not stand or talk to other women or men in the setting. For detailed discussion on the gender differences in public spaces we recommend reading the book *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* by Phadke et al. (2011). Postures also can show power relations that exist in the setting. You may observe that people may stand up to show respect for elders or people in power. They would sit up straight when spoken to or to draw attention to themselves. By adopting different postures people could also signal others to leave them alone by keeping their belongings around them and taking more space around them; on the contrary you may also observe that people could also change their postures to make space for people to come sit next to them and in doing so offer the possibility of an interaction. They may not talk to each other but acknowledge each other through changing body posture and facial expressions of acceptance from the person making the space available and gratitude from the person taking up the space.

The third element of body language is gesture. Gesture is broadly understood as bodily movements to communicate with others. Gestures can range from small movements to more elaborate combinations of movements, for example nodding to acknowledge someone coming into the room or in some cultures kneeling on the ground to welcome someone. Many gestures are culturally specific and need to be interpreted according to the context in which they are performed. For example, if you are observing a conversation between two individuals and one person is nodding in the conversation, here you may assume that the person is in agreement and the nodding can be interpreted as a sign of agreement. Now if you shift this scene to India and the person listening wobbles their head, a non-Indian researcher may find it difficult to decipher if it was an agreement or is the person doubting the communication. When culturally decoded this head wobble, in the Indian context, is the person agreeing to the content of the communication. Similarly, culturally specific gestures such as men in non-western cultures holding hands in public need not be interpreted as men being romantically involved. Therefore, gestures need to be interpreted based on the cultural context. These gestures can also change depending on age, gender, status and power relations. When people mimic each other's gestures, they reciprocate the respect that is shown to them. For example, if you are observing a group of businessmen at an international



convention, you may observe that when an Asian businessman meets a new colleague he takes out his card, turns it around with the text facing the person being addressed and uses both his hands to give his card. The person receiving, if aware of this custom, receives this card with both hands. These gestures show that both individuals are reciprocating the respect show to them. Non-reciprocation of gestures or change in gestures depending on the status of the individual can be interpreted to highlight the power relations that exist between individuals and communities. This non-reciprocation of gestures can be observed by the interactions and body language of the people involved in the setting. For example, imagine you are observing a clinic to understand the interactions between the staff and the patients. An old man with a worn-out shirt with some tears walks in and approaches the attendant, he is unsure of the clinic so keeps looking around and the attendant seated in his chair frowns at the old man and throws on the table a form and asks him to fill it out in the corner away from where others are sitting. A few minutes later a younger man in an expensive suit and carrying a large mobile phone walks in and nods towards the attendant. The attendant immediately stands up, slightly bows his head and requests the younger man to take a seat by pointing at the chair closest to him, and then proceeds to bring a form and a pen for the new patient. He also brings him a glass of water. When we analyse these gestures, we can interpret how different patients are treated in the same setting. In this example the observed gestures can be interpreted as discrimination but in other settings the gestures and behaviours can be subtler. Understanding and documenting these subtle acts or gestures of discrimination requires closer and repeated sets of observations.

Observing the body language of a group of people can also provide rich data on a situation and the interplay of power or social control in some situations. For example, if you are observing a group meeting from a distance you may record how people are sitting, the non-verbal norms of greetings, gestures and eye contact. You may notice that some people lean forward or nod while the speaker is talking, while others look away or yawn. You may also note down whether the person speaking uses their hands while making a point or if there is eye contact between people in the meeting. One can also observe whether other people participating in the meeting conform to the same behaviours observed. For example, if

observing the activities in a Hindu temple in India, you would observe that devotees gather near a statue of the deity, they stand straight, with their feet together and fold their palms together. If you then observe their body language you can see that people typically maintain some distance from others, they do not make eye contact with each other, instead focusing their eyes on the deity.

[Figure 9.2](#) shows a vegetable vendor in a market in India. If you observe the body language of the vendor, you may notice that he is concentrating on what he is doing, he appears to be ‘situated’ within himself. He is not making eye contact with the customer or leaning towards the customer. Was your observation on the body language of [Figure 8.2](#) the same as ours?

## **Place or social setting**

Observation may also focus on a place or social setting. By focusing on a place, you can observe how people make use of a space, social setting or institution. For example, a researcher may observe the layout of an educational institution to identify how this influences the access for people with disabilities. Observing the physical setting is important to begin to situate any activities that take place in that location.

For example, if you observe people at a bus stop, you may begin by observing the bus stop itself, the place. You may observe the physical aspects of the bus stop, such as the height and width of the bus shelter, the number of people that can stand under it, whether the place is clean or littered with waste and so on. Observing the place is one level of observation. The second level is to observe what is around the bus stop; are there shops or newsstands, or machines selling drinks, etc. You may also observe how people use the seating areas. For example, is there space for everyone to sit? Are only some people sitting, what types of people are sitting (i.e. elderly)? Do you observe any interactions related to seating, such as someone giving up their seat for a woman, or an elderly person? Observing in this way helps you understand the place and then locate the activities or behaviour within this place. While observing the location pay attention to the activity patterns in the place and the flow of people and what silent norms exist on the use of the place. Observe how the design of

the place either facilitates or hinders mobility. For example if you are observing how travellers use escalators at an airport, you would first locate the escalators that you would like to observe, then examine what instructions exist that inform people about the escalator, next you might observe what safety mechanisms exist to prevent falls, next you might observe things that surround the escalator. Thus before you start to observe people using the escalator you would have the basic map or design of the place.

Figure 9.2 A vegetable vendor in a market, India



*Photo: A. Bailey*

[Case study 9.1](#) provides an example of an observation of a place – a burial ground in the Netherlands – and the social setting surrounding it. The researchers also observed the religious and economic symbolism associated with different graves in this burial ground.

## **Case study 9.1**

### **Observation of burial places in the Netherlands**

We visited two types of burial grounds in a city in the Netherlands: one was a graveyard and the other a crematorium. At both burial grounds we observed the surroundings and looked for symbols that identified the meanings that people attached to these places. We observed both the location itself and the people present, but we felt it was inappropriate to ask questions or interact with any people present.

#### **Location and people**

Both the graveyard and the crematorium grounds offered a certain degree of privacy in the way they were laid out. For example, both locations were fenced off from the public by bushes, natural growth or a waterway along the borders. This layout offered visitors a degree of privacy; this was especially true for the crematorium.

The graveyard was completely empty of people, it was in a very large open space and this felt a bit frightening. This place seemed to symbolize a very traditional image of death. Perhaps this layout reflects a cultural or religious schema of death where people are not encouraged to sit or visit this place regularly. In contrast, the crematorium grounds felt more welcoming. It did not resemble the layout and design of a traditional graveyard and so seemed more acceptable. The area was landscaped in a modern way resembling a garden. We experienced a sense of peace and remembrance in this area, and also pleasure because we felt like we were walking through a garden. There were also people present in the crematorium grounds (unlike the graveyard). Some people were working to maintain the crematorium (and keeping an eye on the visitors). Two people were busy decorating graves, so we felt it would be inappropriate to disturb them to ask questions. There were also a lot of facilities in the crematorium grounds for visitors, for example fountains to collect water for the flowers and plants by the graves, benches near the graves for visitors and a building for ceremonies, etc. To us the crematorium was a more modern place associated with death.

## **Expressiveness and identity**

The graveyard and the crematorium also differed greatly in the way the graves were decorated. In the graveyard there were big gravestones with few flowers or other types of decorations on them. The only forms of decoration seemed to be the writing and symbols carved on the headstone. In contrast, the graves in the crematorium had plenty of flowers and plants on them and there were also various personal items placed on the graves. Each grave was landscaped, which gave the graves a more personal feeling and showed the perceived identity of the deceased.

## **Economic symbols**

We also tried to identify any symbols of the economic status of the deceased. In the graveyard, we noticed that there was variation in the size of the grave plot, the size (particularly the height) of the headstone and the writing and symbols on the headstone. Could these differences represent economic status? In the crematorium we noticed that the grave size was standardized, but there was variation in the designs on these. We wondered whether these designs could indicate different economic status. We also wondered whether the location of the grave suggested different costs. For example, a grave in the wall with many other urns may be cheaper, while a grave in the garden area may be more expensive. We asked about this later, and this was not the case.

## **Religious symbols**

In both the graveyard and the crematorium we found symbols of the Christian religion, particularly the cross symbol. Religious beliefs might also influence how a burial ground is viewed by the public, for example the frightening feel of the graveyard compared to the crematorium.

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# Types of observation

The use of participant observation may be viewed along a continuum from complete participant observation to non-participant observation. The level of participation may vary between these two extremes; however, here we discuss the two approaches at either end of the continuum, participant observation and non-participant observation. We also discuss two additional approaches to observation: observation with visual aids and the walk through the spaces approach.

The role of the researcher in observation has been described as ranging from 'complete participation', on the one hand, to 'complete invisibility', on the other (Robson, 1995). Complete participation or 'going native' (as it is called by many anthropologists) involves months or years of living in a particular community and becoming part of a community. Complete invisibility, as Robson suggests, is difficult to achieve in reality because as the researcher you are always present in the social situation you observe, whether or not you are participating in the activities. Robson (1995) concludes that 'becoming part of the wallpaper' is never completely possible in observation. The researcher should not aim for invisibility but for stronger rapport with the study population so that they are more likely to blend into the social situation. When you have more rapport, your study population has greater trust in you thus allowing you to participate in the activities. In some studies using a video camera can make the researcher seem less visible; however, the camera itself is still present while recording the activity. Another technique used for observation is the 'walk through the spaces', in which you observe while walking through a particular social space, usually accompanied by a member of the local community. If done well, this approach can yield a very detailed description of a place, including the physical setting and the activities that typically occur as described by the community member.

Selecting the method of observation is typically determined by the purpose of the observation. For example, if your research objective is to describe in detail the religious rituals, symbols and practices of a community, you may use participant observation, where you are participating in the activities. For this you need to build rapport with the religious leader and then obtain

permission to participate and observe. Through participant observation you can then document the religious activities. If your research objective is to identify how commuters use railway stations, you may use non-participant observation, to identify how people use the railway station, the waiting areas, shops and amenities in the station. For this type of observation you do not necessarily need to participate as a commuter yourself, but only focus on observing the people and activities in the place.

## **Participant observation**

Participant observation can be defined as ‘the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the research setting’ (Schensul et al., 1999: 91). Through participation in the daily activities of your study community you can learn about the behaviour of individuals in the community, and also about the social order within a community, and the cultural norms.

In participant observation you thus participate in the life of your study community or participants, behave according to their norms and values, and adopt a certain social role (e.g. as a student, guest or carer), while you maintain sufficient distance to observe the situation. For example, you may be conducting participant observation at a shopping centre or marketplace; therefore you may be participating as a shopper yourself, but you also observe how others behave in this space. Similarly, you may be a participant observer on a bus and be participating as a passenger while observing the bus itself, the actions of travellers, their interactions and the body language of your co-travellers. Your participation in the setting that you observe can help you to get the ‘smell’ and feel of a place, without disturbing the normal course of events. The extent of participation varies and depends on the extent of rapport that you establish with the community or participants. When you enter into a community you typically start by conducting non-participant observation and slowly move towards complete participant observation. [Case study 9.2](#) shows an example of participant observation in a specific setting, where the researcher was unobtrusively participating in the activities of the setting while making observation notes; however, upon moving to another location the researcher felt unable to observe unobtrusively any longer and stopped the observation.

## **Case study 9.2**

### **Observation at the Sunset Hotel, East Africa**

#### **Context**

This observation took place on 1 March 2005 between 9 p.m. and 11 p.m. in the café under the veranda of the Sunset\* Hotel in a city in East Africa. We were interested in observing the activities in the hotel café in the evenings, particularly the women who visited the café. During this observation I was sitting at a café table, participating in the scene by eating and drinking, while observing the activities. I was not interacting with anyone apart from the waiters.

#### **Location**

The location of the observation was the hotel veranda under which there is a café restaurant. It is an outdoor location with a street frontage. The hotel building has large archways in front facing the street. There are large carriage-style lamps hanging from the middle of each archway. The floor is tiled and swept clean, there are wooden beams on the ceiling and the walls are clean, whitewashed and freshly painted. The tables were set up in rows and each table had four matching chairs and a green tablecloth. I was seated at one of these tables close to the main entrance door of the hotel.

#### **People and activities**

There were four types of people in my view: pedestrians along the street, the hotel staff, hotel guests and restaurant customers, like myself. The first type of people were the pedestrians walking on the footpath in front of the café. These included sellers who mostly carried fruit baskets on their heads and offered fruit to passers-by, casually dressed men (in t-shirts and jeans), men in suits and couples walking slowly along the footpath.



The second group of people were the hotel staff. There were three groups of hotel staff, whose roles could be identified by their distinctly different uniforms. For example, the café waiters were wearing a red shirt and black bow tie with black trousers. The concierge staff were dressed in a bright red shirt with gold stripes on the cuffs and wore a matching cap and black trousers. The hotel guards wore dark blue trousers and a white shirt with a badge on the shoulder, and a blue cap. They also carried a gun and held their hand on the gun with a finger pointing forwards as if on the trigger. It became clear that each different type of hotel staff remained within a specific 'zone'. For example, the guards were outside the hotel on the other side of a low hotel fence, the waiters moved around the veranda café area and the concierge staff remained in the hotel lobby directly behind the veranda or they were standing at the main door of the hotel looking outside. Rarely did each type of staff move outside of their 'zone'.

There was also a distinct difference in the pace of movement of each group of hotel staff. The waiters walked with purpose, carrying food and drinks and responding to customers. The guards were stationary, leaning on the fence or walking very slowly from side to side. The concierge staff were often standing idle, talking to other staff or walking slowly with their hands behind their back.

The third group of people were the hotel guests, who moved quickly and purposefully from the street into the hotel lobby and then out of view (presumably to their rooms). Most of the hotel guests were men who appeared to be business people, as they were dressed in suits and carrying briefcases or laptops. There were both black men and white men, perhaps aged from mid-twenties to early fifties. There was a distinct absence of families, children or women amongst the hotel guests.

The fourth group of people were customers in the café, mostly men. Some were seated alone and reading, watching others or eating. There were also small groups of business people who were talking with papers on the table or working at a laptop together. Some of these were eating and most had drinks.

Another type of customer in the café were women who were dressed distinctly differently from other people in the café. They wore tight clothes

often showing their bare back or shoulders, high-heeled shoes and bright coloured jewellery, and carried handbags. They had very obvious make-up and hairstyles (e.g. dyed hair, high braids or large wigs or curls). These women were seated at tables in pairs or threes, right beside the hotel entrance door. They were mostly drinking, few were eating. These women appeared familiar to the café waiters, who interacted with them by calling their names or making playful remarks when the waiters passed by. The waiters were equally familiar with the women, smiling, passing comments, touching the shoulder when speaking or lingering by the tables to straighten condiments that needed no straightening. The hotel manager (identified by his name badge) also made familiar gestures as he passed by these women.

These women were seated in a 'poised' manner with straight backs, head high and legs crossed neatly. Their focus was less towards the other women seated at the same table and more towards the men passing by the café tables. None of these women were seated inside the hotel lobby or went into this area. These women interacted with similar types of women at other tables by lighting each other's cigarettes. They also interacted directly with men seated alone, similarly by asking for a cigarette light, an ashtray or by smiling at them. It soon became obvious that most of the women in the café were of this type. As men passed by, they also looked directly at these women.

My observations then focused specifically on a few of these women. One of them was seated alone at a table as if waiting for someone. She was there for some time before she received an older white man who looked to be in his mid-fifties. He was short and overweight, with ruddy coloured cheeks. He approached the table with familiarity and sat down. Although the woman leaned in towards this man he sat aloof, leaning back in his chair smoking cigarettes and watching other women in the café. There was little conversation between the two and the man continually gazed elsewhere. Before this man arrived the woman was drinking soda and afterwards they both drank beer. Many women greeted this man.

At another table there was a woman who was briefly seated alone, but she soon got up and moved to another area of the hotel (presumably the bar). Within a short time she returned with a young man holding hands; they

walked casually back thorough the café restaurant and greeted a number of people. This man walked slowly by and stopped to converse with several people, including waiters, and they appeared in no hurry to leave. The couple greeted the older white man who was now seated with two women. There appeared to be little concealment of any of these liaisons. There was a clear social familiarity between all these people, but their connections were not clear from observing them. My observations raised many questions. Who was the older white man? How is he familiar with these women? Why doesn't he appear to have a purpose? These questions could not be answered through my observations.

During my observation the older white man leaned over to me and asked what I was doing and where I was from. He had a foreign accent. His questioning had a sense of suspicion about what I was *really* doing. Had he noticed that I was not a 'real' customer and was doing something else (e.g. observing)? Did I look out of place to him? Had my note-taking aroused his suspicion? I completed my observation soon after this.

I walked over to a bar area adjacent to the café. It had loud music and people standing drinking. In this area there were only the women I observed earlier and men. There was more interaction here with men touching women and talking very closely. I suddenly felt obtrusive and no longer concealed in any group of people. My presence began to attract attention, so I left and retired to my hotel room.

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\*The hotel name has been changed.

Your level of participation can vary and depends on the context and nature of your observation. Spradley (1980) identifies four levels of participation within the method of participant observation.

- *Passive participation*, when you do not interact or participate in the activities but observe and record your observations from a nearby vantage point.
- *Moderate participation*, where you conduct some participation with observation, thus you are both an insider and an outsider.

- *Active participation*, when you seek to participate in many activities of those you observe, doing what others do, to learn the cultural rules and values.
- *Complete participation*, where you become completely involved in the social setting you are observing, perhaps by living in the study location for an extended period of time.

An example of how you can move from passive to complete participation could proceed as follows. Imagine that you are conducting a study on geriatric care by observing a care home for older adults. In the beginning as you enter the care home and get permission from the administrator to conduct your study, you will use a *passive participation* approach where you notice the daily rhythms of the place, the design of the home, make brief sketches of the location, and note some first impressions of how people use the space. In a few days when the residents and the administrators have got used to your presence, trust you to an extent, in the setting they may start to make small talk, then they would invite you to have tea with them. Here you start to conduct *moderate participation* as you observe the social activities, how people interact in the setting, and the body language of the people while interacting, the kind of events people are talking about.

In the next stage, when you have been to have tea with the group or an occasional meal, they may invite you to help them organize an event, or participate in the setting up of a computer room, or to think about improving the living situation at the home. At this stage there is a sufficient amount of rapport for you to conduct *active participation*. At this stage you can begin to observe the silent rules and you may in some instances be told off for doing something that is not part of their routine. In planning an activity you will see how some older adults may take a more active role, and you may be asked to help out more than you have asked for and thus in the due course observe other dimensions of the social life which was not possible earlier. Once the event is organized, festival celebrated or a computer room is set up, you have worked closely with them but still had time to go back home and reflect on what you observed, people's reactions to your activities, their reactions to other people in the setting and the process from the start of the idea to finish.

At this level you have gained both trust and established close rapport with the residents and the staff. Here you could approach the administrators and the residents for permission to work in the care home. They now trust you and offer you a place to stay and in return you have to work in the care home. Here begins your *complete participation* in the setting. In the previous stages you could withdraw from the setting and take notes and reflect on the activities of the day. In the stage of complete participation you do not have much time for such reflections. In the care home you could be helping out in the kitchen, washing the laundry and taking older people for doctor visits. All these activities require you to be completely involved in the care of the older adults. Compared to other stages this stage may feel overwhelming but by carrying out all these activities with the people one gets a more emic and grounded view of everyday realities of a care home and it gives us an unique view of everyday challenges and joys of older adults in care home.

Complete participation in a social setting can be quite demanding. However, you may question whether complete participation is actually possible. Participant observation involves taking part in the activities and daily life of the community under study. However, researchers need to consider how much participation is really possible. Sometimes you need to draw the line in terms of what you can or are allowed to participate in. For example, if you were observing the activities of sex workers, would you be a client and actually have sex with them? In another setting, if you are observing a religious service, would you go and take communion with the other members of the congregation if you were not of the same faith?

Participant observation requires researchers to:

- spend a great deal of time in a study context;
- develop close relationships with people they have not met before;
- take detailed field notes;
- possibly incur personal risk (e.g. if observing drug users, street gangs).

As a participant observer you therefore need to:

- keep an open mind, conducting detailed observations and not take observations for granted;

- establish rapport and empathy with the study community to be able to participate in their lives;
- learn to separate interpretation from observation.

Once you are familiar with the main components of participant observation and have internalized these, it will enable you to gain an emic view of the lives of the people you study. One of the key decisions for researchers using participant observation is to determine the type of activities to participate in and the level of participation that is appropriate. These decisions will be primarily guided by your research question or the purpose of your observation, but also by the types of activities that are commonly conducted within your study setting. The activities in which you participate may be as simple as working in an orchard picking grapes if you are observing seasonal workers, or more risky activities such as observing the selling of drugs if you are using participant observation to identify the nature of drug transactions. The extent of participation is also dependent on how easily you are accepted by your study community or on certain social restrictions. For example, you may not be welcome or allowed to observe particular religious practices, community meetings, political discussions or other activities where you are considered an outsider. In addition, you need to be aware that your personal characteristics (e.g. ethnicity, religion, gender) may disrupt the usual progress of the activities that you are observing. For example, if you are a white European observing voting behaviour at a polling booth in Uganda, your presence may attract attention and influence people's behaviour while at the polling booth; people may become suspicious and not enter the polling booth or be afraid that their vote will not be confidential, and thus behave differently than normal.

Before conducting participant observation, particularly where you intend to participate completely in certain activities, it is necessary to develop rapport with your study community and with those whom you wish to observe. In the early stages of your fieldwork you may not yet be accepted into the community and your presence and desire to participate in community activities may be received with suspicion. For example, at the beginning of a study on HIV/AIDS among migrant men in India, a researcher participated in a community campaign to promote condom use. However, the presence of the researcher, who was not yet familiar to the local

community, caused suspicion among the local community. They thought that the researcher was from the police and may be secretly collecting information about local men. It was only after the researcher had been in the community for some time and became 'normalized' in the local setting that their suspicions subsided. For effective participant observation it is therefore necessary to ensure that you have developed rapport with your study population and that they are aware of your role as a researcher.

## **Non-participant observation**

Non-participant observation refers to conducting an observation without participating in the activities that you are observing. In order to do this, you often observe people, activities or events from a distance, so that you are not part of the situation you are observing. Some authors refer to non-participant observation as similar to being a 'fly on the wall', that is, blending into the background and not influencing what you are observing. However, in reality this is very difficult. Researchers are often part of the situation they observe and may influence the situation by their presence or actions. The influence of a researcher in this way is referred to as the '[Hawthorne effect](#)' (Mulhall, 2003).

The approach of observing without participation provides you with another insight on the activities observed, because you are able to withdraw from the situation, perhaps sitting at a distance to gain a broader view of the people or activities you are observing. As you are not participating in the activities you can also observe, listen and take field notes more freely. Non-participant observation is not observing through deception but is observing with a purpose and from a distance. Some examples of non-participant observation include:

- observing at a library, where a researcher may observe how users access books, use computers and follow rules in the library;
- observing at a music store, where a researcher may observe how people view and select music, the type of music selected, who they are with, and the length of time they are there;
- observing in a restaurant, where a researcher may observe the customers and staff and their interactions;

- observing at a swimming pool, where a researcher may observe the pool environment, perhaps from their hotel room, including the shape and size of the pool, the gender of pool users and how they interact.

Non-participant observation requires less involvement in the activities you are observing and also does not require the same extent of rapport building as participant observation. For example, in a crowded location you can easily mingle with a crowd to observe activities, but in smaller groups people may be more aware of your presence and the influence you have on the setting may be more pronounced. In more closed settings you may need to build rapport with the group or institution where you are observing. For example, if you are observing a group of men who meet every evening at a tea shop, by going to the tea shop in an effort to participate you may be disturbing their normal course of socializing. Some of the ways by which you can make yourself relatively less visible include:

- visiting your study community regularly to help build rapport with the community or neighbourhood;
- trying to blend into the setting by the way you dress or your appearance;
- observing the rhythm of activities and trying not to disturb them.

In both participant and non-participant observation people in the social setting need to grow used to your presence, so that they will continue their normal activities. In the tea shop example, if you also continue to visit this place every evening then in the due course you will not be seen as an outsider and may also be invited to be part of the group. Once people are used to your presence, and can situate you in their setting, you can more easily observe them. In urban centres, where there is more mixing of people, or in shopping malls, rapport with those you observe is not necessarily required.

In some studies, it may be appropriate to use both participant and non-participant observation, perhaps at different locations or at different times during the study. For example, when you begin your fieldwork you may choose to conduct non-participant observation to become acquainted with the study setting and community and to identify the different types of activities that are conducted. You may later conduct participant observation,



to become involved in specific activities or participate in the lives of particular individuals in the study community. Similarly, you may also combine non-participant observation with other methods, such as in-depth interviews. For example, if you are conducting in-depth interviews with elderly participants in their own home or in a care home, you may also conduct non-participant observation to describe the context of the homes or care centre where the elderly live. You may then observe how an elderly person organizes their home, the personal memorabilia or photos that are on display, the amenities that the person has available to them and so on. The field notes from your observation then provide important contextual data to enable you to situate the interview with elderly people within their own social setting.

Structured observation is a type of non-participant observation where you have a defined set of criteria you want to observe in the setting. The structured observations could be on the availability of facilities in a clinic, the safety regulations adhered by the police, the use of bed nets in the community, the washing of hands among children. Nizame and colleagues (2015) studied the hand washing practices of households in Bangladesh that were involved in interventions to reduce infections. The field staff conducted a five-hour structured observation in the houses to observe all activities of household members and noted the hand washing practice after every activity (defecations, cleaning a child, cooking, consuming meals, etc.). Compared to other types of observation there is no scope here for inductive observations as the focus is exclusively on whether the phenomenon observed meet a specific criteria or not. One can monitor the adherence to the criteria either continuously or through spot checks. For example, if your purpose is to observe the hand washing behaviour of a childcare assistant in a school in a single day then you can spend a set amount of time in the school such as the opening hours from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. The task of the observer is to observe after which activities they wash their hands. This continuous monitoring will give you an insight into the activities and the performance of the behaviour. One could also carry out structured observation by spot checking. Here there is no prior information given to the participants and observers drop in at different times of the day to check either the same activity or presence or absence of a facility. For example, in a campaign on eliminating mosquito breeding sites one may

need to visit different homes, schools and community centres to see if they have adhered to the norm of covering water storage tanks, and disposed of used tyres or old containers which can collect water. These spot checks are useful as they provide a rapid manner of measuring the extent of any particular behaviour. Structured observations can be also quantified but the purpose here is not to generalize but to provide an overview of the behaviours.

## **Observation with visual aids**

Observation can also be conducted without the researcher being present by using visual recording equipment such as a video or still camera. Conducting an observation with these visual aids is typically done when the presence of the researcher would be intrusive and interfere with the normal behaviour of those observed. For example, if you want to observe how nurses counsel their patients, your presence as a researcher would certainly influence the interaction between the nurse and patient during the counselling session. In these situations, it can be useful to use a video recorder to capture the counselling session. If you intend to use a video camera for observation, you need to seek permission from those observed and be aware that you will capture only what is in the focus of the video camera and not the broader context of the situation. Therefore, you need to pay attention to the visual framing of the observation.

Using visual recording devices may be a useful tool when the setting or the interaction to be observed is too personal to conduct an observation in person or when the observer would be considered an outsider (i.e. not a medical provider) and therefore their presence may affect the natural flow of the event observed. The use of video recording is also used when researchers wish to study group dynamics in certain situations (Pink, 2001), particularly people's body language and interactions. For example, if you were observing how adolescents interact in a classroom setting, you might use video to observe the actions, interactions and body language of the class. If using such visual aids to document your observation in this situation, you would normally require the consent of parents, school authorities and the adolescents.

There are several advantages in using visual aids for conducting an observation. The use of video can facilitate a detailed observation, particularly because you can stop the video or review certain scenes. This may enable you to take more detailed notes than in other types of observation. You may also focus on watching certain aspects, such as actions, then later view the recording again for the body language, etc. Video recording can also be useful when you are not able to gain access to a certain situation or location. A disadvantage of using a video is the framing of the observation: the framing (angle of the camera) narrows the focus to only one particular activity, and the mobility of the camera and changing the focus is dependent on the ability of the researcher to judge which angles can capture more of the activity. For example, a researcher behind the video camera wants to understand non-verbal communication between a teacher and the students but if they frame only the teacher and take the back profile of the students then they will miss the communication from the students. Hence it is important to have an angle where both the teacher and the students are visible. In situations where a video is used without a researcher present, you may use different cameras to capture different angles of the activity. In public health research, videos may be used to record doctor–patient communication and body language while providing care and administering procedures. Though an installed video is less intrusive than an observer, it has some challenges: the confidentiality of participants cannot be ensured and therefore such a study may not be approved by an ethics committee, and there is a larger chance of the Hawthorne effect, whereby people behave as is socially expected rather than as they normally would. There are also advantages of using the video over an observer: the ability to review the recording, to observe more minute details in the setting, and the possibility to collect a large amount of data. See Asan and Montague (2014) for a detailed analysis of using video for observation.

Photography is another visual aid that can be used for conducting an observation. Researchers using observation with visual technology are often more likely to use video rather than photography. When using photography, you observe only the situation at the particular point in time when the image was captured. It is also useful to combine photographs with your observations. In a study on migrants and HIV/AIDS in India the researcher observed that migrants built their homes and decorated the inside in the

same style as in their place of origin. Although written descriptions provided much detail, the researcher also took photographs with the permission of the study participants to capture the detail of the setting. [Figure 9.3](#) shows the inside of a home of a migrant family in this study. Of particular note is the decoration of the home with cultural and religious symbols from the migrant's home location. For example, within the Hindu religious shrine shown in the photograph are white horizontal stripes which are a distinct religious symbol of Shivaism typical of the Lingayat study community. Also, there is a dried lemon strung with chillies on the doorframe, which is believed to ward off evil spirits. Within the shrine are the deities that are worshiped by this household. When taking photographs as part of observation we must realize that we (the researchers) are selecting and framing the subject in the photograph and thus it often becomes the researcher's interpretation of the religion or culture of migrants that is shown.

When using a video recorder or still camera you need to spend time normalizing the equipment in the setting to reduce the Hawthorne effect, whereby those observed behave differently because they are being observed. In settings where a prolonged use of video is planned, you may normalize the equipment (either video or a photo camera) by:

- letting people see and handle the equipment;
- making a recording and showing people the outcome (video or photograph);
- carrying the equipment in the community or the social setting on a regular basis, so that it becomes a familiar sight.

Figure 9.3 Decorated home of a migrant, India



*Photo: A. Bailey*

Observation using video or photography is commonly assumed to involve the researcher taking the video or photographs; however, in some fieldwork approaches participants themselves can take the visual images that become data for the study. This approach may be used in participatory research, where researchers conduct research *with* a study community rather than *on* them, and the study community is involved in the data collection process. An example of this approach is shown in a documentary film *Born into*

*Brothels* (2004), where the children of sex workers were given cameras to photograph their lives and their surroundings. This approach provided the perspective of the children themselves on their lives or the things that were important to them. Photovoice (Wang and Burris, 1997) is an example of this approach used in research, whereby photographs are taken by participants themselves and analysed by the researcher for the purpose of social action. A photo-elicitation interview is another version of the photovoice method. In a photo-elicitation interview images are used to motivate the interviewees to speak about their memories associated with the object in the picture. In both these techniques, photos act as measure to start the discussion on the topic. The images are often symbolic to what the study participants want to convey and bring out other stories than what is depicted in the photographs. Using this approach to observation with visual aids can be time- and resource-intensive, as it requires the provision of the equipment and time to train study participants to use the equipment. For further discussion on using these approaches, see Young and Barrett (2001) and Crivello et al. (2009) on child-led participation in research.

## **Walk through the spaces**

In this technique the researcher walks through the study community or location together with a community member, who describes the social setting and the usual activities that take place. The researcher can ask the community member to describe certain things that are observed on the walk and how these normally change in different contexts (e.g. daytime, night-time). This technique is a combination of ethnographic observation and the ‘imaginary walk’ developed by the Chicago School (Blokland, 2003). Through this technique, one can derive an emic view of the situation observed. The technique can be particularly useful during the early stages of a study for becoming familiar with the study context and social norms that are evident. For example, in a study on sex workers in India, researchers walked through public places in the study community with a worker from a local NGO. The NGO worker identified different places where sex work usually took place and explained the different times it was more likely to occur or different types of sex workers who worked at different locations. During the walk the NGO worker also shared his own experiences of

working with sex workers in the community. The researcher was also able to observe some activities from a distance, such as the negotiation between sex workers and their clients, and the movement of sex workers between various locations. Using this approach enabled the researcher to develop a detailed description of the places and contexts where sex work was negotiated in the study community.

This technique allows the researcher to gain detailed information about the study context and study participants from the perspective of a local community member. However, it differs from other types of observation because:

- it combines observation with contextual commentary from a community member;
- it provides observation from the perspective of a community member;
- you are participating while moving through the neighbourhood (versus observing while stationary in one location) and therefore gain a broader and more diverse view of the study area.

## **Preparation and conduct of observation**

Fieldwork preparation for observation includes training yourself to observe in a consistent manner. As you are the instrument through which the data are gathered you need to train yourself to observe both the detail and the larger setting. Researchers therefore need to pay attention to shifting from a 'wide' to a 'narrow' perspective, such as focusing on a single person, activity or interaction, and then viewing the overall situation (Merriam, 1998). In addition, researchers also need to focus on the following issues when preparing and conducting observations: reflect on your positionality; decide what kind of clothes to wear; select the place to conduct observation; how to gain access; and how to pre-test yourself.

## **Observer's skills**

When using observation, the researcher themselves becomes the instrument for the observation. Hence there are some skills that you need to become an

effective observer. The first skill is discipline: you need to prepare yourself to systematically observe and maintain the same discipline across different sites. The second skill is self-reflection: this skill enables you to question the production of knowledge and your positionality in the setting. The third skill is ability to minimize interpretation of observations: this involves differentiating between what you observe and what you interpret about your observations so as not to infer, judge or assume what is being observed but rather to focus on recording what is actually observed. The fourth skill is patience: observation can be a long process whereby you need to remain in a setting for a long period of time and repeat this over and over. If you are not patient there is risk of interpretation and the inability to see the nuances and silent norms that are present in the setting. The fifth skill is rapport building: when using participant observation in particular you will also be participating in activities in the social setting being observed, therefore you need to have strong social skills to engage with the study population. These social skills are also essential to gain trust of the study population to allow you to participate in their activities. The sixth skill is the ability to multitask in the setting; this skill is related to previous skills on rapport development. Multi-tasking becomes important while conducting participant observation. The final and most crucial skill is having good memory to recall what has happened in the setting and describing it in the field notes.

## **Reflecting on positionality**

Observation does not only involve simply viewing a social situation. As with all qualitative methods, the researcher is part of the research process, hence part of the observation context. Therefore, a researcher can influence what is observed. Researchers should take into consideration their positionality and the effect they can have on the situation. Hence, you need to reflect on the following issues both before and during your observations.

- How do I enter the community and introduce myself to community members?
  - What are possible questions that the group/community may ask me?
  - What will they think of me and how will they react to my presence?
- What were my personal impressions of them when I started the observation?



- What are my personal impressions of them after the observation?

Once you answer these questions yourself you will be able to better situate yourself and the community within your observations. You may notice that as time passes the way you are received and addressed by the community also changes. For example, initially your study community may be wary of an unknown person sitting in a corner taking notes but after you have explained your intention and purpose of the study, they may perceive your presence less intrusive. So, keep a note of your own impressions of the community. Most researchers record these observations in their field diary (see later).

## Selecting a place

You need to identify an appropriate place to conduct observation. The location of an observation will be guided by the research question or purpose of the observation. The type of location varies with the choice of research topic and the intensity of activity. For example, if your purpose is to observe street food vendors then you select a place where most street food vendors operate in that city. Then you could select different types of street vendor locations to observe, such as the main shopping street, near a cinema or close to a temple, and so on.

When beginning an observation, you usually identify and sketch the various locations. It can also be very useful to ask local collaborators or key informants about suitable locations from which to observe activities of interest to the research topic. While sketching the locations for observation it is useful to make a note of:

- the activities being conducted;
- the types of people present;
- the locations from which to observe.

For example, if you plan to observe in a public market or at a health clinic, it is advisable to visit the place before conducting the observation to identify the different seating areas where you could position yourself. During an observation it is useful to blend into the local situation so as not

to draw attention to yourself; therefore while sketching the location be aware of how visible or obtrusive you may be in the locations you wish to observe. In places with a high degree of activity you are more likely to blend in. You could also decide multiple observation points so that you can observe from different angles. For example if you are observing customer behaviour in a shopping mall you could first stand near the entrance of the shop and then walk to the other end of the shop to watch people buying clothes inside the shop and then the third point could be near the cashier to see how people behave as they queue to bill their purchases. If you are working in a team of two or more researchers then you could divide the places/observation points and then combine and contrast your observations.

## **Gaining access**

Obtaining access to a social setting is a crucial step in conducting observation. Gaining access to certain social situations often improves as you build rapport with the local community. Therefore, it is important to begin rapport development in the early stages of fieldwork. However, rapport development is not needed for all types of observation. For example, when conducting non-participant observation in a public place rapport development is not necessary as it will not affect your entry into the place you wish to observe; you do need to develop rapport when you intend to do participant observation or observation with visual aids.

The manner in which you seek access and the manner in which permission is given highlight the positionality of the researcher among the group that is studied, as this process determines the level of trust that the community or the group under study has for the researchers. It is useful to write in your field diary about the process of gaining access to the community and the steps that you took before you were able to conduct your observation.

Gaining access to conduct an observation in an institutional setting often requires permission from different authorities. The process of getting permission will vary for each organization. Imagine that you want to conduct observation in a bank or a hospital. This would require permission of the person in charge – the bank manager or a hospital official. In instances where your observation may involve minors it is essential to get

permission of the parents or the guardians before you start your research project (see [Chapter 5](#) on the ethical guidelines).

If you are denied access to the location where you intended to conduct an observation you will simply need to reconsider the location of the observation or revise the research strategy. Some reasons for researchers being denied permission to conduct observation include: a lack of trust from the community about the intentions of the researcher; discomfort of the community in having an outsider observe them; or concern about the potential risk to the community or group. Risk in terms of information disclosure could lead them to be harmed or their locations being made public. The gender of the observer can influence whether or not access is given for observations in certain situations. For example, it will be easier for a female researcher to observe childrearing practices in an Indian village setting than for male researchers, as men who are not related to the family are not invited into the home, which is perceived to be a female-dominated space.

## **Appearance**

Before you begin an observation it is important to consider your appearance and how this may influence your observation. Remember that while you are observing people, they will also notice you. Therefore, consider what people in the location you wish to observe may be wearing or doing, so that you can adapt your clothes or appearance to blend in as much as possible into the surroundings. Although you cannot alter your basic appearance, there are some things that you can modify, for example your clothing or how much make-up or jewellery you wear.

Your clothes and appearance often reflect your social status, which can affect how you blend into the location where you are conducting your observation. It is useful to consult your local collaborators on how to best present yourself in the settings where you intend to conduct observation. It is generally advisable to select clothes that help you blend into the social setting you are observing. A certain style of dress may be necessary to project a particular image. For example, if you want to observe a board meeting of governors, you may have to dress formally to fit into the

professional setting. Conversely, if you are a tall white European conducting research in an African setting, you will be noticed regardless of whether you change your style of dress. But, by adopting a certain local wardrobe, you can hasten the rapport building process. While conducting fieldwork in a neighbourhood of migrants in the state of Goa in India, the researcher spoke the local dialect of the migrant community but wore the local dress of men in Goa (jeans and t-shirt). The study community therefore assumed he was Goan, not someone from the migrant community. Goans are seen with suspicion by the migrant population and so they were a little wary of the researcher's presence in the neighbourhood. However, the research assistant was considered to be one of their own as he did not wear jeans but more local clothes such as pants with the shirt untucked. Therefore he could blend into the community through his choice of clothes. Hence, your clothes can have both a positive and a negative influence when conducting observation.

## **Pre-test yourself**

It is always useful to do a [pilot test](#) of your observation, perhaps in another setting from the actual locations where you intend to conduct your observation. The pre-test is necessary because it helps you to check if you are able to observe and document a situation effectively. It can also make you realize the time needed for observing the context versus the time needed to observe particular activities in the context. It can also help you to determine the length of time you can pay attention to observing a situation.

Conducting a pre-test involves selecting an observation site, and writing down what you saw, heard, the actors who were involved, the smells of the place, and so on. Repeat this activity again and compare the field notes you took each time. By repeating the activity you are likely to see a difference in the level of detail you are able to capture each time. A good memory is essential in any ethnographic fieldwork. This point can be best illustrated by the work of M.N. Srinivas who wrote an entire monograph, *The Remembered Village* (1976), based on his memory of the place, as he lost all his data due to a fire. Kawulich (2005) suggests the following ways of improving your memory for observation.

- Think of a familiar place (such as a room in your home) and note down all that you can remember from the setting.
- Make a map of it and write down as much as possible about the physical setting.
- Then compare what you have written to what is actually there and examine what you have missed.

This exercise will help you see how much of a nuanced observation you can make and how much you can recollect later on. Making short notes during observation is crucial, as we may tend to forget some things at a later point.

## **Writing an observation**

### **Field notes**

Conducting an observation requires skills not only in observing social situations but also in recording your observations. The field notes taken during your observation become your data for analysis, therefore taking detailed and clear notes is important. Keeping detailed field notes may include notes on things that may not seem important at the time, but whose importance may become clear later during analysis.

Researchers often take notes during observation on a small notepad, because using a laptop computer in some situations may distract people in the social setting. Writing field notes while observing can be challenging. Some strategies for taking field notes during an observation include:

- writing notes continuously while observing;
- taking short breaks from observing to write field notes, and then elaborating on these later;
- becoming familiar with the social setting to find a place where you can observe and take notes;
- using sketches or drawings to improve the detail of field notes;
- labelling each field note with a date, time and place;
- developing your own shorthand technique to note brief points that you can expand later;

- including notes on people, activities and the physical environment itself.

Detailed field notes typically include notes on multiple elements, such as the place (e.g. setting, activities, sounds and smells) and people (e.g. actions, interactions, conversations).

One strategy is to structure your field notes into three concentric circles, the innermost circle has the primary focus of the observation (e.g. object/person/activity), the second concentric circle has the context surrounding the main activity (e.g. place/people/context) and the third circle focuses on the broader environment that surrounds the activity. Start to take notes by focusing on the inner most circle and slowly focus your attention to the details in the outer circles thus capturing different elements in the process. For example, if you were observing use of park benches by older people, you may use the first circle to describe the place and take note of the benches, the colour, shape, size, location, and so on. Then once an older adult sits on the bench, note how the person looks, what they are carrying and doing, their body language, facial expressions and appearance of the person. The older adult and the bench form the content of your first circle. Then zoom out to the second circle to note what is around the person and the bench, take notes of other people/objects in the setting, the possible distance between benches, people or other objects. You may take notes on the pathway leading to the bench. Does it have loose gravel, tiles or is it cemented? Then zoom out further and take notes on the third circle, for example to note the weather, the trees, activities that are happening in the distance, for example children playing, cyclists and so on. After this you could zoom in again to the first circle to make sure you have not missed out any details or if the situation has changed.

Another strategy for making detailed descriptive field notes of your observations might be as follows.

- Write about where you are seated in the social setting, to explain the gaze you have.
- Sketch the location you are observing.
- Count the number of people and describe their characteristics (e.g. approximate age, gender and ethnicity).

- Describe the actual setting you are observing.
- Focus on how people move around in the setting.

When describing people, try to be as specific as possible. For example, instead of writing ‘young man in shabby clothes’ describe how the man actually looks, such as ‘a young man possibly around 20 years old, wearing soiled blue jeans, a grey stained t-shirt and a black jacket tied loosely around his waist, uncombed hair and worn shoes with untied laces’. This provides a much more detailed description without your interpretation of how the man looks (e.g. ‘shabby’ clothing), because your interpretation of ‘shabby’ may differ from another person’s view.

When observing a social setting such as a community meeting, it is useful to include in your field notes comments about the interactions occurring in the social setting, including who talks to whom, whose opinions are sought, who are the listeners, and what is the body language of the person speaking and listeners.

Observing body language in such a setting can indicate the power dynamics in the social setting. For example, if you observe that the person speaking is always standing and giving their opinions, while others sit and listen, this may indicate that the person is in a leadership role. If you further observe that one group sits apart from the other and each have their own speaker, this may indicate different power dynamics between the groups. These types of observations may give you clues on cultural behaviour in certain social settings. Keeping field notes on how people greet each other and what are the culturally appropriate methods of addressing different types of people in the community, can also provide clues on the social norms within a group.

Observation of events requires more detailed stepwise documentation. Events are sequences of activities that are usually limited to a certain geographical area and in many cases are time-dependent. Events may also be repeated on a regular basis (e.g. daily or weekly). You may wonder why it is necessary to actually observe an event rather than asking a community member about certain events. When we ask people about an event, we get their interpretations of the event, and this interpretation may not be the same for others. By observing the event in terms of a time sequence, we get

an order of activities that may be part of the ritual. For example, if you are observing the evening prayers in a Hindu temple you may observe activities in the following order.

1. At 5.30 p.m. the priest enters the temple.
2. The priest walks in a circle around the shrine.
3. At 6.00 p.m. the priest enters the shrine.
4. At 6.30 p.m. the priest lights the lamps and rings the bell.
5. After this, the devotees gather until the offerings are given to everyone.
6. At 7.30 p.m. the priest closes the inner temple.
7. At 8 p.m. the priest leaves the temple premises.

Such an event may be repeated with the same precision every day. When recording time in an observation, consider what the local meanings of time might be. For example, the Hindu temple ritual begins at 5.30 p.m.; for the local community this is the time of the sunset, which marks the beginning of the evening rituals in this community. Rather than assuming what certain times mean, you can verify this with local community members. When describing an event, it is advisable to note down who was present, what roles they play, what happens at each point in the time sequence, where the whole event takes place, what time it is conducted and the length of the event.

Field notes can be made richer with use of sketches and maps as short cuts to remember activity patterns in the observed location. You can sketch the site, and mark your location to explain your gaze, and then make small drawings of objects and where they are located in the observation site, and finally mark the location of the central activities that are the focus of your observation. For example, if you are observing waiters in a restaurant you could first sketch the layout of the restaurant, then mark your location and then the location of the waiters. Once they start to move in the setting you could draw lines to show how they navigate the setting and take quick shorthand notes on what they carry, the interactions they have on the way and if they stop in between. You could use different coloured pens to differentiate between purposeful activity (e.g. taking orders, bringing food, serving drinks) versus idle activity (e.g. waiting, adjusting their hair or



clothes). Sketches, maps and drawings are only supplementary to detailed written field notes. They need further elaboration in the text to make sense to the reader. In the event you are using a structured observation you may have a map of the location and on this you mark places of areas of interest. Taking the example from earlier, if you are observing mosquito breeding sites outside homes you could use a structured list of potential places around the house that could be mosquito breeding places (old bins, water storage tanks, etc.). You can then sketch these places and the information gained from the sketch could be added to the other observations done in that household.

In structured observation, you may use a form to guide your observations. This provides a framework for your observations with the list of items, activities or behaviours to be observed. In such a form, you would mark what was observed, for example if doing a structured observation of information presented in health clinics, your structured observation form would include questions on whether the clinic displays posters from the Ministry of Health, whether there are leaflets available, whether there is a separate room for counselling of patients, and so on. The form may also include behaviours to observe, such as the number of people who enter a facility, then number of times they used a machine, or the length of time they are in the waiting room. In structured observation forms or protocols, the same items are observed at every site so there is little opportunity for initiating the inductive process by adding new items in a more inductive way. However, some observation sheets may include a comments section for the observer to add additional insights not captured in the questions.

It is important to focus your field notes on descriptions of what is actually happening, rather than making an interpretation of what you see. It is a general practice that field notes do not include an interpretation of what is happening in the setting, because this may impose your own judgement on what you see. Therefore, you need to separate your observations from any interpretation, as these could be wrong or naïve. Thus always ask yourself: is this what is actually happening or am I interpreting what is happening? Of course you will have some interpretations or opinions about what you observe, and it is useful to write down these thoughts as they may prompt things that you may clarify with community members later on or begin a

theoretical hunch that you keep in your field diary and return to in later analysis.

## **Field diary**

A field diary is another way to record your thoughts and interpretations about what you observe. In a field diary you may include your hunches, ideas, feelings, personal opinions and sometimes also feelings of disgust and shock. In this way, you keep separate documents on what you actually observe (in field notes) and your personal thoughts and reactions to what you observe (in a field diary). The content of a field diary are reflective notes where you question what you have observed, keep methodological ideas on what could be improved in the next observation and things you need to check with someone from the local culture. For example, when studying a group of indigenous people you may observe that they never walk with their back to the temple. This is something you may consult with your key informants on the beliefs behind such a custom. In a field diary you could also make note of corrections or misunderstandings you had of previous sessions of observation. In situations where you find yourself having conflicting ideas about what you have observed you can take reflective notes of this confusion. Ask yourself the following questions: why do I have this confusion? What is difficult to interpret? Am I reading too much into the situation? Are multiple interpretations of this situation possible? In what way is my positionality influencing the way I am interpreting what I have observed? These questions are integral to the iterative production of knowledge through observation.

The field diary may be considered as a confidant of the researcher during their fieldwork (though this may be an exaggeration of its intimacy with the researcher). When the field diary of the famous anthropologist Malinowski was published in 1989, there was a huge outcry in academic circles about his racist comments about the natives in his diary (the Tobriand islanders). This, however, need not come as a surprise as a field diary is usually kept by researchers to record their personal opinions, which may change during the course of the fieldwork. Writing a field diary is therefore essential as it keeps your field notes free of interpretations. A field diary also gives you the space to note down your thoughts on emerging ideas and initial cultural

inferences. As qualitative research is an iterative process (see [Chapter 2](#)) it is also useful to be reflective and critical of the process of your observations.

## Reporting observations

When presenting observation data gather all the notes, sketches, pictures and videos and include them in your analysis. You will apply the same **coding** principles (see [Chapter 10](#)) as other textual data that comes from interviews and focus groups discussions. Once you have coded all the observational data you can retrieve segments to start writing up the report. In this report you can focus on what was being observed, when were the observations conducted, where the observations were conducted and finally the purpose of the observation. The report is a collection of all the observations so when you write the report you will also show a range of activities that took place in the setting, for example, the divergence of behaviours and the people involved. Some researchers use observation to give very detailed accounts of a setting to describe the context of the study. Others may focus more on the activities in the setting and focus on describing the people and their behaviours in the setting. Caro and colleagues (2014) conducted observation in the homes of migrants living in a settlement outside the city of Tirana in Albania. In their paper, they explain the role of remittances in improving the lives of the people left behind, and use photographs and field notes to illustrate the changes. With participant observation you can also write first person accounts of activities you participated in. For example, if you are writing about participating in a religious ritual in a community you can present your experience of the situation. Such writing is common when you are conducting auto-ethnography (see Chang, 2016). Reports about observation are enriched with the use of sketches, maps and photographs that one has collected during the process of data collection. In [Chapter 12](#) we will further discuss the various ways of presenting study results from qualitative data.

## Strengths and limitations

The strength and limitations of observation are summarized in [Table 9.1](#).

Table 9.1 Strengths and limitations of observation

Table 9.1 Strengths and limitations of observation

Strengths	Limitations
Provides familiarity with cultural milieu	Time consuming (continued and repeated immersion in setting)
Provides context to behaviour	Recording field notes is cumbersome
Explains behaviour	Simultaneous observing and recording can be difficult
Documents unspoken rules of social conduct	Field notes may be subjective behaviour
Less intrusive than interview methods	Researchers need to refrain from interpretation
Provides insight into people's behaviour	Need skilled observers' interactions
Helps avoid participants' post-hoc rationalization of behaviour	Limited as a standalone method
Complementary to other methods (e.g. interviews)	

## Evaluating quality

### *Appropriate*

Is observation as a method appropriate for the research topic?

Which type of observation is used and is this suitable for the topic?

### *Saturated*

How detailed is the documentation of the event or activities?

### *Grounded*

Does the researcher summarize or interpret their observation or remain close to the activity?

### *Culturally sensitive*

How does the researcher present themselves in the community?

### *Ethical*

Has the researcher obtained permission to observe?

### Key points

- Observation involves systematically watching and recording people's behaviours, expressions and interactions as situated in the settings or locations.
- Places, people and their body language are some of the things observed.
- Participant observation enables researchers to learn about the group of people by participating in their day-to-day activities.
- Non-participant observation requires less involvement and collaboration of the people under study.
- Obtaining access to a social setting is a crucial step in conducting participant observation.
- Observation research depends not only on the skills of observation but also on clear and unbiased methods of recording observations.
- Field notes can be descriptive and written as per the events taking place in the setting.
- A field diary also gives you the space to jot down your own opinions or ideas on an emerging theoretical idea.

- The walk through the spaces technique provides an emic view on the situation and is very useful in the exploratory part of the research.

## Exercises

1. Identify a topic in your research project that you feel is suited for observation. Why is it suited for observation?
2. Determine if the topic requires a participant or a non-participant observation approach.
3. Conduct the observation and try different styles of note-taking during your observation: taking notes continuously while observing, taking short breaks from observation to write notes, and taking no notes during the observation and writing these afterwards. Consider which style works best for you. In which situations could you use these different strategies?
4. Repeat the same exercise with another researcher and see the difference in the observations.

Further reading

## On methods

Boccagni, P. and Schrooten, M. (2018) 'Participant observation in migration studies: An overview and some emerging issues', in R. Zapata Barrero and E. Yalaz (eds), *Qualitative Research in European Migration Studies*. Champaign, IL: SpringerOpen, pp. 209–25.

Provides an overview of how the method of participant observation developed and its theoretical underpinnings.

Shah, A. (2017) 'Ethnography? Participant observation, a potentially revolutionary praxis', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 7 (1): 45–59. This article explores how observation encourages researchers

to question their assumptions and reflect on the process of knowledge production.

Spradley, J. (1980) *Participant Observation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Essential reading for people conducting observation.

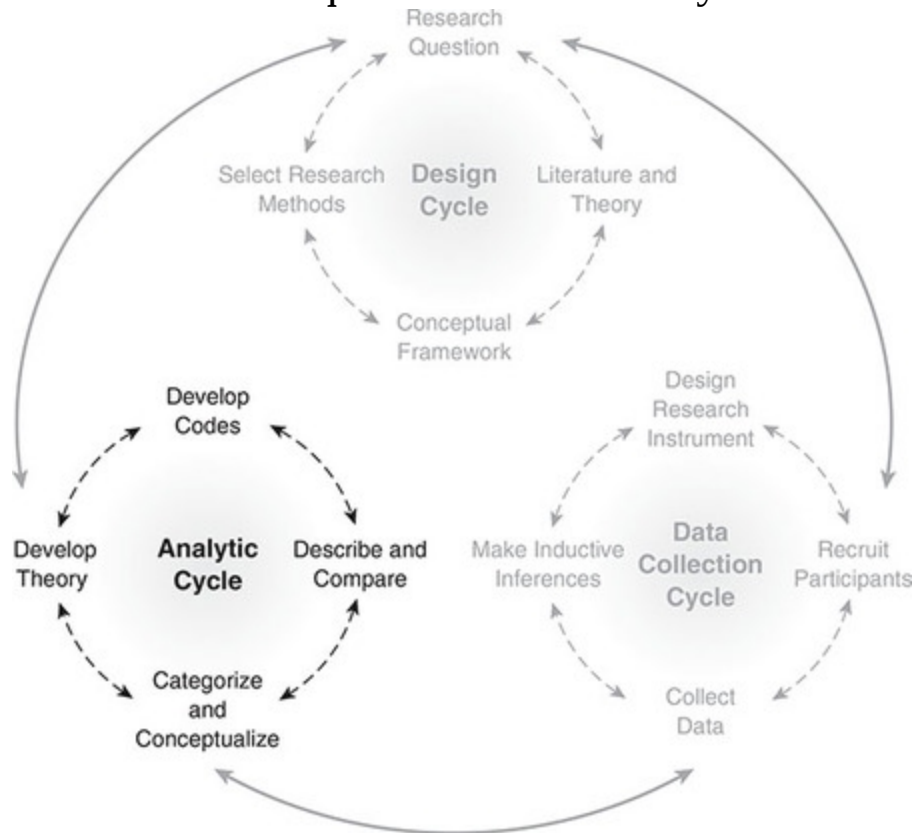
Whiting, R., Symon, G., Roby, H. and Chamakiotis, P. (2018) 'Who's behind the lens? A reflexive analysis of roles in participatory video research', *Organizational Research Methods*, 21 (2): 316–40. This article discusses the challenges and opportunities of using video for observation research.

## **On field practice**

Van Meurs, J., Smeets, W., Vissers, K.C., Groot, M. and Engels, Y. (2018) 'Nurses exploring the spirituality of their patients with cancer: Participant observation on a medical oncology ward', *Cancer Nursing*, 41 (4): E39. This article describes participant observation in a cancer ward to understand how nurses dealt with the spiritual needs of patients.

## Part III The Analytic Cycle

### Hutter–Hennink qualitative research cycle



The analytic cycle is the third component of the overall qualitative research cycle. It comprises the core tasks of qualitative data analysis: developing [codes](#), description and comparison, [categorization](#) and [conceptualization](#), and theory development. These analytic tasks are closely interlinked; not only are they used in a circular manner whereby tasks are repeated throughout the analytic process, but they are also done simultaneously and at different points in analysis.

The analytic cycle may be viewed as an inductive process, whereby issues and concepts are derived from data itself. However, we argue that the analytic cycle comprises *both* inductive and deductive techniques and therefore differs from other approaches to qualitative data analysis.



The analytic cycle has important links with both the data collection cycle and the design cycle. For example, the task of developing codes in the analytic cycle actually begins in the data collection cycle when noticing issues that are later made into codes during analysis; code development is also influenced by deductive concepts from research literature and scientific theory from the design cycle. Similarly, theory development in the analytic cycle involves developing inductive theory from data analysis but can also involve using existing theory from the design cycle. You also compare the inductive theory developed in the analytic cycle with your original conceptual framework of the study from the design cycle to contribute new concepts or explanations to existing theory. Alternatively, you may apply theories not considered in the design cycle, if they fit your emerging analysis. Therefore, the analytic cycle has important interlinkages with the other cycles in the qualitative research cycle.

In [Part III](#) of this book we describe the components of the analytic cycle. [Chapter 10](#) describes data preparation and code development. [Chapter 11](#) discusses the core analytic tasks of description, comparison, categorization, conceptualization and theory development. We also discuss validating your analysis. [Chapter 12](#) describes how to move from analysis to action to achieve social change, if you adopted a participatory approach to qualitative research from design cycle onwards (see [Chapter 4](#)). [Chapter 13](#) discusses approaches to writing and presenting your qualitative research.

## **Our approach to analysis**

Although there are different approaches to analysing qualitative data, described later, our approach utilizes the broad principles of grounded theory. Grounded theory provides a set of guidelines and a flexible yet rigorous process from which to develop empirical theory. Although grounded theory offers an implicitly inductive approach, what is not made explicit are the deductive strategies that researchers also use in qualitative data analysis. We acknowledge the use of deductive strategies in our approach to data analysis and believe that qualitative data analysis involves the interplay between induction and deduction. Research is often not purely inductive or deductive but mostly one or the other (Bernard and Ryan, 2010).

Grounded theory provides a set of guidelines for data analysis. However, as Charmaz (2006: 9) points out, ‘*how* researchers use these guidelines is not neutral: nor are the assumptions that they bring to their research and enact during the process’. Therefore, the disciplinary tradition of the researcher can have an influence on the way qualitative research and data analysis are conducted (see [Chapter 2](#) for further discussion on this). In our analytic cycle we reflect on the circular nature of qualitative data analysis, whereby core analytic tasks are inductive and repeated in a circular manner throughout the analysis process. However, we add deductive strategies to this, such as deductive code development, deductive comparison, and how deductive reasoning influences inductive conceptualizing and theory building. These elements of our approach to qualitative data analysis may be summarized as follows.

- We adopt the general principles of grounded theory and inductive data analysis.
- We acknowledge the use of deductive strategies in qualitative data analysis.
- We believe data analysis involves the interplay between inductive and deductive reasoning.
- We depict analysis as an analytic cycle comprising core tasks.
- We describe how data analysis is linked to, yet distinct from, the data collection cycle and the design cycle.

## **Inductive and deductive elements in analysis**

Qualitative research is characterized by an inductive approach to data analysis, whereby codes, concepts and theory are derived from the data. However, what is less acknowledged is the use of deductive strategies within qualitative data analysis. Our approach to qualitative research and data analysis acknowledges that researchers do use some deductive techniques in qualitative data analysis and that deductive theory does play a part in theory building in qualitative research. We believe that qualitative data analysis involves the interplay between induction and deduction, but in order to use both elements effectively researchers first need to understand the contribution and influence of each element. Here we highlight the analytic tasks that we consider to have both inductive and deductive

elements that will be explained more fully throughout the following chapters.

**Inductive and deductive strategies for code development.** Codes are labels that capture issues in data. Codes are often developed inductively through close reading of data, but also deductively when derived from topics on the research instrument that originate from the conceptual framework of the study. Both these strategies for code development are described in [Chapter 10](#).

**Inductive and deductive search strategies.** Searching data during analysis involves deductive and inductive approaches. For example, you may construct a data search deductively by using a topic or concept from the conceptual framework of the study, or inductively by exploring issues that were identified from data. [Chapter 11](#) describes this more fully.

**Inductive and deductive analytic comparisons.** Deductive comparisons may involve comparing topics, issues or subgroups defined from the outset, in the study design (e.g. comparing by socio-demographic characteristics), or they may involve comparing inductive issues or subgroups that were identified during analysis. See [Chapter 11](#) for comparison strategies.

**Inductive and deductive theory development.** Inductive theory development is the hallmark of grounded theory; however, we take a broader perspective, whereby ‘theory building occurs in an ongoing dialogue between pre-existing theory and new insights generated as a consequence of empirical observation’ (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005: 266). Therefore, theory development involves the interplay between existing theory and inductively derived empirical theory to develop new explanations or transform and refine pre-existing theory. See [Chapter 11](#) for more details.

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# 10 Data Preparation and Developing Codes

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## Objectives

After reading this chapter you will:

- understand different approaches to textual data analysis;
- know how to prepare data for analysis;
- understand how to make a verbatim transcript;
- understand deductive and inductive strategies to develop codes;
- know how to make a codebook;
- understand how to code data and check for consistency in coding;
- know the role of software in qualitative data analysis;
- understand how to evaluate quality in data preparation.

## Introduction

In previous chapters we described the collection of qualitative data through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. These methods generate textual data in the form of written transcripts. Textual data is not the only type of qualitative data (there is also visual data), but it is the most common type and includes many forms of data such as transcribed interviews, media documents (e.g. news reports, internet blogs), diaries, stories, speeches, and more. In the following two chapters we describe the process of analysing these types of textual data, from identifying themes to developing explanatory theory. We describe both the analytic tasks and principles of data analysis.

Our approach to data analysis is described above and summarized diagrammatically in our analytic cycle (see figure above in the introduction to [Part III](#)). In this chapter and the next we describe the analytic tasks that comprise this cycle, and how the analytic cycle is embedded within our broader qualitative research cycle (see [Figure 1.1](#)). Our approach to qualitative data analysis, as described above, broadly follows the principles of grounded theory, which is based on an inductive approach; however, we acknowledge that qualitative researchers also use deductive strategies during data analysis. Therefore, our approach to data analysis also describes deductive elements of data analysis and the interplay between induction and deduction throughout the analytic process.

To put our approach into context, this chapter begins by briefly describing different approaches to textual data analysis. We then start our process of analysis by describing how to transform recorded interviews or group discussions into textual data by making a verbatim transcript, then how to develop codes from textual data to capture the issues raised, and finally how to code the entire data set and check consistency in coding. These activities form the initial tasks of preparing data for analysis and are themselves analytic tasks. We also describe the role of software in qualitative data analysis, common functions of software and the advantages and limitations of using software. In [Chapter 11](#), we continue the process of data analysis by describing the core tasks of analysis: description, comparison, categorizing, conceptualizing and theory development.

## **Different approaches to textual data analysis**

There are many approaches to analysing qualitative data, each with different epistemological assumptions and outcomes. Qualitative studies have different goals, and qualitative data are diverse, so different studies may require a different analytic approach. Below we briefly summarize several widely used approaches to analysing textual data. It is not our intention here to describe how to use each approach; instead we describe the underlying philosophy of each approach and provide a research example to help you understand its practical application. These approaches are presented to put our analytic approach into context and to demonstrate how we align most closely with the grounded theory approach.

We outline the following approaches to textual data analysis: [narrative analysis](#), [case study analysis](#), [discourse analysis](#), [content analysis](#), and [grounded theory](#). Although these approaches have different theoretical underpinnings and outcomes, they use similar analytic tasks; for example identifying themes and coding data by these themes, using description to convey depth and context, and comparison to identify core patterns in data. Categorizing data into meaningful groups is another common task to understand, explain or present data. Strategies for conducting these common analytic tasks are described in detail in [Chapter 11](#). What distinguishes these approaches is not the analytic tasks but the theoretical framework and purpose of each approach and the outcome of analysis. For

example, grounded theory aims to build conceptual theory, narrative analysis seeks to examine issues within the life context of individuals, discourse analysis focuses on understanding how language and expressions construct social meaning, while content analysis seeks to count and compare elements in data. The different goals of each analytic approach lead some researchers to use a pragmatic mixture of approaches in a single study. We present these various approaches to data analysis also because they may be used together with our approach to analysis, for example when you have different types of data in a study or when different analytic outcomes are needed to answer your research questions.

## **Narrative analysis**

A narrative is essentially a story that is depicted through an interview or document (e.g. letters, diaries, biographies). Narrative analysis examines the nature of these stories to understand how people portray their lives and experiences. Narratives reflect a person's subjective and social *constructions* of their lived experience (Bude, 1984 in Flick, 2014: 283), rather than the life history of an individual. Therefore, 'narratives resonate as echoes of actual events' (Hall, 2011: 5) and 'the goal of analysing narrative data is more to disclose these constructive processes than to reconstruct factual processes' (Flick, 2014: 283).

Narrative analysis examines people's constructions of experiences, so each text is examined as a whole to retain the narrative flow, context and implicit meaning of the story. Therefore, narrative analysis focuses on one single text at a time to understand the core narrative of that individual. Narrative analysis may focus on the structure or content of the narrative, but often both elements are present. Examining the *structure* of the narrative involves identifying how the story is told, the language used, its temporal order and flow (e.g. biographical details, chronology of events, turning points, the main plot and actors). The *content* of the narrative may be examined by identifying issues raised, threads of the story, categories of issues, and the participant's own interpretation of the meaning of events or experiences. Narrative analysis culminates in depicting the core narrative of each story in a statement that summarizes its distinctive qualities or essential meaning.

The core narratives of each individual may be compared with others to construct a larger common narrative of the phenomena being studied.

Woodgate (2005) used illness narratives to understand how childhood cancer shapes the lives of those affected. Narratives of the cancer experience were collected from children, their parents and siblings in response to an open ended question: 'Tell me what happened?' Narrative analysis involved developing chronologies, turning points or 'epiphanies' in the cancer experience and constructing a core narrative of each individual. The core narratives were compared across individuals to reveal an overarching narrative – '*life is never the same*' – which represented how childhood cancer affected the lives of those involved.

## **Case study analysis**

Case study analysis involves narrative analysis (see above) on a single case, which means going deeply into the experiences of one individual. Analysis involves developing a synopsis of a person's experiences and examining the meanings they associate with those experiences to develop a core narrative in relation to the research issues. Speraw (2009) conducted a case study analysis of one 3-hour narrative interview with an adolescent girl with multiple disabilities. Analysis focused on understanding how the concept of personhood is handled in healthcare delivery. The life history interview used only one pre-determined question – '*Tell me, what is it like to be you?*' – which allowed the interviewee to shape the narrative of her own experience. Analysis involved close readings of the interview transcript, identifying the narrative structure and defining themes. The core narrative that was reflected throughout the data was '*Talk to me – I'm human*', which reflected the neglect of her humanity, dignity and agency in healthcare settings.

## **Discourse analysis**

A discourse is a frame of thinking or social reality that can be reflected in the way people talk about issues. Discourse analysis is built on the premise that language, expressions and dialogue are profoundly shaped by social



understandings, expectations and broader social structures (Bernard and Ryan, 2010; Lupton, 1992; Mills and Birks, 2014). It therefore involves analysing narrative text to identify the social reality (or discourse) around a phenomenon. Data for discourse analysis includes interview narratives or texts (i.e. parliamentary debates, media reports, doctor–patient interactions). Discourse analysis has become an umbrella term for a wide range of techniques related to the social construction of language (Cheek, 2004; Flick, 2014). Discourse analysis may involve examining: conversational structure (e.g. composition, turn-taking, performance); the intent of language (e.g. negotiation, humour, message delivery); and how narratives reflect broader social structures (e.g. power, agency, authority) (Bernard and Ryan, 2010). Discourse analysis is typically used to understand social constructions of reality; therefore it may also incorporate analytic strategies of grounded theory to identify themes and concepts that define a discourse.

Graffigna and Olson (2009) used discourse analysis to explore how social discourses surrounding HIV/AIDS are socially constructed and produce shared understandings about the disease that frame individual behaviours and risk perceptions. Data from focus group discussions provided a natural dialogue on these issues for analysis. Five main discourses about HIV/AIDS emerged from the analysis; for example, a ‘denying discourse’, whereby participants minimized the significance of HIV/AIDS by circumscribing the disease to other countries or specific population groups (e.g. drug users, gay men); and the ‘ineffable disease discourse’, which reflected the unspeakable quality of HIV/AIDS due to social taboos, sexual transmission and its association with death. Another study used discourse analysis and grounded theory techniques to explore media representations of weight-loss surgery (Glenn et al., 2013). The authors analysed news articles and websites on bariatric surgery to identify themes and overarching discourses about weight-loss surgery. The results identified a dominant biomedical discourse that positioned obesity as a disease requiring professional management and weight-loss surgery as the necessary medical treatment.

## **Content analysis**

Content analysis involves counting and quantifying elements in qualitative data. It involves selecting data (e.g. texts, images or other data), developing a coding matrix to capture relevant items, and reviewing data to count the presence of those items. Once these frequency counts are taken, simple statistical analysis is conducted, which may include presenting frequency counts and percentages, cross tabulations, or statistical comparisons. Items in the coding matrix may be derived externally such as from research literature and theory or developed by reviewing the data itself.

Content analysis is commonly used on visual data (e.g. photos, posters, films) or media documents (e.g. newspapers, internet blogs). Escamilla and colleagues (2000) used content analysis to assess how smoking is portrayed in Hollywood films. They selected 50 films and divided these into five-minute segments to count images of smoking. A coding matrix was used to identify actual and implied smoking (e.g. holding a cigarette), smoking equipment, smoking messages (e.g. no smoking signs, smoking advertising), smoker's demographic characteristics, location of smoking (e.g. bar, home), the context of smoking (e.g. alone, with smokers/non-smokers) and emotional valence of smoking (e.g. to control emotions, provide comfort, show sex appeal or prestige). Results were presented as frequencies and percentages, for example 28% of film segments depicted smoking, and 58% of smoking occurred in the presence of non-smokers.

Other forms of content analysis include word counts and 'key-words-in-context'. Word counts involve identifying specific words relevant to the research question and counting the frequency of these words in the data. Analysis may also involve identifying related words, counting word co-occurrence or proximity to other words in a document. Key-words-in-context (or KWIC) is another technique that assesses the context in which key words are used by examining the surrounding words or sentence in which the word appears. Crawford et al. (2013) used both word counts and KWIC to examine the language of compassion in qualitative interviews with mental healthcare providers. Word counts were used to identify words reflecting compassion (e.g. caring, helpful, giving, supportive, and understanding). KWIC was then used to examine the context in which these words were used to find that compassion is mostly described in an institutionally focused way rather than in a patient-centred context, leading

authors to conclude that there is an absence of compassionate mentality amongst mental healthcare providers.

## **Grounded theory**

Grounded theory is an approach to develop theory inductively from textual data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The outcome of a grounded theory study is a comprehensive theory, emerging from data, using systematic techniques, that has the ability to explain a phenomena or process. Theory may be defined as ‘an explanatory scheme comprising a set of concepts related to each other through logical patterns of connectivity’ (Schwandt, 2007 in Mills and Birks, 2014: 112). Grounded theory is based on symbolic interactionism, which proposes that human behaviour can be understood through the symbols and meanings that people communicate through their social interactions (Blumer, 1969), and uncovering these meanings is fundamental to the grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006).

Grounded theory comprises a set of techniques and principles for theory development that are used in a flexible way. The strength of grounded theory lies in concurrently collecting, coding and analysing data, and theorizing as you go. It is an extremely iterative process of building and refining theory throughout the analysis (Ryan and Bernard, 2010), that leads to a rich, dense theoretical account that is completely grounded in empirical data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Green and Thorogood, 2004). Grounded theory is a prominent approach for collecting and analysing textual data; its original form (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and subsequent variations (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) remain influential in qualitative research.

Isakson and Jurkovic (2013) used grounded theory to analyse interviews with survivors of torture to explain the nature and process of healing after experiences of torture. Analysis involved reading data and writing memos to capture issues, concepts and themes present in data, which formed a coding scheme that was used to explore data, identify links between themes and develop broader categories of themes. A storyline approach was then used to describe the components, process and enabling conditions for healing after torture. This led to the development of a model (or grounded

theory) centred on the main theme of ‘moving on’, that was used to conceptualize and explain how the enabling factors identified in data led to healing and moving on after the experience of torture.

## **The nature of qualitative data analysis**

Qualitative data analysis involves a process of immersion in data, through which you can identify and interpret the experiences of your study participants. It involves a process of discovery that enables you to remain close to the data and form an evidence-based understanding of the research issues. It is through immersion in your data that you are able to identify the unique perspectives of your study participants, understand social or cultural meanings attached to behaviour and begin to explain people’s beliefs or behaviours. Immersion in qualitative data involves following analytic procedures to prepare, analyse and interpret data, so that the meanings from the data are indeed evidence based and reflect participants’ own experience.

Qualitative data analysis is sometimes described as a ‘science and an art’ (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Patton, 1990), as ‘structured but flexible’ (Charmaz, 2006) and as a process of ‘calculated chaos’ (Lofand and Lofand, 1971). These descriptions refer to the two seemingly contrasting aspects that comprise qualitative research and data analysis. On the one hand, qualitative data analysis is referred to as a ‘science’ – not in the sense of experimental science, but referring to the rigour and structure that come from following established procedures, and using well-accepted methods and techniques for analysing textual data. The ‘science’ aspect also refers to developing evidence-based interpretations of data to ensure that study findings are well supported by data.

On the other hand, qualitative data analysis is also described as an ‘art’, and is often referred to as ‘creative’, ‘flexible’ and involving ‘chaos’. This aspect of qualitative data analysis refers to the interpretive nature of analysis, whereby researchers need to understand, explain and interpret human experience, which requires uncovering personal, social and cultural meanings that underlie people’s behaviour. This involves making sense of people’s multiple and contrasting perspectives. It involves developing a ‘story’ from the data, but not in the fictitious or imaginary sense, rather a

coherent presentation of people's experiences that reflects the depth, complexity and sometimes irrational nature of human behaviour. The interpretive aspect of analysis comprises the 'art' of qualitative data analysis, but this should not suggest that these activities are not rigorous or unscientific, only that they require different strategies to effectively interpret data. Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005: 258) state that 'good qualitative research allows chaos. If the problem could be precisely defined, if the meanings of the participants were known completely beforehand, if it were clear that a theory would explain a particular experience ... qualitative research would be irrelevant'.

Both the scientific and creative aspects are important in qualitative data analysis, and a balance of both aspects is needed to conduct good quality analysis. Without the 'scientific' component data analysis would lack process, technique and rigour; and without the 'creative' component analysis would lack interpretive meaning and empirical theory development.

We now return to our approach to textual data analysis by describing how to prepare data for analysis and begin the tasks in the analytic cycle of developing codes and coding data.

## **Textual data preparation**

Preparing textual data for analysis involves making a verbatim transcript of the data (e.g. an interview, group discussion), translating the transcript (if necessary), and removing identifiers from the data to preserve participant anonymity. You can begin these tasks in the data collection cycle if they are done while the data are still being collected (see [Part II](#) of this book), or in the analytic cycle, if they are conducted after all data are collected.

Typically, some interviews will be transcribed in the field and the remaining data transcribed after fieldwork is completed. Some qualitative data are already in written format (e.g. speeches, blogs, diaries, media documents) and so do not need to be transcribed.

## **Verbatim transcription**

Transcription involves making a written record of an interview or group discussion (called a *transcript*) for data analysis. Transcription is an act of representation in qualitative research, and the purpose of the analysis influences the type of transcription that is conducted (Oliver et al., 2005). For example, linguistic and conversation analysis focuses on the nature and structure of dialogue, since the interest is on *how* people talk. Therefore, the transcript may include the length of pauses, elongated words, diction, word emphasis or overlapping speech. However, in other analytic approaches (e.g. grounded theory or discourse analysis), the interest in transcription is less on the mechanics of speech, and more on the informational content of the interview and the social or cultural meanings attached to this content. So the focus is on *what* is said, rather than *how* it is said. Therefore, the transcript for analysis focuses on producing a word-for-word replica of the words spoken in the interview, but can also include some aspects of speech that may help to interpret the meaning of what is said. For example, a pause before speaking, speech fillers (ahh, you know) and verbal gestures (um, a-ha) can convey meaning in a passage of text. We suggest that a verbatim transcript includes everything that is said in the interview, and that you make your own decisions about any further level of detail that is needed in relation to the purpose of your analysis. Additional considerations include how to transcribe pronunciation, such as slang, regional accents, or errors in diction. For a thoughtful discussion of these transcription issues see Oliver et al. (2005).

Each recorded interview or group discussion needs to be turned into a verbatim transcript that includes both the words spoken by the participant(s) and the interviewer. A verbatim transcript is essential to capture participants' own words, phrases and expressions; this provides the rich detail that is so valuable in qualitative research and allows researchers to understand the emic perspective on the issues raised. The words used by participants also reflect emphasis and emotions relating to the issues discussed. So a transcript may include any emotions of a speaker that can be heard on the recording, which are usually noted in parentheses before or after the words spoken – for example, (laughter), (pause), (softly spoken), (hesitation), etc. People do not speak in complete sentences – we speak in fragmented sentences, there are false starts, pauses, rephrasing, repetition, speech fillers (e.g. umm, ahh) and so on. Therefore, a verbatim transcript

will not be fluid as it reflects the nature of true speech; however, this does not detract from the quality of the data for analysis. Avoid editing or synthesizing in a verbatim transcript, as this adds a layer of interpretation by the researcher and thus data become removed from participants' own words. As verbatim transcripts become data for analysis, it is very important to check each transcript for accuracy and completeness. This may involve listening to segments of the recorded interview while following the written transcript to identify any errors or omissions.

## **Transcription key**

Transcripts also need a key to denote the meaning of symbols used in the transcript. For example, (.) may denote a short pause, (...) a longer pause, or (inaudible) used for sections of unclear speech, and so on. The transcript key provides standardized meanings for particular symbols across all the transcripts in a particular study. The transcript key also identifies notation for who is speaking, in particular to distinguish the words of the interviewer from those of the participant. Different speakers may be differentiated by a letter, for example 'I' for the words spoken by the interviewer and 'P' for the participant. If there are multiple participants, such as in a group discussion, they may be distinguished by P1, P2, P3, etc., to show that a different participant is speaking. What you include in a transcription key is really up to you.

## **Transcript label**

Each transcript needs a label, usually included at the beginning, which includes key information relating to the participant, study site, demographics, interviewer, and so on. The label is used consistently on all transcripts in the study with information specific to each interview. Each transcript needs a unique identifier (e.g. interview number) that is included in the transcript label. There will often be numerous documents that relate to each interview or group discussion, such as the original transcript, anonymized transcript, translated transcript, note-taker's summary, researchers' debriefing notes, memos for analysis and so on. You need to be able to quickly identify all documents related to an interview during

analysis, so it is necessary to have a clear system of labelling data. Using similar filenames for documents relating to the same interview or group discussion may be helpful, for example the filename 'FGD4 original' may denote the fourth focus group discussion in the original language, 'FGD4 translated' may denote the translation of the same group discussion and 'FGD4 notes' the field notes from this group discussion. Any file labelling convention can be used as long as you have a system that is effective for locating the files you need.

[Figure 10.1](#) shows an extract of a verbatim transcript, including the interview label, transcription key, speaker identifiers, participant's emotions (sigh, laughter, etc.), and features of natural speech and expressions (um, oh, etc.).

Figure 10.1 Verbatim transcript of an in-depth interview



**Transcript Label**

Filename: FGD4translated

Study site: Bama, Burkina Faso

Participant Gender: Female

Age: 45

Marital status: Married

Interviewer: Sophie Boules

Location: Participant's home

Date: 24 July 2019

Duration: 60 minutes

**Transcription Key**

I = Interviewer

P = Participant

(...) Pause

[sound] Sigh, laughter etc.

(inaudible) Unclear speech

[[\_\_\_\_]] Redacted text for anonymity

I: How was your household situation before you received a micro-credit loan?

P: Well, (...) it was not easy, we would manage, but it was not easy.

I: What was not easy for you at that time?

P: Well, there would be times when I would have nothing ummm and my husband too would have nothing, at those times we would endure and just suffer. Only at the time of harvest did things change a little, mmhm then we could have rice, we grow rice you see. And we can sell a little for profit and that gives a little money, a little, not even enough to buy condiments, but it helped us. It was not easy for us at that time, (...) it was difficult, we even struggled to buy food.

I: Tell me more about the harvest and how it supported you.

P: Oh, ok, well, we grow rice, it is possible to have two harvests if it's a good year. My husband plants the rice and if it grows successfully, three months later, he will cut it down and thresh it. That is the first harvest. So during this time of threshing rice, there is a little money to support us and he can give me some money, money for food. But, afterwards, after the harvest, well, you have to manage with little money. If the money is finished quickly you will both be sitting there staring at each other. What to do?

I: How did you manage when the money from the harvest was finished?

P: You see this season was so dry, the rice did not grow well. When the harvest is bad, we try to manage but it is difficult (...). We have to struggle, we sometimes have to ask our family to assist. My brother-in-law [[name]] helped us last season, but my husband will not often ask, he wants us to manage ourselves. It is shameful to ask for money, it means he can't manage to look after the family. Sometimes I will ask without his knowledge, but this is not good. I worry, how will I repay, it will be a long time before the next harvest, you see, I feel (...) well (...) [sigh] I also feel shame, it is (inaudible) for my family, you see.

I: I see.

P: uummm, it is not good to bother your family like this.

I: How else did you find money at these times?

P: You can borrow too, you can borrow from the money lender in town, you know these people at the market, yes, this is possible. I am afraid of this, my husband will not allow this. 'How do we repay them?' he said, yes, it's true, we have no means to repay them.

I: Ok, how did things change once you received your first micro-credit loan?

P: Ayyeeee!! This was a big change, a very big change [laughter]. I could start my commerce business, to sell cloth in the market and fruit in the summer. I can contribute some money, it helps my husband, and I feel proud that we can manage. We don't need to ask family for money now and we can even buy small things for them, this is good. It is a big change, it's a good thing for us. Yes, it's a big, big change for us.

*Note:* This transcript is adapted from original data to maintain confidentiality.

## **When to start transcribing**

Transcription can begin as soon as you complete the first interview (during the data collection cycle), or it may be conducted after you have collected all data (in the analytic cycle). There are several advantages of transcribing an interview directly after you complete it. First, it allows you to identify new issues from the interview that may be further explored in subsequent interviews. You may notice important, interesting or unexpected issues from the transcripts that can be added to the interview guide for the next interviews. This initiates the inductive process of data collection (described in [Part II](#)), whereby issues from early interviews are fed into subsequent interviews, to explore the issues in greater depth as data collection progresses. Second, information from early transcripts may guide participant recruitment (see [Chapter 6](#)). You may learn about other types of people who may have interesting perspectives on the study issues and actively recruit them into the study. For example, interviews with young British-Asian women who lived with their parents described that personal relationships were different for their Asian peers who did not live with their parents. This led the researcher to specifically recruit women who did not live with their parents so that their perspectives on relationships were also included in the study (Hennink et al., 1999a). Third, transcribing interviews as you collect the data enables you to assess whether data have reached saturation, that is, when no more new issues are being raised, and data collection can stop (see [Chapter 6](#)). Finally, transcription during data collection enables you to check on the quality of the data and correct any problems while data collection is happening.

Producing a verbatim transcript is extremely time-consuming, so we advise beginning the process early in data collection. A one-hour in-depth interview can easily take four-to-five hours to transcribe verbatim. A one-hour focus group discussion can take five-to-eight hours to transcribe verbatim owing to the added complexities of transcribing a group of speakers. This transcription time increases significantly when you also need to translate data. A multitude of transcription services for qualitative data

now exist that can reduce the time burden of transcription for the research team, however, the cost of these services may preclude their use in some projects. All transcripts need to be checked for accuracy and completeness.

## **Translation of data**

In some studies, data are collected in a different language from that spoken by the researchers, so the transcripts need to be translated prior to data analysis. There are two approaches to translating a recorded interview. The first approach involves producing a verbatim transcript in the original language and then translating this to make a second transcript in the language of the researchers. Although this is time-consuming, it does mean that you have a transcript in the original language for reference during data analysis. The second approach is more common, whereby translation and transcription are conducted simultaneously leading to a single transcript in the language of the researcher. This involves a translator listening to segments of the recorded interview, considering an appropriate translation and then writing down the translation into a transcript. This type of simultaneous translation and transcription may lead to some loss of detail in the translated transcript and it may be more prone to translation errors. Therefore, it is imperative that translators are carefully selected and trained, and that the translation is checked for accuracy and appropriateness by a person familiar with the language *and* culture of the study to ensure the translation conveys the correct meaning. These checks may involve back-translating segments of the translated transcript into the original language to identify whether the appropriate meaning of the dialogue has been captured.

It is not always necessary to translate data. If the study team can understand the original language, you can leave the transcript in the original language. For example, a US researcher fluent in Spanish can analyse the Spanish language transcripts. We recommend analysing data in the language spoken by participants whenever possible, to stay close to the words and expressions of the participants and thereby accurately capture the emic perspective.

## **Retain colloquial language**

The *style* of language in the translation is important. A translation should aim to preserve the colloquial style of language and phrases used by participants as some expressions hold cultural meaning that you want to retain for analysis. For example, a participant may say in their own language: ‘I feel dried out (*wana*) like a fish with no blood in my body.’ This may be translated as ‘I feel anaemic’. However, this translation loses the flavour and nuance of the participant’s original expression and any cultural references that this holds will be lost. Similarly, it is important to retain in the translated transcript any words, phrases or expressions that represent specific cultural concepts (e.g. *wana* refers to feeling ‘dried out’ in Kanada language). In Pakistani culture, *purdah* refers to the culturally specific practice of gender separation, *burqa* refers to the clothing worn by women to preserve *purdah*, and *izzat* refers to family honour. Retaining these phrases in the translation, often in brackets, provides important cultural references that are useful when interpreting data. This also ensures that the cultural dimensions of the data continue to be reflected throughout the data analysis. Such cultural terms are often used as codes; this is called an *in-vivo* code, where a term from the data is used as a code name (see later section on developing codes).

To retain the colloquial language, nuances and meaningful phrases in a translated transcript, it can be useful to select a bilingual person from the study setting itself to conduct the translation, rather than using a professional translator. Whoever conducts the translation needs to be trained on your requirements for translation and transcription (see Hennink, 2007, for a discussion on training a transcriber or translator).

## **Anonymizing data**

A further task in data preparation involves removing any identifiers from the transcript to preserve the participant’s anonymity. It is very important to maintain ethical principles during data analysis (see [Chapter 5](#) on ethics). Anonymizing a transcript involves removing any information that may reveal the identity of the participant, such as names, places, or other specific information. These identifiers may simply be left blank or replaced with a pseudonym. The following example of fictional data includes a lot of information about the participant in her introduction, which could easily

identify her, such as her name, her husband's name, the name of the restaurant they own, and the place of employment of a live-in relative:

P4: My name is Maria Sanchez, I am the wife of Juan Luis Sanchez, and we own the Soul Cantina in the centre of Merida town. There are 9 of us, we live in two houses close to each other. There are my three children and two older children of my husband's brother. My husband's mother is there too, she helps in the restaurant. My husband's younger brother works as a clerk at the Central Bank in Merida.

In the anonymized extract below, for use in the data analysis, these identifiers are removed. However, to maintain the sense and context of the information in the paragraph they have been replaced with a word to indicate what was removed, for example '(workplace)', '(job title)'.

P4: My name is (name), I am the wife of (name), and we own the (business name) in the centre of (name) town. There are 9 of us, we live in two houses close to each other. There are my three children and two older children of my husband's brother. My husband's mother is there too, she helps in (family business). My husband's younger brother works as a (job title) at the (workplace name) in (town).

## **Developing codes**

Many approaches to textual data analysis involve developing codes to capture issues in data. Once data have been transcribed verbatim, translated (if necessary) and anonymized, you are ready to begin the task of developing codes. This is one of the central activities in textual data analysis. It actually begins during the data collection cycle as you begin to notice issues that may later become codes as you progress into the analytic cycle.

## **What is a code?**

Describing a code can be more complicated than it is, essentially 'you'll know it when you see it, and until then you won't understand it' (Guest et

al., 2012: 65). Once you begin to develop your own codes it will become clearer what a code is. Codes are essentially issues, topics or concepts that are present in data. For example, in a transcript on barriers to physical exercise participants may raise issues such as ‘motivation to exercise’, ‘time constraints for exercise’, ‘location of facilities’, ‘body image’, ‘perceptions of exercise’, ‘modesty while exercising’, etc. These issues become codes that are used to label data where these specific topics are mentioned.

There are two main reasons for developing codes: methodological and practical reasons. From a methodological perspective, developing codes allows you to identify the issues raised by participants, give these issues a name (or code) and thereby capture the emic perspective on the research issues. From a practical perspective, developing codes helps you break-up data into smaller but *meaningful* parts for analysis. Codes are used as topical markers to index your entire data (this is called *coding*) so that you can easily retrieve all text on a specific topic for closer analysis. A qualitative study may have hundreds of pages of text which is too cumbersome to analyse as a whole, therefore codes provide a framework for analysis that enables you to focus analysis on specific issues one at a time.

## Developing codes

Codes are developed by the researcher. Software programs for qualitative data analysis won’t develop codes for you, because software cannot read the text, reflect on its meaning and determine an effective code. You need to develop codes yourself by reading data, thinking critically, knowing the research question and the overall purpose of the study. Developing codes is time consuming but critical since it provides the foundation for your analysis.

Usually you work with only a portion of your data when developing codes, not the entire data set. We suggest you select about one-third of your data to work on intensely for developing codes as this is usually sufficient to develop a robust set of codes from your data. Therefore, if your project has 20 transcripts, you would select about six or seven transcripts to use for developing codes. It is most useful to select diverse transcripts so that a

broad range of initial codes can be identified. For example, selecting transcripts that vary by demographic characteristics, study site, participant experiences or perspectives, provides potential for diversity in the issues raised and therefore enables you to develop a comprehensive set of initial codes. This strategy will likely lead to less modification of codes later in the analysis. However, it is still possible to add or modify codes during analysis if you did not capture all relevant issues in this initial code development process. Usually there are only minor adjustments to codes after the initial code development process.

## **How many codes are enough?**

The number of codes in a project will depend on the purpose of the analysis, data richness and your own style. Overall, it is not the number of codes that is important but their usefulness for your analysis. Qualitative studies comprising 20–30 transcripts may easily generate 80–150 codes (Bernard and Ryan, 2010: 361). The process of developing codes stops when you reach saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), that is, when no more new issues are identified in the data. It is difficult to know when saturation of codes will be reached as this depends on the nature of the data, so it will occur at different points in different studies. Some data may be richly detailed, with extensive discussion on each topic whereby many issues are raised and a greater number of potential codes; while other data may be more sparse, leading to fewer codes so saturation is reached sooner. The number of codes you develop is also influenced by the level of analysis you plan to do. You may conduct a macro-level analysis where a limited number of broad codes are sufficient, or you may conduct micro-level analysis to explore issues in great depth or develop contextual explanations, which may require more detailed code development. The number of codes may also change during a project, as codes are merged or split and new codes added to the study.

## **Strategies for developing codes**

We distinguish two approaches to developing codes – deductive and inductive – and describe a range of strategies for each approach below.

Usually a mix of strategies is used to develop codes; however, we encourage you to ensure some inductive strategies are always used so that you capture the emic perspective of study participants more directly from the data.

## **Deductive strategies**

Deductive strategies for developing codes do not start with reading data. They involve using other sources to develop potential codes (e.g. topics on the interview guide, theoretical concepts in literature, professional experience of the study topic), which are provisionally included in a list of codes. This is a way of quickly generating ideas for codes that will be later validated when you closely read the data. For this reason, deductive strategies are often used first before the more intensive process of reading data to develop codes inductively from the data itself. These initial codes are effectively derived from issues, theories or concepts included in the design cycle at the outset of the study, and are therefore defined by the researchers rather than the data. This demonstrates how the design cycle of qualitative research integrates with the analytic cycle (see [Part I](#)).

Deductive strategies for code development may involve using topics from the conceptual framework of the study, research instrument or concepts from research literature as a starting point. For example, the code ‘return migration’ in [Table 10.2](#) originated from a question on the interview guide about migrants returning home; and the code ‘cue-action’ originated from behavioural theory in the scientific literature. Similarly, your own professional or personal experience with the study topic may prompt you to develop potential codes for issues you anticipate will be present in the data. [Table 10.1](#) highlights how these strategies work.

Since these deductive strategies involve identifying potential codes from sources outside of the data, it is important that you validate and refine these codes when you later read the data. As you read data, verify that these initial codes are actually present in the data in the way you anticipated, and refine the codes to accurately represent how the issue is portrayed by the study participants. This step is important to ensure that you are not



imposing codes when they do not have a strong presence in the data, and improves the validity of these codes.

We believe that you should not only use deductive strategies to develop codes, as this does not allow the data to ‘speak for itself’ and you risk missing new and unique issues raised by participants, which defeats the core purpose of a qualitative study. Therefore, we recommend using a mix of deductive and inductive strategies for code development.

Table 10.1 Strategies for developing codes

Table 10.1 Strategies for developing codes

Strategies for developing codes	How it works
	<b>Deductive strategies</b>
Topics from interview guide	Use core topics from the interview guide as initial codes. For example, an interview guide on HIV prevention with four main topic areas including ‘HIV awareness’, ‘HIV beliefs’, ‘HIV risk behaviour’, and ‘HIV prevention strategies’ may use these topics as initial codes.
Concepts from literature and theory	Use issues from research literature or concepts from existing theory as initial codes. For example, literature on perceptions of unemployment benefits may identify concepts of ‘stigma’ and ‘shame’, which may be used as initial codes. Reading your data is needed to verify whether these issues are present in your data to justify these codes.
Professional/ personal experience	Use your professional or personal experience to identify anticipated issues in data. For example, you may know that a ‘bride-wealth’ payment is the norm in your study context or that a ‘mother-in-law’ influences women’s contraceptive use and use these topics as initial codes.

Strategies for developing codes	How it works
	Reading your data is needed to verify that these issues are present in the way you anticipated.
Functional codes	Consider using some functional codes, for example, 'good quotes' is a useful code to mark passages of text that exemplify an issue particularly well and may be used later when writing study results; similarly, a code called 'question 5' may be used if you simply want to search responses to this particular question.
	<b>Inductive strategies</b>
Active reading	<i>Active reading</i> involves reading data, thinking critically and reflecting on the meaning of issues raised. It requires engaging with data to question issues, examine their context, identify the relationship with other issues, understand their relevance to the research topic, and notice how participants express the issues. Active reading highlights issues in data that may become codes.
Notice connections	Reading data analytically can lead to more conceptual codes that are important for building explanatory theory. Read data for underlying concepts, notice connections between issues that signify a broader concept, examine whether relevant concepts from the literature or existing theory are present in data.
Writing memos	Memos are notes about your data that capture your ideas, reflections and thoughts about potential codes, and facilitate a more critical, analytic reading of text.

Strategies for developing codes	How it works
Notice repetition	Notice if issues are repeated within or across texts that may signify an important issue for participants and a potential code. For example, participants may describe feeling unsupported with a disease, getting no help, having no-one to turn to, feeling isolated. Although using different words, the same idea is expressed, leading to a code of 'Feeling Alone'.
Structure of text	Notice topic changes within the text to indicate different issues. For example, text on how parents select a school may describe the school's reputation, size, pupil–teacher ratios, then the issue of school fees and location. These natural topic changes may indicate different codes.
In-vivo phrases	Notice particular expressions, words, or metaphors used by participants to convey a specific meaning or concept, and use these words as the code name for that issue. This is called an in-vivo code. For example, the in-vivo code 'maya' represented the maternal bond between a mother and baby in data from Bangladesh; and 'not a death sentence' was an in-vivo code relating to being diagnosed as HIV positive in data from the USA.

## Inductive strategies

Inductive strategies for developing codes involve reading data, identifying issues, reflecting on their meaning and capturing these in codes. Codes derived directly from data are extremely valuable as they reflect the issues of importance to participants themselves, which may be different from those anticipated by the researcher. These codes allow data to 'speak for

itself' which is central to qualitative data analysis. [Table 10.1](#) summarizes inductive strategies for developing codes.

Reading data for code development is not a passive activity. It involves *active reading* of data to notice issues, think critically about them, question data, reflect on the meaning conveyed and use all of this to develop an effective code to capture each issue. As you read, you engage with data by questioning data to fully understand an issue, its relevance to the research topic, relationship to other issues, explicit and subtle components of the issues, and so on. Active reading also involves trying to 'see' how participants present the issues, the meanings they bring to an issue, and the words or expressions they use. An example of a code derived from active reading is 'family name' (shown in [Table 10.2](#)), where participants described one component of stigma surrounding HIV was the loss of a family's reputation when a family member has HIV/AIDS, which was described by participants as the loss of family honour, respect and standing in the community, often expressed as 'the family gets a bad name'.

Active reading involves multiple readings of data, moving back and forth within a transcript and reading across transcripts. The first reading of data provides you with a broad overview of the content, captures your first impressions and familiarizes you with the depth and flow of the data. From this reading you may develop more explicit, concrete codes from issues that are clear from the data. These concrete codes may remain relevant or they may be further refined during later readings of data. Re-reading data often uncovers the subtleties in data, such as underlying aspects of an issue, emotions expressed by participants, where emphasis is given and the use of specific words or phrases to describe issues. This reading enables you to develop more subtle or conceptual codes and to refine the earlier concrete codes, if needed. Reading across transcripts is useful to identify repetition of issues, notice if similar issues are raised and so determine the importance of certain issues to participants and ensure these are captured with codes. Active reading helps you to notice this repetition, examine the structure of participant's responses and note specific expressions or metaphors used, all of which are strategies for developing codes (see [Table 10.1](#)). If you collected the data yourself, you will likely have some familiarity with the issues raised similar to a first reading of data. However, we encourage

multiple closer readings of data to reveal further insights that will help to develop effective codes.

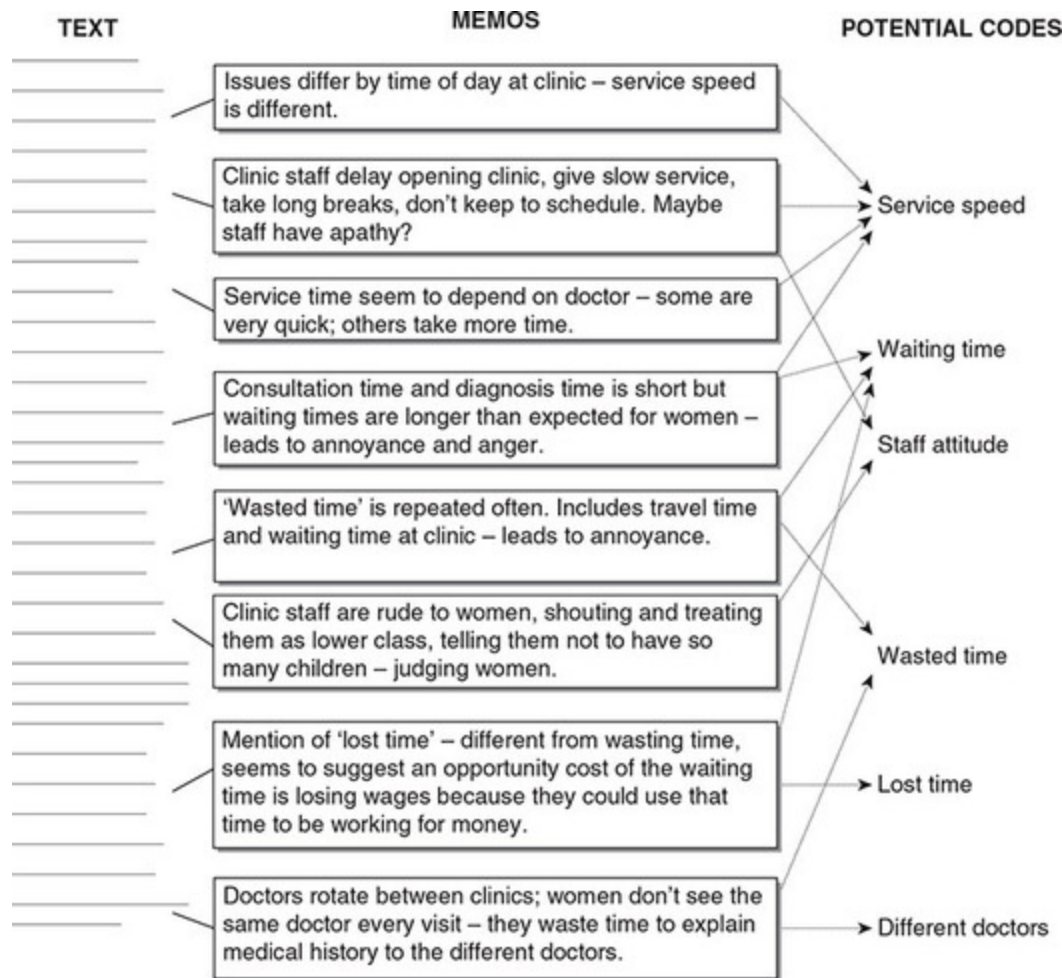
Writing memos during active reading facilitates a deeper exploration of data leading to valuable codes. Memos are simply notes about your data and they provide a place to store your ideas, reflections and thoughts about potential codes. However, the act of writing memos ‘provides a space to become actively engaged in your materials’ (Charmaz, 2006: 72), which can facilitate a more critical, analytic reading of text. In your memos you may note issues raised for potential codes, identify subtle nuances of an issue that may help to define separate aspects of that issue into different codes, or notice what a group of seemingly disparate issues have in common to be part of a broader code. Drawing out subtle aspects of issues in memos can therefore lead to more considered codes. Effective memos go beyond summarizing the content of data; instead they reflect deeply on data. The first time you read data is a particularly good time to write memos as they will likely capture your initial, fresh impressions of data that may be lost in later readings. Overall, writing memos facilitates a deeper exploration of data than reading alone.

There is no right or wrong way to write memos. How you write memos is entirely up to you – they may be brief notes, detailed thoughts or even diagrams; they may be written on paper, entered into analysis software, or put on documents with post-it notes. You will develop your own style of writing memos that best facilitates your close reading of text for code development. [Figure 10.2](#) shows an example of memos that highlight multiple topics and impressions. Reviewing these memos reveals several common themes that are noted as potential codes.

Active reading and writing memos can also help you consider data at a more abstract level to identify conceptual codes. It is not always necessary to develop conceptual codes as this will depend on your analytic approach; if you are building an explanatory theory then conceptual codes are important. Conceptual codes may emerge from reading ‘beyond the words’ and questioning data to examine underlying concepts or processes. For example, when first reviewing the phrase ‘*I always use condoms, but not for their benefit*’ you may focus on the issue of consistent condom use (‘I

*always* use condoms’), but the phrase also suggests an underlying self-motivation for condom use (‘but not for *their* benefit’), which led to the code of ‘self-protection’. Once you develop this conceptual code you may become more sensitive to recognizing the concept of self-protection when it is raised again in data. Another strategy for developing conceptual codes is to notice relationships between issues and consider whether a group of issues collectively represents a broader concept. For example, in data from India on strategies for safer sex in HIV discordant couples (where the husband was HIV positive and his wife negative), women described doing certain activities when their husband wanted to have sex, for example ‘making tea’, ‘feeding the baby’, ‘sleeping in another room’, ‘delaying her bedtime’ (Patel et al., 2016). Individually these behaviours are not compelling, but *collectively* they suggest a broader strategy of avoiding sex as a protective measure – leading to a conceptual code of ‘avoidance’. Alternatively, you may begin with a conceptual issue from the literature or an existing theory and examine whether this issue is present in your data. Identifying concepts from external sources may help refocus your attention on a concept that may have been unnoticed at first, but is indeed evident in your data. However, careful validation of the concept with data is needed so as not to impose the issue on data (see the earlier section on deductive strategies).

Figure 10.2 From text to memos to codes



## Validating codes

How do you know if an issue raised should be a code? Glaser (1978) states that codes must earn their way into the analysis, that is, they must be shown to be valid, robust and useful to be included in analysis. A useful code is one that effectively reflects an issue in data and works well to retrieve relevant segments of text on that specific issue for focused analysis. We suggest using the 7Rs below to determine whether an issue raised is worthy to become a code in your analysis and to validate its presence in your data. An effective code meets the following criteria:

- Relevant to the research topic.
- Represents the issue well.
- Recognized in data.

- Repeated in data (within or across texts).
- Raised by participants.
- Ratified by others in research team.
- Retrieves applicable text segments.

These criteria will help to distinguish issues that will become meaningful codes that are useful for your analysis.

## Making a codebook

Once a core set of codes are developed they are listed in a [codebook](#) that is simply a list of all the codes you developed for the analysis (see example in [Table 10.2](#)). A codebook includes the name of each code and a description of how to apply the code to text, since codes are used as topical markers of text to identify where specific issues are raised. A codebook is essential as it provides a central reference of all codes in the study. Code development is an evolving process, in which new codes may be added, code descriptions refined, and codes combined or divided; therefore a codebook is an essential reference for analysis. A codebook is critical in team-based analysis to maintain consistency across the analytic team in how codes are used in the analysis.

Typically, a codebook has the name of each code and a description on how to apply the code when coding text. A code name can be a single word (e.g. ‘cost’, ‘access’, ‘independence’), a short phrase (e.g. ‘not a death sentence’), or an *in-vivo* term (e.g. ‘maya’). The description of each code should provide clear instructions on when to apply the code, such as what the code means, the type of text that the code should capture and how to recognize the issue in the data. It is helpful to provide an example of the type of text to which the code is relevant (see [Table 10.2](#)). The description may also identify exclusions where the code would *not* apply to the text. In [Table 10.2](#) the description of the code ‘migration history’ states that it refers to the migration journey and should *not* be used for visits home or returning for festivals. [Table 10.2](#) also includes a column on the type of code (deductive, inductive, *in-vivo*), which is included in the example for learning purposes only, we would not include this column in the codebook for a study.



Table 10.2 Example extract of codebook

Table 10.2 Example extract of codebook

Code	Strategy Used	Description	Example from data
<i>Migration history</i>	Deductive	Migration history since leaving the place of origin. Apply this code for discussion about the migration journey. Do not apply for visits to village for festivals.	<i>I first went to Panaji town to stay with my sister's husband, he helped me to find a job and then I came to work in this place, Vasco.</i>
<i>Return migration</i>	Deductive	Return migration to the place of origin. Use for discussion on 'returning home', future plans, hope etc. Do not use for visits home.	<i>In the future after I earn some money I want to return to my village in Karnataka. There we can live better ... we can do anything, there is harmony, we are all the same. Here we are different.</i>
<i>Cue-action</i>	Deductive	Use this code for any external event or information that prompted the respondent to take action (e.g. condom use, monogamous relationships).	<i>Before I did not know about this (HIV). Only after these people (NGO workers) came and told me, this is how I know, so now I am careful.</i>
<i>Trust</i>	Inductive	Any discussion on trust and sexual	<i>My wife is always at home she is not like</i>

Code	Strategy Used	Description	Example from data
		relationships. Trust related to the quality of condoms should not be included here.	<i>those bazzari women (sex workers) so I trust her, she is not running around.</i>
<i>Family name</i>	Inductive	Migrants perceive that HIV infection leads to stigma, loss of respect (i.e. loss of family name). Use for any mention of loss of family name, honour, family respect.	<i>If I go to (have sex with) someone else and get this disease (HIV) the whole family will get a bad name. If I die, who will respect my wife? The whole family will be damaged, our name will be ruined.</i>
<i>Looks healthy</i>	Inductive	Use for mention of external appearance of women (esp. sex workers) influencing men's decisions on having sex or using a condom.	<i>If she (sex worker) looks healthy, her skin is OK, she is plump, then she cannot have this disease (HIV), then you can proceed, it is OK, it's safe.</i>
<i>Use double</i>	Inductive	Use for mention of using two condoms over each other. Common phrases are: 'double use', 'use double', or 'double'.	<i>I sometimes use double ... those people give condoms for free, but I do not trust the quality ... so I use double.</i>
<i>Ghati</i>	In vivo	Use for any mention of term 'Ghati' used by	<i>People say these Ghati' are worthless, they</i>

Code	Strategy Used	Description	Example from data
		Goan people to refer to migrants.	<i>don't see us only call us this name, they treat us poorly, sometimes they don't serve us, it feels bad. So we stay together and help each other.</i>
<i>Nama jana</i>	In vivo	Nama jana (translated as 'our people') is term used by migrants for their migrant community. Use for discussion of own community or ethnic group.	<i>At this jathri (fair), all are nama jana, here we feel good, no one asks where do you belong or what caste you belong to. We are not excluded, these are nama jana.</i>

## Coding data

Coding involves indexing the *whole* data set with the codes from your codebook to provide a framework for analysis. Once all data are coded you can then use a code to search data and retrieve all segments of text on a specific issue to conduct a focused analysis on that issue, thereby exploring one issue at a time in your analysis. Coding data enables you to search data on a specific topic, compare issues across data or by subgroups within data; it therefore provides the analytic handles for your analysis. Coding data takes time but the quality of your analysis depends on it. Strauss (1987: 27) stated that 'the excellence of the research rests in large part on the excellence of coding'. Carefully coded data provide the foundation for your analysis, so poor or inconsistent coding can reduce the quality of your analysis. It is important to distinguish the two processes of code development (described earlier) and coding data. 'Code development' occurs first and is done with only a *portion* of the data to develop the range

of codes, while ‘coding data’ is a separate process that uses the final codes in your codebook to label the *entire* data set.

Coding is not simply a clerical task of labelling data; it also involves interpretation. ‘Coding means naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes and accounts for each piece of data’ (Charmaz, 2006: 43). Coding involves reading a segment of text, interpreting its meaning, reviewing the codebook to select relevant codes and labelling the text with these codes. This process involves subjective interpretation both in reviewing data and in selecting codes. It is therefore important to use some validity checks to balance the subjective nature of coding. As you are coding, check the evidence in data for applying a particular code to a segment of text – what is the trigger in the text that makes this code relevant? Perhaps the use of a word, phrase or example prompted the selection of that code. Check the code description in the codebook to justify that a code is relevant to a segment of text. Without clear reasoning for applying a code, you may be subjectively interpreting data beyond what is there. Checking [inter-coder agreement](#) (described below) is another strategy for balancing subjective interpretation in coding.

## The process of coding

The process of coding involves carefully reading each segment of text, identifying the issues raised, reviewing the codebook to select all codes that are relevant, and applying codes to each text segment. Coding involves continually identifying what is being said, assessing the context of the text, following the line of argument and then deciding which codes are appropriate. The entire data set is coded using this process. It is common for one segment of text to contain several issues, and so be coded with multiple codes. For example, in [Figure 10.3](#) the first paragraph is coded with six codes that reflect all the issues in this segment of text. The entire paragraph is coded with the first four codes (public, private, attention and service time), while the remaining two codes (public and wait time) are only mentioned in the last few lines of the paragraph so only this section is coded with those two codes. During the process of coding you may still identify new issues, adjust the description of a code, decide to merge several codes into one or separate a code to make several codes or even

delete a code. These changes need to be reflected in the codebook and you may need to re-code any data prior to the change to ensure consistency.

Coding may involve multiple readings of data to ensure that all relevant issues are coded. Coders can only retain about 20 codes at once and code effectively (Hruschka et al., 2004), so coding involves several sweeps of data to ensure all issues are captured or you may focus coding on one part of the text at a time (e.g. one topic from the interview guide). Researchers also have different coding styles; some may prefer macro-coding by coding large blocks of text while others prefer micro-coding smaller sections of text. This is commonly referred to as 'lumping' or 'splitting'. When team-coding, it is important to discuss different coding styles and agree on a common strategy to improve consistency in coding data (see section below on inter-coder agreement).

Before coding data, it is useful to decide how you are defining a 'text segment' to which you will apply codes. This is particularly important in team-based analysis to ensure consistency in coding. How you define a text segment will be influenced by the nature of the text to be coded, the preferences of the research team and the purpose of analysis. It is useful to discuss this before coding begins. You may adopt a structured approach to defining text segments, whereby each paragraph or question and response block are considered a segment of text to which all relevant codes are applied. Alternatively, you may use a topical approach, where a text segment is defined by where a specific topic starts and stops in the text. In this approach coding follows the issues discussed in a more organic way than the structured approach. [Figure 10.3](#) shows a topical approach to coding text. Whichever approach you use should be used consistently within the research team throughout the coding process.

Figure 10.3 Coded interview transcript

R1	Really. Those that seek fast service go to (private clinic name) near the market in town. We can contrast. For example, as soon as you arrive at (private clinic) and present your problem and declare your favourite method, you are instantly attended to so that before long you return home. In contrast, when we go to a public reproductive health facility, you are made to wait intolerably long hours unattended, that's why we reluctantly take recourse to the private centre.	Public Private Attention Service speed Wait time
I	Do you think there's any difference in care between public and private health service facilities?	
R4	There's some difference. At the public hospital, you can be there for up to three days unattended and uncared for.	Public Attention Service speed
R1	Absolutely. For instance, those that are here are near and represent ..... hospital and those that are there represent ..... Hospital. Upon arrival (at private), you are welcomed and shown where to sit and medicines are immediately dispensed or administered.	Private Attention Medicine Distance
R5	At the health facility where the service is free, you experience undue delays. At the paying health facility, service is quick when you've paid.	Private Service speed Cost
I	Is it possible to be accorded quality care at a public health facility?	Public
R1	Yes but it is not common, if you are able to bribe or you know the staff then yes	Cost Know Staff
I	What about at the paying health facility?	
R1	At the paying health facility, service is always quick. At the free service health facility, sometimes you meet with disappointment where you're made to wait unnecessarily for a long time.	Private Service Time Public Wait Time

Source: Reprinted with permission from Hennink (2007: 227)

## How much text to code

The amount of text you code will vary. Some coded segments may comprise a single line of text, while others may span a paragraph, page or several pages of text, depending on the length of discussion on the issue. Remember the purpose of coding is to retrieve segments of text on a specific issue for focused analysis. It is therefore useful to code self-contained segments of text that still make sense once removed from the main body of the interview. Consider how much text you need to code to

enable a clear understanding of the issue discussed. You may need to code slightly more text or include the question asked to retain the sense of the issue when reading the text segment alone. Coding often involves balancing focus with context – selecting a focused segment of text to code that still retains the context of the issue in the extract. If you code too much text for every issue you will end up having to do a lot of potentially redundant reading during analysis. Qualitative data analysis software allows you to expand the view of a retrieved text segment to see lines of text immediately before or after the coded segment; however you don't want to expand the view for every segment retrieved to understand it.

## Consistency in coding data

It is important to check the consistency of coding between different coders. **Inter-coder agreement** (ICA) is a measure of the consistency with which two coders can independently code data in the same way using the same coding instructions (i.e. codebook). This is a check on whether each coder is identifying the same issues in data, interpreting data in the same way and selecting the same codes to apply to specific segments of text. Although there are varying opinions on the relevance of ICA for qualitative research, we believe that some consistency checks on coding are valuable to avoid differential coding that can reduce the quality of the analysis.

There are many benefits of checking ICA. It can improve the effectiveness of the codebook by identifying problems with code descriptions (e.g. unclear instructions, overlaps between codes, too broad codes) that lead to inconsistent use of codes. It can also identify problems in the process of coding, such as differences between coders in defining a text segment, coding styles (e.g. lumping or splitting) or subjective interpretation of text. Issues identified can then be rectified before coding the entire data set. It is advisable for all coders to discuss the codes, coding instructions and their own coding styles before doing ICA and coding data.

Common causes of inconsistent coding typically stem from issues with the codebook, coding process or the data itself. The codebook may have unclear code descriptions that are too broad or narrow, duplicate codes, or simply have too many codes for coders to remember. Inconsistent coding

can also result from the coding process, for example, new issues may arise for which there is no code, different coding styles (e.g. lumping or splitting), superficial or subjective interpretation of text or coder fatigue. There may also be issues with the data that cause inconsistent coding, for example the issue may not be clear in data itself leading coders to handle this differently. An ICA activity will highlight the cause of these issues, which may lead to revisions to the codebook, further training of coders, or better team management (e.g. to reduce coder fatigue, increase time for coding).

ICA is done before coding the whole data set. It involves selecting a text that will be coded by different coders, and comparing similarities and differences in their coding. Where significant coding differences occur it is important to discuss the issues and decide how to rectify issues found to improve consistency in coding. Some qualitative data analysis software has tools to compare coding by different analysts; these tools will not identify the problems but can provide a useful diagnostic tool to help you refine where coding inconsistencies occurred from which you can discuss issues and solutions.

## Using software in qualitative analysis

CAQDAS (computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software) is an umbrella term to refer to the range of software programs designed to support qualitative data analysis. These programs are useful for managing textual data, coding and systematic retrieval of text segments, adding variables to texts and visualizing data in different formats to identify connections. You can conduct these tasks without software, by cutting documents into segments, sorting segments into groups, adding post-it notes, drawing diagrams of links and so on – therefore using a software package is a choice rather than a requirement. However, there are distinct advantages to using software for analysis, but also important limitations, which we described below.

Most importantly, software programs do not *do analysis* for you; they are a tool to facilitate *your* analysis of data. Researchers often cite a software package in published articles or reports as though the software conducted



the analysis rather than the researcher. Software for qualitative data analysis has a similar function to a word processor which does not write for you but it facilitates your writing; a word processor does not identify topics to write about, structure your writing, or construct an argument for you. Similarly, [CAQDAS](#) programs *cannot read data* therefore they cannot develop codes or code data for you, nor can they identify meaningful connections or interpret data. It is the researcher who does these analytic tasks and who needs to follow an analytic process to interpret data; software can facilitate these tasks but does not replace a trained analyst. Using CAQDAS is no substitute for the skills of an analyst, the quality of analysis still rests largely on the researcher not the software. Therefore, learning a software program is not the same as learning how to do analysis. It is not enough to learn how to use software for qualitative data analysis, since this does not do the analysis for you – you also need to learn the tasks of analysis and follow an analytic approach. It is often better to know the tasks of analysis before learning the technical skills needed to use a software program. However, novice qualitative researchers often prioritize learning a software program over learning methods of data analysis.

## Software functions and programs

Most CAQDAS programs provide a similar set of core functions to support thematic coding of data and retrieval of coded segments of text. Therefore, they provide the most support for analytic approaches that use a ‘code and retrieve’ approach, such as grounded theory and thematic analysis.

Common functions of CAQDAS programs include:

- Uploading different types of documents (e.g. text, audio, video, archival documents).
- Transcription and editing of documents directly in the program.
- Document organization (e.g. grouping, labelling, adding variables for analysis).
- Writing memos on different parts of a project.
- Entering, organizing and modifying code lists and definitions.
- Functions to code data using the code lists developed.
- Search and retrieval functions, typically searching text by the code list or building more complex searches by document variables or Boolean

search strings.

- Text searches for keywords, word combinations, co-occurrence or word frequencies.
- Graphic visualization of data (e.g. diagrams, charts, maps) with hyperlinks back to data.
- Functions to compare coding of different analysts to assess inter-coder agreement.

How do you select a CAQDAS program? The program you select will depend on how you want to use software in your analysis, the specific functions you need for a particular project and your own personal preference. First decide if you want to use software at all, review the benefits and limitations of CAQDAS described below and consider how using software would benefit your project. Decide the main tasks that you would like the software to perform. Many programs have similar functions, so if your main goal is coding data for a thematic analysis then any of the leading programs will do this. However, if you are looking for some distinctive features you may wish to compare programs. Software is not static so the best advice is to visit the websites of various CAQDAS programs, many of which have a free trial version where you can try the various features and get a feel for the program's usability. An important consideration in program selection is its user friendliness. Assess the interactivity of the program and how well it matches your way of thinking. View the layout of the program's user interface, the toolbars and menus and assess how intuitive these are for you. Consider how quickly you can learn the basic functions of a program as you don't want a too lengthy or steep learning curve before you can use the functions you need. Many programs have an array of additional features that may be 'bells and whistles' rather than core functions you actually need and will use, so focusing your selection on core functions and their usability is a good basis for decision-making. The cost of a program is another consideration. Most of the leading CAQDAS programs now offer a range of pricing options, including reduced pricing for educational institutions and student licenses, plus options to purchase software for a course or semester. The leading commercial CAQDAS programs include Atlat.ti, MAXQDA and NVivo. Several authors provide useful guidance on selecting a CAQDAS program (Flick, 2014), how to use the leading programs for analytic tasks (Silver and

Lewins, 2014; Silverman, 2005), and setting up a project in various programs (Gibbs, 2007). There are now also a host of free software programs for qualitative data analysis (e.g. Dedoose, QDA Miner, Transana), which perform basic 'search and retrieve' functions; however they provide less user support.

## **Benefits of using software**

Qualitative data analysis requires effectively managing large amounts of data, codes, memos and project documents. A fundamental benefit of using CAQDAS is its ability to facilitate project management, by providing an efficient way to store, manage, organize and locate the volume of data and analytic files generated during analysis. CAQDAS programs therefore provide you with a management system for your project. A clear benefit of using a CAQDAS program is speed. Software programs are highly effective for coding data, searching text and systematically retrieving coded text segments for closer analysis. These tasks can be conducted with incredible speed which gives you more time for analytic thought and deeper analysis; this is because you can quickly generate results on one issue that spurs new ideas for further analysis that can follow quickly thereby allowing you to explore analytic ideas as they emerge. For content analysis, searching text for key words or phrases can also be done quickly and systematically. Therefore, software enables researchers to devote more time to thoughtful exploration of data rather than more routine tasks of data preparation.

CAQDAS also enables systematic analysis which contributes to analytic rigour. Software programs allow you to systematically search data by codes, variables, key words and so on, which enables you to identify every instance of these items in data. Such a systematic process may be prone to error if done by hand, therefore using software can lead to more comprehensive and consistent analysis. Software also facilitates systematic counting in data (e.g. counting coded segments, key words), which may be used as an analytic tool or as an outcome to report in study findings – depending on the analytic approach you use. If you wish to change elements of analysis (e.g. edit coding, add variables) this can also be done in a quick and systematic way by searching and editing each item. In this way using software increases the flexibility of analysis by allowing analysis to be

modified and refined in an iterative way as the process moves forward and you learn more about the issues.

CAQDAS can also facilitate team-based analysis by enabling you to share the project electronically between analysts, review the work of others and manage consistency in analytic tasks between team members. Most software programs have a team sharing function that allows you to share the project, merge projects or identify the work of different analysts on a project. However, there is currently no function to transfer data or codes between different software programs, so careful selection of a program for your team is needed upfront. In addition, software has useful tools to assess the level of consistency between team members in interpreting text and coding data. These tools to assess inter-coder agreement enable areas of inconsistency to be identified and rectified thereby improving the quality of analysis.

CAQDAS programs also offer features that enable you to explore relationships in text – these are often referred to as ‘theory building’ programs. This is not because the program itself will develop theory, but because they offer tools to identify connections in data that can facilitate theory development. Data visualization tools (e.g. mapping, drawing and code association features) allow you to see data in different ways, which can highlight relationships between issues, build categories and lead to more conceptual exploration of data that is needed for theory building. Attaching variables to documents (e.g. socio-demographic characteristics) is a powerful tool to facilitate comparison, identify patterns and identify explanations of issues. Software programs can efficiently construct groupings of texts and search issues in these groups, thereby allowing you to rapidly sift through large volumes of data to identify meaningful patterns. Creating hyperlinks is another tool to build connections in data by instantly linking one piece of text to another or to an external document. This function allows you to connect individual elements of data together that build broader concepts and lead to theory development. Hyperlinks may also be used to link text to relevant external documents that provide contextual information on the issues. Creating hyperlinks is a unique advantage of using software. It should be noted however that theory building can be done outside of software and there’s nothing wrong with

stepping away from software to use pencil and paper to reflect on data, relationships and their meanings.

## Limitations of using software

Although there are many benefits of using CAQDAS there are also limitations. A longstanding concern about CAQDAS is that the emphasis on 'code and retrieve' functions by most programs favours certain analytic approaches (e.g. grounded theory). Therefore, other analytic approaches that require maintaining the flow, logic or evolution of narratives (e.g. narrative analysis) or those that focus on analysing discursive elements of data (e.g. conversation analysis) are less well served by CAQDAS. However, this concern is beginning to fade as software programs are becoming increasingly more sophisticated, for example adding new functions that link text segments back to the narrative data to maintain the context of issues, word searches, counting features for content analysis and so on. As these new functions continue to develop, software programs are effectively providing a menu of options to work with data, allowing the analyst to select those that best support their analytic approach rather than coercing any particular approach to analysis. It is important to remember that 'you remain in control of the interpretive process and you decide which tools within a software package best facilitate *your* approach to analysis. You also have the responsibility for being transparent about your process and ensuring the quality of your interpretation' (Silver and Lewins, 2014: 22).

While using software can increase the speed of analysis there are two important limitations of this speed. First, using software can be time saving for certain analytic tasks but learning a program and setting up a project in software can also be time intensive. Data need to be uploaded and organized in the software program, a codebook developed and all data coded. Coding data is time consuming and even though the process is made easy in software it simply takes time to code data well. Coding data is required to use the basic 'search and retrieve' functions of CAQDAS and this is where the main time saving aspect is found – in the speed at which programs can search data and retrieve coded segments. Therefore, an upfront time investment is needed to gain the later benefit of speed in

searching data. This time investment has clear benefits for longer projects, those with a large volume of data or more analysts, but there may be less to gain in short-term projects or smaller data sets. You therefore need to weigh up the benefits of speed in analysis with the time needed to set up a project in CAQDAS. Second, the speed offered by CAQDAS programs may lead to superficial analysis. Software enables rapid searching of large volumes of data, which may tempt some analysts to generate quick ‘shopping lists’ of themes as their results, or present issues that are dramatic but atypical. While the software itself does not dictate depth of analysis, its speed in searching data may lead to this outcome rather than taking time to provide a more considered analysis of data by identifying patterns, providing descriptive depth and contextual explanations of issues.

Finally, there is a somewhat implicit expectation for analysts to use CAQDAS with the assumption that using software will generate higher quality analysis. The use of software often appears as a quality indicator in various checklists for assessing the quality of qualitative research. While using software may offer systematic and transparent analysis, this overlooks the ‘essentially humanistic approach to qualitative research’ (Gibbs, 2014: 279) whereby the quality and rigour lies with the skills of the analyst regardless of whether a software program is used or not. Nonetheless, this expectation has led to a greater emphasis on learning software rather than learning analytic approaches and techniques that improve the skills of the analyst.

## **Evaluating quality**

Data preparation and code development form the foundation for data analysis and therefore ensuring the quality of data preparation is important. It is important to understand how the interview transcripts were prepared, whether they are transcribed verbatim, have been checked for accuracy and prepared ethically. Code development should be well grounded in the data, conducted systematically and validated for consistency. We propose the following questions to evaluate the quality of data preparation that we describe in this chapter.

*Appropriate*

Were verbatim transcripts prepared with a transcription key?  
Was a codebook used to maintain consistency in coding?  
How was inter-coder agreement checked?

### *Transparent*

Are data preparation tasks described?  
Are code development and coding described?  
Is it clear how software was used in analysis?

### *Grounded*

Were inductive and *in-vivo* codes developed?  
How were codes and concepts grounded in data?  
Was memoing used to reflect deeply on data in developing codes?

### *Saturated*

Was code development saturated?

### *Interpretive*

Was colloquial language maintained in transcripts?  
Do translated transcripts retain the expressions or metaphors of participants?

### *Ethical*

Have all identifiers been removed from data transcripts?

### Key points

- Many approaches to data analysis exist. Selecting an analytic approach is influenced by the goal of your study and your data. Our approach follows the principles of grounded theory, but acknowledges the use of deductive strategies and the interplay between inductive and deductive techniques.

- Preparing data for analysis requires making a verbatim transcript, developing codes and coding data by these codes.
- A verbatim transcript is a written record of an interview or group discussion. It captures information in participants' own words, phrases and expressions, which provides the rich detail that is so valuable in qualitative research.
- Codes are labels that capture issues, topics, concepts and processes that are present in data.
- Deductive strategies to develop codes are external to reading data so codes need to be validated with the data. Inductive strategies involve reading data so codes come directly from data and allow the data to 'speak for itself'.
- An *in-vivo* code comes from a word, phrase or metaphor used by participants, usually referring to a specific concept in data.
- Codes and their definitions are listed in a codebook for consistency in the project.
- Coding data is a process that involves indexing the entire data using the codes developed, so that researchers can focus analysis on specific issues in the data.
- Qualitative analysis software does not do analysis for you, but can be useful for data management, systematic coding, search and retrieval of text segments, comparing data and visualizing data to identify connections.

## Exercises

1. Produce a verbatim transcript and anonymize it.
2. Use a range of deductive and inductive strategies to develop codes from the data.
3. Put together a codebook of your codes and definitions.
4. Code your data using your codebook. Ask another researcher to code a portion of your data and assess the consistency in coding between researchers.



Further reading

## On methods

Charmaz, K. (2014) *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2nd edn). London: Sage Publications. An accessible text on the principles and process of conducting grounded theory.

Flick, U. (2014) *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (5th edn). London: Sage Publications. A comprehensive introduction to qualitative research, including an overview of the various approaches for data analysis.

Gibbs, G. (2014) 'Using software in qualitative analysis' in U. Flick (ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*. London: Sage Publications, Chapter 19. This is a useful book chapter outlining considerations for using software in qualitative analysis.

Saldana, J. (2015) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (3rd edn). London: Sage Publications. This text covers much useful information about coding procedures for qualitative research.

Silver, C. and Lewins, A. (2014) *Using Software in Qualitative Research: A Step by Step Guide* (2nd edn). London: Sage. A comprehensive guide to conducting analysis with software.

## On field practice

Esposito, N. (2001) 'From meaning to meaning: The influence of translation techniques on non-English focus group research', *Qualitative Health Research*, 11 (4): 568–79. This paper describes the impact of translation techniques on the validity of qualitative research.

Hennink, M. (2008) 'Language and communication in cross-cultural research', in P. Liamputtong (ed.), *Doing Cross-Cultural Research*:

*Ethical and Methodological Perspectives*. Dordrecht: Springer. pp. 21–33. This book chapter describes how language and communication in cross-cultural research can influence the rigour of qualitative research.

Oliver, D., Serovich, J. and Mason, T. (2005) 'Constraints and opportunities with interview transcription: Towards reflection in qualitative research', *Social Forces*, 84 (2): 1273–89. This paper provides a thoughtful discussion on the complexities of verbatim transcription as representation in qualitative research.

Twinn, S. (1997) 'An exploratory study examining the influence of translation on the validity and reliability of qualitative data in nursing research', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 26: 418–23. This article describes the influence of translation on the quality of qualitative research.

## 11 Textual Data Analysis

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### Objectives

After reading this chapter you will:

- understand how to use the tasks in the analytic cycle;
- recognize inductive and deductive elements of analysis;
- understand how to make a ‘thick description’ of data;
- know how to use strategies for comparison of data;
- develop skills for categorizing and conceptualizing data;
- understand the role and process of developing inductive theory;
- know how to validate your analysis;
- understand how to evaluate the quality of textual data analysis.

### Introduction

In this chapter we continue the process of data analysis following the analytic cycle (shown in [Part III](#)). We suggest beginning by making an [analysis plan](#) to focus your analytic tasks. We then discuss the core tasks used in the analytic cycle: description, comparison, categorization, conceptualization and theory development. These analytic tasks are closely interlinked and are used in a circular way by using the tasks repeatedly and simultaneously throughout analysis.

*Description* is a core analytic task that provides the foundation of qualitative data analysis, it enables you to identify the depth, breadth, context and nuance of issues to understand their meaning.

*Comparison* is the next analytic task that allows you to explore patterns in data that add richness to your description of issues. *Categorization* involves grouping codes with similar attributes into broad categories. Categorization is closely linked with *conceptualization*, which involves visualizing your

data as a whole to develop a conceptual understanding of the phenomenon studied. Both categorization and conceptualization move analysis to a higher level of abstraction and provide the building blocks for *theory development*, the final task in the analytic cycle, which moves qualitative research beyond description and into the realm of explanation, to provide a broader conceptual understanding of the social phenomenon studied. Part of empirical theory development is validating that the theory developed is ‘grounded’ (or well supported) in data, and we describe strategies for validating your analysis. In this chapter we highlight both inductive and deductive elements of data analysis. Both these elements link the analytic cycle back to the original design cycle, thus bringing the qualitative research cycle full circle.

## Developing an analysis plan

Embarking on qualitative data analysis can seem overwhelming at first because of the large volume of data you have and the tangle of issues it contains. Initially you may feel like you are ‘drowning’ in data with no clear strategy to navigate the analysis process. Throughout this chapter we discuss the overall process of analysis and the analytic tasks you can use throughout the process. However, it is useful to begin by developing a project-specific analysis plan that will guide you through the analysis of your data and lead to answering your specific research questions.

Developing a project-specific analysis plan will provide you with a ‘roadmap’ of the specific issues, topics or questions on which to focus your analysis in order to meet the study goals. There is no format for an analysis plan; it simply needs to be a guide that helps you progress through your analysis. However, it is useful to write down your analysis plan, even though this may change as the analysis progresses; this will enable you to keep track of the analysis tasks completed, identify areas missed and review your progress. In developing your analysis plan you may consider the overall purpose of your analysis, the level of analysis needed to meet this purpose and then identify specific topics, questions, areas or codes on which to begin your analysis. These areas are discussed below.

Consider the overall *purpose* of your analysis. Are you trying to answer a specific research question? Do you want to explore a general topic in your data? Are you identifying issues to be used later in a quantitative survey? Your analysis plan should then focus on tasks to meet your goal. This may seem obvious, but there are often a multitude of topics, questions or interesting aspects you could explore in your data and it is easy to lose focus of the overall purpose of the analysis. It is helpful to write the purpose of your analysis at the beginning of your analysis plan. Every task you include on your analysis plan should then contribute something to this overall goal and help you to prioritize tasks that focus on this outcome.

Consider the *level* of analysis that is needed to meet your research goals. If your purpose is to write a descriptive account of an issue or to identify issues for a survey, then you may only need to use description and comparison in your analysis (these are the first tasks described in this chapter). However, if the purpose of your study is to develop an explanation or theory about a phenomenon then you would likely need a deeper level of analysis and use the tasks related to developing a grounded theory. Also consider the level of analysis that is achievable with your data. Some parts of data may be rich and detailed allowing a deeper level of analysis, while other parts may be thin or did not yield useful data, so modify your analysis plan to reflect the level of analysis that is possible on different parts of your data.

Qualitative data analysis involves focusing on small tasks and gradually building up your analysis by exploring one issue at a time until you gain a detailed understanding of the overall phenomenon. You may start by writing down a question, topic or issue, then identify all the codes from your codebook that

will help to explore this issue in the data. This then becomes the first task in your analysis plan. Continue to write questions or topics in your analysis plan and relevant codes to explore the data on each, until you have a range of core issues to examine in your analysis plan. By detailing your analytic tasks in this way, you identify focused and manageable steps for analysis. Breaking down your analysis into smaller tasks is also useful when working in research teams, as you are able to divide tasks between team members and build up the analysis as a group. Your analysis plan will also evolve as you move through your analysis, by adding further questions to explore, comparisons to make or more complex data searches to use.

Once you have developed your analysis plan, where do you *begin* your analysis? Which topics or codes should you start with? There may be a specific question or code that is central to your study and a logical place to begin your analysis, or you may simply begin with a code or topic that you find interesting.

## Searching data

Searching data is a basic analytic task that is conducted throughout your analysis. Using codes to search data allows you to focus your analysis on one issue at a time and slowly build up your analysis. This involves selecting a code or series of codes from your codebook and searching data for each segment of text that is labelled with this code, reading the segments of text retrieved to develop an understanding of the issue, writing down what you learn, then thinking analytically about the search results to guide the next data search. Searching data is therefore a continuous process of searching, reading, writing and thinking; and using what you find to spur the next data search. Therefore, searching data is not a mechanical task, but rather a process of reflecting on the outcomes of each search to guide further exploration of an issue. In this way you initiate an inductive process of data exploration by using search results to guide further data analysis. It is important to remember what a search represents. Searching data by codes will simply retrieve the segments of text that *you* coded with the codes that *you* developed. Therefore, the usefulness of your searches rests entirely on the quality of your code development and the consistency of your coding.

There are many ways to search data and several strategies are summarized in [Table 11.1](#). Some strategies are more useful for developing a description (e.g. searching by a code or topic), while other searches are used more in comparison (e.g. search by subgroups). Searching data is made easier by using a qualitative data analysis software, however, no program will do the analysis for you. These programs will assist in managing large volumes of data, searching data quickly and facilitate complex data searches (see section on ‘Using software in qualitative analysis’ in [Chapter 10](#)).

During data analysis you will conduct countless data searches; some of these will lead to important findings, some will be unfruitful and others will generate ideas, thoughts and questions for further data searches. Therefore, it is important to document your searches and the outcomes of each so that you keep an analytic trail of your data exploration. Even unfruitful searches should be documented, not only so that you do not repeat the same search but also in case what appears to be an unfruitful search turns out to be significant later in the analysis. You may explore a topic for some time, then stop to take stock of your findings by writing an analytic memo on what you learnt, what remains unclear and other avenues for exploration before you continue to the next topic for analysis. This provides space to reflect on each set of findings as you progress and allows the findings to provide direction for your analysis. Keeping a trail of your data searches and the findings of each can be easier when using data analysis software, where you can save, date and label your searches, keep memos about your analytic thoughts and add to these as your analysis progresses.

Table 11.1 Data search strategies

Table 11.1 Data search strategies

Search by code	<p>A basic search that is repeated often.</p> <p>Select a code from the codebook and search data to identify all segments of text labelled with this code. You can search by a code across all texts to identify variation in an issue or search within a single text to identify an individual experience of the issue. For example, searching the code 'stress' across interviews may reveal how different participants view stress, while searching for 'stress' within one interview can identify the experience of stress for a single participant.</p>
Search by topic	<p>A search that uses several codes to explore a specific topic.</p> <p>Select all codes from your codebook that relate to a specific topic. Search data by each code individually (see 'search by code' above) to build up an understanding of the topic. For example, to explore the topic of 'knowledge of diabetes', you could use the codes 'source of knowledge', 'symptoms', 'causes', 'myths' and 'treatment' to build up a detailed understanding of different aspects of knowledge of diabetes.</p>
Search by subgroup	<p>A search that focuses on a defined subgroup of participants.</p> <p>Identify a subgroup of participants, for example by their demographic characteristics (e.g. young women or married men) or experience (e.g. an illness, miscarriage). Then search by a code <i>within</i> the subgroup. For example, make two subgroups of participants – employed and unemployed men – then search for the code 'stress' within each subgroup separately and compare whether stress is discussed differently in each subgroup to identify any patterns. This type of search is easily done using qualitative data analysis software.</p>
Search by a question	<p>A search that is built around answering an analytic question.</p> <p>Think of an analytic question, select codes to search data to answer this question. For example, take a question, 'what is the connection between family and stress?' identify codes to help explore this issue (e.g. 'stress' and 'family' or 'spouse'), then search data where these codes overlap to identify where family-related stress is likely discussed.</p>

## The cyclical process of analysis

In this chapter, we describe the core analytic tasks of qualitative data analysis: description, comparison, categorization, conceptualization and theory development. These tasks are closely interlinked: not only are they used in a circular manner whereby tasks are used repeatedly during data analysis, but tasks are also used concurrently at different points in the analysis process.

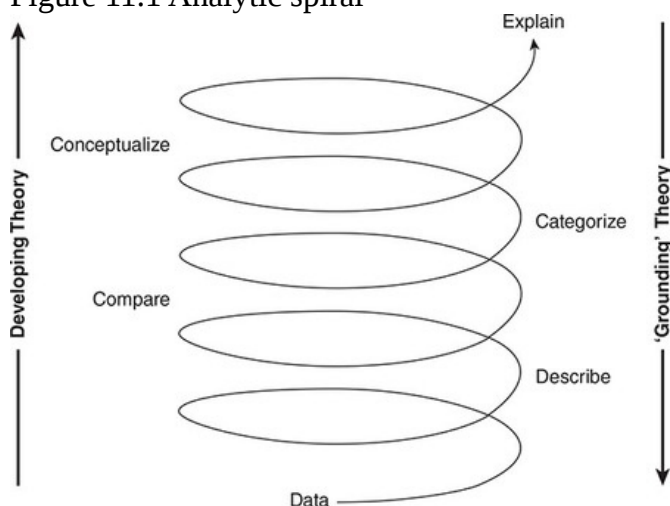
Qualitative data collection and analysis are closely linked and may be conducted simultaneously, whereby you collect some data and review it before continuing data collection (as described in the 'data collection cycle' in [Part II](#)). This allows further data collection to go deeper into the issues identified and develop a more refined understanding of the phenomenon studied.

In addition to the circular process of data analysis, it is also an analytic spiral (Dey, 1993), as shown in [Figure 11.1](#). As you move through the analytic process in a circular manner, you are simultaneously moving up an analytic spiral, by building up your analysis to understand issues more conceptually. You move up the spiral from description and comparison, towards conceptualizing and explaining (or theory development), thereby gaining a more conceptual understanding of issues. As you begin to develop explanations you also validate (or ‘ground’) these explanations by returning to the data, thus moving down the spiral. The process of analysis involves continuously moving up and down the analytic spiral as you develop theory and then validate it with the data. In this way qualitative data analysis may be seen as an inductive conceptual cycle, whereby the process of analysis leads to the development of inductive concepts and theory that are verified with the data (as opposed to deductive theory development which is what you may begin with in the design cycle as you developed your study; see [Part I](#)).

## Description

Description is the first analytic task in the analytic cycle (see diagram at beginning of [Part III](#)). Description forms the foundation of qualitative data analysis and provides the rich contextual detail that is sought in qualitative research. By developing a detailed description of the issues in your data, you begin to understand each issue, variations within the issue, and the subtle nuances of issues. You also begin to understand the unique and valuable perspectives of your study participants on each issue. Description is therefore an important analytic tool that can be used to develop powerful and engaging accounts of events, processes, or social phenomena in your data.

Figure 11.1 Analytic spiral



Source: Adapted from Dey (1993)

Although description is the first analytic task in the analytic cycle, it is used throughout data analysis and used concurrently with other analytic tasks as you progress through your analysis. You may use description early in analysis to describe each issue in your data, then use description again as you compare issues to describe how an issue is distinct from others, and again use description as you categorize data to describe the core characteristics of each category, and return to description when developing theory to describe the concepts and connections of your explanatory framework. Therefore, description is a core task in qualitative data analysis that is used independently, concurrently with other

tasks and continuously throughout analysis. Knowing how to write an effective description is therefore a key skill in qualitative data analysis.

Qualitative data analysis typically involves making a '*thick description*'. This term was developed by the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), who explained that a thick description involves not only describing a particular act but also the context within which that act occurs. It is the context that gives the social or cultural meaning to the act and helps us to understand its symbolic importance. In contrast, a thin description would describe only the act. Geertz used the example of a wink to highlight the importance of including context in description. A wink may have many different meanings depending upon the context in which it occurs, for example it may mean a flirtation if observed between a couple, a gesture of support in a professional setting, or an inside joke when used among friends. The wink itself is simply a movement of your eye, but the context in which it occurs provides the specific meaning to this action. Developing a thick description is important to contextualize issues and understand their meaning, which is the foundation for further analysis to conceptualize and explain phenomena.

Making a thick description typically involves focusing on part of the data, such as a single code, a broader topic, process or particular behaviour. You then search the data (see strategies in [Table 11.1](#)) for all related text, read the extracts of text retrieved and begin to write a thick description from the search results. Developing a thick description involves reading and reflecting on search results to delve deeply into an issue. To make a thick description of an issue, we suggest you consider the depth, breadth, context and nuance of the issue. Considering each of these elements helps to build a comprehensive description and can help identify where your thick description could be expanded. A useful starting point is to explore the breadth of an issue by noticing various aspects of the issue that are raised in data. For example, you may be exploring the issue of 'stress' and notice that different types of stress are mentioned in your data: physical, emotional, financial, and health related stress. Identifying the different types of stress provides breadth to the issue of stress. These aspects can then be used as a framework from which to explore depth, for example, by focusing on each aspect in turn (e.g. physical, emotional, financial and health stress) to understand the different types of stress in greater detail. Exploring the context of an issue helps uncover its meaning, for example, stress may always be raised in an event-related context, such as the financial stress of losing a job, emotional stress of a divorce or the physical stress of a health event. As you look for context of an issue, you will also begin to notice connections and relationships between issues that become useful later when exploring patterns in data that lead to explanations. Also consider whether there are any nuances to the issue, which can add richness to a thick description. You may see nuance when an issue is discussed differently in different circumstances, for example, seeking counselling for stress may be viewed as acceptable in some circumstances but not for others. You may not find nuances in all issues, but when they are found this detail can add a lot of depth and richness to a thick description. The following questions will guide you to develop a 'thick description' by looking for breadth, depth, context and nuance of an issue.

*Breadth* What are the different aspects of an issue (e.g. range of perceptions, behaviours, components, dimensions)? How are these aspects distinct? Are some aspects more common than others?

*Depth* What is the issue? How is it described? Why is it relevant? What examples or stories are given? How do participants express an issue (e.g. words, phrases, emotions)?

*Context* What is the context of an issue? (When, where, how does it happen?) What meaning or explanations are given about the issue? Does an issue commonly overlap with another issue in data?

*Nuance* Is the issue discussed differently in different circumstances or contexts? What are these differences? What reasons are given for differences? Are these nuances linked to particular types of participants or patterned in any way?



[Table 11.2](#) shows an example of analytic notes about a code called ‘sources of support’ for coping with work-related stress. The example shows how focusing on breadth, depth, context and nuance when exploring the code can really ‘open up’ the data and capture considerable detail that is valuable for writing a thick description of this issue. These notes would then be transformed into a written narrative. Seeking breadth involved identifying all the different types of support that were mentioned in data, which revealed six distinct categories of support. Seeking depth involved providing details about each of the six sources of support identified, the nature of each source and examples. Seeking context involved identifying broader comments in data that provide context about that source of support, such as why work colleagues provide effective support (because they are familiar with the workplace environment), and how participating in activities can displace stress or strengthen internal coping from stress. Seeking nuance involved identifying when things worked differently in certain circumstances, for example, some work colleagues gossip so they are not suitable confidantes for offloading stress at work, some spouses and family members cause stress rather than provide stress relief, and socializing with friends was stressful (not stress relieving) for unemployed participants as they felt devalued without a job. The issue of self-reliance for coping with stress may be seen as a nuance in itself. Whereas most sources of support are external, self-reliance involved rejecting external sources to instead cope with stress independently. These subtle nuances provide richness to the issue of support; however, not all issues will have nuances. [Figure 11.2](#) shows a narrative thick description of support for coping with work-related stress that was developed from the analytic notes shown in [Table 11.2](#).

Description is a fundamental task in qualitative data analysis. It is also an important component of the grounded theory approach. However, using only description does not comprise a grounded theory analysis, for example, providing a detailed description of themes present in data is not sufficient for grounded theory. Description tells us ‘what’ the issues are, but does not explain ‘how’ or ‘why’ they occur, which is necessary to explain phenomena and is the essence of the grounded theory approach. A grounded theory analysis progresses further around the analytic cycle, moving from description to theory development. While theory development includes description, it is important to go *beyond* description to include interpretation and explanation that contributes to a theory about the phenomenon studied. The theory that is developed may be validated by description, include descriptive details or use the nuances uncovered in descriptive analysis to refine theory development. Thus, description is both a precursor to theory development and a component of it. So, while description does not constitute theory development, description is an essential component to theorizing from textual data. Strauss and Corbin (1998: 19) stress that ‘although description clearly is *not* theory, it is basic to theorizing’. Therefore, in the grounded theory approach you use description but go beyond description towards conceptualizing data and theorizing from data. A unique strength of the grounded theory approach is its potential to move beyond description to develop comprehensive frameworks of concepts that derive from the data, which are then used to theorize about social phenomena. Unfortunately, many published studies state they used grounded theory but only present a description of key themes without moving further to generate explanatory theory which is central to grounded theory.

For more strategies to build a thick description from textual data see Miles et al. (2014). Their sourcebook offers a range of systematic approaches to describe participants, variability of issues and experiences in data.

Table 11.2 Analytic notes for a thick description of the code ‘sources of support’  
 Table 11.2 Analytic notes for a thick description of the code ‘sources of support’

Breadth (Different sources of support)	Depth (Details of each source of support)	Context (Context of support)	Nuance (Circumstances of support)

Breadth (Different sources of support)	Depth (Details of each source of support)	Context (Context of support)	Nuance (Circumstances of support)
Work colleagues	Provide an informal and trusted source of support to help 'blow off steam'. Act as supportive confidantes. Provide distraction from daily stress while at work. Interact daily so always available. Indirect colleagues (e.g. rideshare partners) also provide informal support.	Colleagues are familiar with workplace environment to understand shared stressors. Colleagues from a different department provide distance and confidentiality.	Not all work colleagues can be confidential, they gossip, so are not suitable confidantes for stress relief.
Spouse	Spouses provide emotional support. Provide understanding and affirmation of value.	Spouses provide continuous support for stress despite the current circumstances at work.	Some spouses were a source of stress, not support, as they did not understand work-stress. Could not 'offload' daily stress.
Family members	Family members (parents, children, siblings) provide a close bond for both practical and emotional support. Family interactions and outings provide distraction and relaxation from stress. Children provide welcome stress relief, and parents want to hide stress from them.	Physical proximity to family, and emotional 'closeness' influence the nature of family support received.	Some family members or family issues caused stress not support.
Friends	Friends provide a relaxing social distraction from stress (e.g. fishing, barbecues, watching sports, outings). Taking a break with friends helps cope with stress. Some had little time for social activities due to increased work and family responsibilities.	Providing support and advice to friends in need helped to put own problems into context.	Those who were unemployed had the most time for socializing with friends but described social interactions as stressful rather than stress relief. Leading to feeling devalued, excluded and resentful of friends who had a job.
Activities	Activities and classes provide a distraction from stress as well as stress relief.	Displacement activities (e.g. TV, internet, online gaming) provide a distraction from stress, while classes (e.g. yoga,	No nuances found

Breadth (Different sources of support)	Depth (Details of each source of support)	Context (Context of support)	Nuance (Circumstances of support)
		meditation, playing sports) provide relaxation and internal stress relief.	
Self-reliance	Involves being independent by relying on themselves rather than others to cope with stress. Don't want to burden others for support and want to keep own issues confidential by not sharing. Positive thinking was an individual coping mechanism for stress. Sleep and drinking alcohol were other individual coping mechanisms.	Sharing problems with other people may not relieve stress if they can't provide help or support.	The issue of self-reliance was a nuance of sources of support – while some sought external support, for others this was problematic so they coped with stress independently and internally.

Figure 11.2 Narrative thick description of 'sources of support'

Five sources of support were identified for coping with work-related stress: work colleagues, family, friends, activities and self-reliance. A core source of support were work colleagues with whom participants could talk, laugh, and 'blow off steam' to provide a distraction from daily work stresses. Colleagues understood the workplace environment and shared the same stress: for example *'we talk about work stuff and off load about that [...] it also helps to relieve the pressure to just chat about things that bother you at work, in a casual informal kind of way.'* Some described having a trusted confidante at their workplace with whom they could share more personal issues causing stress, while they avoided sharing with those who were known to gossip. Participants felt that confidentiality was assured with colleagues with whom they did not work directly, such as those from other departments or a ride-share partner. These colleagues had sufficient distance to provide confidentiality, yet were still familiar with the workplace environment to understand shared sources of stress.

Outside of the workplace, family members (i.e. spouse, children, parents and siblings) were described as the main source of support for stress. Spouses were often described as a constant source of emotional support by being understanding and caring, making them feel valued and proud of their achievements, despite current stressful situations. However, some participants stated their spouse was not always a source of support because they did not understand their work-related stresses making it difficult to 'off-load' daily pressures with them. Participants described that having a close bond with family members (e.g. parents, siblings) provided emotional support in stressful situations, they welcomed family interactions as a distraction from stress and a source of relaxation, for example, *'I would probably feel lost without family around me'* and *'knowing that you have a great support network really puts you at ease.'* Conversely, participants who did not live nearby family, did not have a close bond, or had infrequent contact with family members discounted them as a source of support. Children were universally described as a welcome source of stress relief, for example, *'time with my kids is pure pleasure, it takes away the constant stress, because they are the reason I am doing all this work anyhow';* however some described suppressing their stress from young children so they did not see their parents worry. Younger children provided a distraction from stress, while adult children provided advice.

Friends acted as another source of support by providing a social distraction from work-related stress, during barbeques, fishing trips, or simply watching sports and relaxing. For example, *'Taking a break from things that pressure you, like work, also helps you to feel better, cope with stress, so just being sociable helps a lot.'* One participant described how providing advice to friends put their own problems into perspective, thereby providing indirect stress relief. Despite these benefits, most participants described the difficulty of finding time to socialize with friends due to competing priorities of work and family responsibilities. In contrast, participants who were unemployed described social interactions with friends as a source of tension, because they had little in common with their employed friends so they felt excluded, they resented their complaints about work stress and felt low self-worth due to being unemployed. At the same time unemployed participants had the most time to socialize, but they weighed the benefits of social contact with the stress it caused them. For example, *'Most of my friends have jobs and I really hate to be around them when they complain about their job ... I would kill to just have a job, so I have to weigh the social contact with the complaining.'*

A range of activities and classes were identified as providing stress relief. Activities such as watching television, online gaming, and using Facebook were described as displacement activities to deal with stress, while classes such as yoga, meditation, creative writing and sculpture provided relaxation and internal stress relief. For example: *'My writing groups are just a way to feel really alive and have any work-related worries melt away'* and *'I've been really getting into online gaming ... it gets me out of my head, you know, you can forget about the daily stresses of being unemployed for a while.'*

Some participants described being self-reliant as the most effective source of support for work related stress. They described not wanting to burden others for support, keeping work issues confidential, and questioned the value of sharing problems with others who may not be able to help: for example *'I keep it all to myself, I like to keep it simple and sort out my issues on my own.'* Using positive thinking, sleeping and drinking alcohol were also described as other forms of individual support for stress: for example *'thinking of better times really does take the pressure off.'*

## Comparison

Comparison is a second task in the analytic cycle. Comparison is typically used early in data analysis, often alongside description, so they are depicted together in the analytic cycle. While description provides the depth and detail when initially describing issues, comparison allows you to further describe how issues are distinct from each other and whether any issues are patterned in your data. Therefore, comparison adds further depth, richness and clarity to the description of issues. Comparison is an important analytic tool in all social science research; in qualitative data analysis we use the [constant comparative method](#) to make a multitude of comparisons when exploring data towards developing theory. Comparison also provides an important link between description and explanation. Description identifies *what* the issue is, comparison identifies *how* issues are patterned in data, which leads to explanation to understand *why* issues are patterned in this way. Thus, you are simultaneously using the tasks of description and comparison to answer what, how and why for each issue, that leads you further towards explanation as you begin to move up the analytic spiral depicted in [Figure 11.1](#). Comparison is also used in later stages of data analysis when categorizing and conceptualizing data; these applications of comparison will be described later.

There are many ways to conduct comparisons in data analysis. Using a software program for qualitative data analysis can be very beneficial for making comparisons in data, by creating subgroups to compare and adding variables to data to use for comparisons. [Table 11.3](#) outlines several strategies for comparison; these are not exhaustive or mutually exclusive and are simply intended to provide you with examples of how to consider comparisons in your data. The first strategy listed is cross-case comparison, which involves comparing a single issue across the entire data set; for example, searching for a code across all interviews to identify different views or experiences of the issue. This is the same as a basic ‘search by a code’ described in [Table 11.1](#), but it is actually a comparison of the issue across all participants or texts. A cross-case comparison is most commonly used when making a thick description of an issue (see section on ‘Description’ above).

Table 11.3 Strategies for comparison

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Type of comparison	Description
Cross-case comparison	Compare a single code across all texts in the data set. This can be used to identify the variety of perspectives or experiences of a single issue across the data. For example, comparing the code ‘shame’ across all interviews to identify similar and unique experiences of shame.
Comparison by deductively derived subgroups	Compare codes by deductive subgroups developed by the researcher (e.g. by socio-demographic characteristics). For example, comparing how a code is discussed by men versus women, younger versus older, single versus married participants, and so on.
Comparison by inductively derived subgroups	Compare codes by inductive subgroups that are identified from the data (e.g. participant beliefs, behaviours or experiences). For example, comparing participants who express pro-gun values versus anti-gun values or comparing participants who have experienced workplace stigma with those who have not.
Comparison across and within subgroups	Compare codes across subgroups (e.g. between urban and rural participants) and within a subgroup (e.g. within the rural subgroup). For example, comparing within the rural subgroup may identify further subgroups (e.g. a rural elite and rural poor) that can be compared and refine analysis by identifying subtle patterns within rural residents.
Comparison by a typology	Compare issues by using a typology developed in earlier analysis. For example, a typology of pill users may include people who are ‘regimented’, ‘haphazard’ and ‘pill-averse’. You may then compare how each ‘type’ of pill user views preventative health to identify any patterns.
Comparison by study design elements	Compare by elements of the study design. For example, compare an issue by the different study sites (e.g. urban vs rural), participant groups (e.g. patients vs providers) or participant characteristics (e.g. service users vs non-users) that were part of your study design or recruitment criteria.

The other strategies for comparison that are listed in [Table 11.3](#) focus on comparing issues by different types of subgroups. Making comparisons by subgroups can identify whether issues are presented

differently in different subgroups, whether issues are patterned in any way in data and how they are patterned (e.g. by demographic/geographic characteristics or by certain beliefs/behaviours). Comparing whether issues differ by subgroups of participants (see [Chapter 6](#)) is one way to begin your comparisons. Deductively derived subgroups may be developed from elements of your study design (e.g. study sites or types of participants recruited), or by socio-demographic characteristics of participants (e.g. gender, age, marital status). Comparing issues by deductively developed subgroups is commonly used, perhaps because these subgroups are easy to define; however they may not yield the most fruitful results. If no clear patterns emerge after making comparisons by deductively developed subgroups, then issues may be patterned by other characteristics, so try comparing issues by inductively developed subgroups. Inductively developed subgroups often emerge during data analysis and are specific to your data and they may be more subtle groupings that can yield fruitful patterns in data that more clearly explain issues. Inductively developed subgroups may reflect different beliefs, behaviours or experiences of participants. For example, a study on perceptions of breast cancer prevention amongst women in China showed few patterns after comparing by socio-demographic characteristics; however, participants were divided by a belief system – fatalists and non-fatalists. Comparisons by these inductively derived subgroups revealed clear patterns on knowledge of breast cancer, prevention strategies and treatment seeking behaviours. Comparing by inductively developed subgroups can therefore yield meaningful patterns and explanations in data.

Making structured comparisons can identify patterns in data that are not obvious from reading data alone. Also, if you collected all data yourself, you may still not see the patterns that emerge from the comparisons you will conduct during data analysis. For example, a study in the Asian community in the UK found that young Muslim women felt embarrassed to consult with male doctors for family planning services, particularly if the doctor was from the same cultural and religious background as they were, because they felt the doctor would judge them for using contraception or would not maintain confidentiality within their shared community. These issues were not raised in consulting with non-Asian doctors, only the embarrassment of a physical examination (Hennink et al., 1999a). This specific finding emerged after constant comparison by various subgroups in data. This began by comparing the code of ‘embarrassment’ by gender to find that the issue was only mentioned by women. Then, within the subgroup of women, a comparison by age groups found that it was younger women who were most concerned about embarrassment. Next, amongst the subgroup of young women, a comparison by religion found that embarrassment was most strongly voiced by Muslim women. Then, reviewing data from only young, Muslim women where this issue was clustered, highlighted different nuances in the issue, including how the cultural background and religion of the doctor caused concerns of judgement or confidentiality, and the only concern about non-Asian doctors was the physical examination. These patterns and subtle nuances in the code ‘embarrassment’ are revealed by using the constant comparative method to fully explore an issue and identify how it is patterned in data.

## **Categorizing and conceptualizing**

The next tasks in the analytic cycle are used to categorize and conceptualize data to begin considering your data as a whole. These tasks are distinct, but in practice they are often used together. Categorization involves bringing together groups of codes that collectively represent a broader concept. Conceptualization then involves considering the relationships between these categories, to view the data as a whole and develop a more conceptual understanding of the phenomenon studied. Both these tasks begin to move analysis to a more conceptual level to provide the building blocks for theory development. Thus you are now moving up the analytic spiral (shown in [Figure 11.1](#)) by considering your data more conceptually. Categorizing and conceptualizing data build on a solid foundation of description and comparison, so that you are familiar with all components of data before moving onto the more conceptual levels of analysis. Categorizing and conceptualizing are closely interlinked,



whereby categorizing may lead to conceptualizing data or become the conceptualization of data, and conversely conceptualizing may highlight meaningful categories of data. Here we describe categorization first as a precursor for conceptualizing data. Many of the leading software programs for qualitative data analysis have tools for drawing and visualizing data in different ways that can facilitate the process of conceptualizing data; however, these tools do not replace careful analytic thinking.

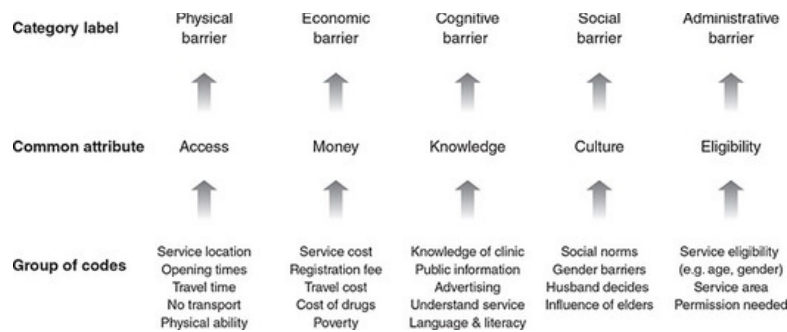
## Categorizing

Categorizing data involves grouping codes with similar attributes into meaningful categories that relate to your research question. Individual codes often capture single issues in data, while categories bring together a group of codes that collectively represent a broader concept or topical issue. Categorizing data thus moves the focus from individual codes towards broader categories that represent higher-order groupings of data. In this way categorizing data becomes a precursor for theory development, as categories may become components of a conceptual framework that is used to explain the phenomenon of interest. Much social science research consists of some type of categorizing or conceptual ordering of data that forms a precursor for abstraction and theory building (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Categories may be developed using inductive or deductive strategies. You may identify categories inductively by reviewing codes, identifying similarities between codes, grouping these codes together, and giving the category a name that represents the common attribute. Some codes may already represent a broader concept or category of issues, but most will not. During this process you will again use description and comparison, to define the core concept represented by each category and to differentiate categories to identify how each is distinct. Developing categories inductively allows you to remain close to the data. You may also use a deductive approach to develop or refine categories; for example, a category may be initially spurred by concepts from research literature or from the original conceptual framework of your study, but these categories still need to be validated against your data to ensure their relevance and fit. Regardless of how categories are developed, they need to be well defined, appropriate and valid as they will become core components in theory development. The development of categories continues until saturation, when you can identify no further meaningful categories in your data. You may categorize all data or only the portion of data that relates to the specific phenomenon you intend to explain.

[Figure 11.3](#) shows an example of categorization using data on the barriers to using health services for women in Pakistan. In this study, 22 codes related to barriers were identified, which were then classified into five broad categories: access, money, knowledge, culture and eligibility. While some codes could be easily grouped together by a common characteristic (e.g. money), others required a more abstract thinking to identify their shared attributes (e.g. eligibility). The five categories developed were initially labelled by their common attribute (access, money, knowledge, culture and eligibility), and then category names were further refined after comparison with constructs from research literature. After reviewing literature on barriers to health services, similarities were found for three categories of barriers which were then refined as physical, economic and cognitive barriers. The final two categories of barriers were unique to the study context and not referenced in the research literature, but their labels refined to reflect the type of barrier they represent. You need to be careful not to simply apply categories from research literature to your data, but to compare categories emerging from your data with those identified in the literature to refine or rethink your categories; in this way the categories remain well supported by data. Another example of codes grouped into categories can be seen later in this chapter in [Figure 11.5](#), where codes are classified into three core categories (legal, economic and health).

Figure 11.3 From codes to categories in data on ‘barriers to using health services’



## Conceptualizing

Conceptualizing data moves analysis to a more abstract level. It involves seeing your data as a whole to develop a broader conceptual understanding of data in the context of your research question.

Conceptualizing data is an essential precursor to theory development as it involves understanding how the individual components of data are linked together into a broader conceptual framework that can begin to explain the phenomenon under study. Conceptualizing data involves some degree of abstraction; however it is important to remain close to the data so that you develop an empirically based conceptual understanding of your data.

There are many ways to conceptualize data to get a broad overview of what is happening in your data. Most strategies require some abstraction or lateral thinking to enable you to ‘see’ the patterns more clearly or understand how data fit together conceptually. Some strategies will focus your attention on different parts of data to highlight a pattern or trigger an understanding of how an issue works, while other strategies help to identify the broad structure of data and how it fits together. The process of categorizing data (described earlier) may be part of the conceptualization process by classifying data into higher-order categories that begin the conceptual process. We outline a range of strategies below to help you view your data in different ways, which may lead to a more conceptual understanding of the data as a whole. The strategies described below are not exhaustive and some strategies are similar. We present the strategies as a menu of options and recommend that you try various strategies to see what works for you and for different types of data. You may find a single strategy works for a project or you may use several strategies together to conceptualize your data. Overall, conceptualizing data takes time and will most likely evolve as your analysis progress.

## The ‘big picture’

A common strategy for conceptualizing data is to consider the ‘big picture’ of the data by identifying the central story that accounts for the issues in your data. Identifying the big picture or central story of your data involves stepping back from data to gain a broader perspective of the issues, then synthesizing these into a concise account that brings together the core issues within the data. In order to develop a big picture view of the data you first need to have a detailed understanding of the individual components of your data and the linkages between these (by using description and comparison). The key to developing a big picture understanding is to look for simplicity to clarify the core issues, key linkages and overarching explanations, and then identify how these may contribute to an overall account of the data. Extracting the central story from data requires some simplification of the issues; however, this should not be viewed as diminishing data but rather adding strength by contributing to a clearer understanding of the relationships within complex data. Furthermore, there may be several storylines in your data, reflecting diversity of behaviour, circumstances or outcomes, so try to capture this diversity in the ‘big picture’ overview. The challenge of developing a big picture view of data is to



summarize data yet retain some complexity and nuance that reflects a comprehensive understanding of the issues. Sometimes stepping away from your data helps to see the broader picture; take a walk or think about data without looking at it, to clarify the overarching message of your data.

## Telescoping

A telescoping technique allows you to vary your perspective on your data by moving from a broad overview of the data to a close examination of the detail. Telescoping involves continually switching from ‘zooming in’ to ‘zooming out’ from the data, and essentially conducting two analytic tasks simultaneously. Zooming out involves gaining distance from the data to develop a broader perspective on the data as a whole, to identify central issues, core processes or main linkages in the data; this essentially helps you conceptually summarize the data. Zooming in enables you to return to the detail in the data, to clarify links, identify nuances or exceptions and further refine the broad conceptualization process. Telescoping therefore fosters two analytic processes, broad conceptualization by moving away from the data and detailed exploration by moving closer to the data, ensuring that your broad conceptualization still retains a strong foothold in data.

## Explore links

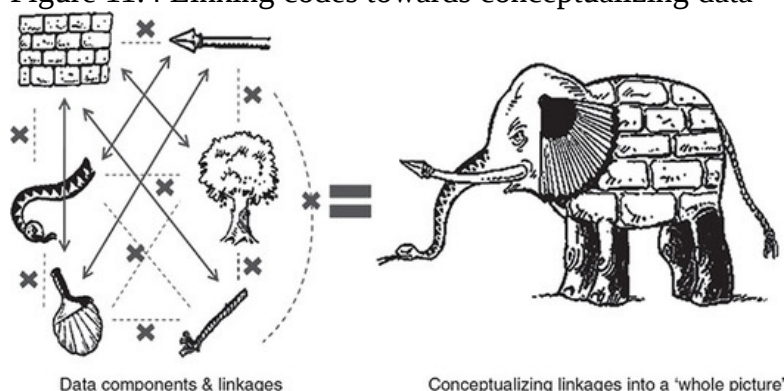
Exploring the links between individual components of data can help build up a complete picture of your data as a whole. Exploring relationships between parts of your data may begin with following up on any associations you noticed in the data when describing and comparing codes. You may begin by exploring links between a particular subset of codes, then move on to explore another subset of codes and then consider whether the two subsets are linked in any way. In this way links between codes are built up in an incremental manner to develop a comprehensive understanding of the network of relationships in your data. It is important to note that not all issues in the data will be related, and that the absence of links is just as important as their presence.

The importance of fully exploring your data to conceptualize the whole picture may be highlighted through a nineteenth-century parable by John Godfrey Saxe called ‘The blind men and the elephant’ (Saxe, 1873). This parable describes how six blind men take turns to touch an elephant and then describe what an elephant is, but each man touches a different part of the elephant and only that part (e.g. the trunk, tail, tusk, ear, legs or body). The men then disagree on what an elephant is, because each man has only explored a part of the elephant and not the whole elephant. The parable states that ‘each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong’, to suggest that although each blind man may have correctly described one part of the elephant, no one described the whole elephant. This underscores the importance of exploring *all* your data in order to develop a complete picture of the overall story of your data.

Furthermore, exploring links between each element of the data can build up to a conceptual understanding of the data as a whole. Suppose that the six parts of the elephant described by each of the blind men were codes in your data, so you would have six codes: a brick wall, spear, snake, tree, fan and rope (as shown in [Figure 11.4](#)). Each code first needs to be fully described and the links with all other codes explored (see earlier sections on ‘Description’ and ‘Comparison’ for strategies). This descriptive detail may identify that there are four aspects to the ‘tree’ code, two types of ‘fan’ and ‘spear’ codes, but only one type of ‘snake’ and ‘rope’ code. These details will become important later when understanding the whole picture. Exploring how codes relate to each other reveals that the ‘brick wall’ code is central because it is linked to three other codes: the fan, rope and tree codes (shown by arrows between these). However, equally important are the codes that are not linked to the brick wall (shown by a dashed line and cross): these are the snake and spear codes. Further exploration of linkages

reveals that the rope code is linked only to the brick wall code but not to any other codes in the data; and the snake code is also only linked to one other code, the spear. By continuing to explore links in this way you develop a detailed understanding of the key relationships in the data (this is shown by the matrix of arrows and dashed lines in [Figure 11.4](#)). If you then construct your understanding of the data according to the linkages found, it will lead to an overall understanding of your data as a whole (this is represented by an elephant on the right-hand side of [Figure 11.4](#), which resulted from piecing together the components of data by the linkages found between them). We encourage you to find the ‘elephant’ in your own data through incrementally understanding how different components of data are linked together to form a comprehensive whole. In conceptualizing data as whole, you may find that you return to descriptive details of codes to understand the nuances in the data; for example, to understand how the four aspects of the tree code (legs of the elephant) and two variations of the fan code (ears of the elephant) contribute to the whole picture. Exploring links in data slowly builds up a bigger picture of data. What data *collectively* reveal is often much more meaningful than the individual components that comprise that whole.

Figure 11.4 Linking codes towards conceptualizing data



## Matrices

Drawing a matrix of core codes is a systematic strategy to identify patterns in data more clearly. It enables you to examine the intersection of key codes to identify patterns in behaviour, attitudes, actions, outcomes, etc. Highlighting these patterns may trigger a clearer conceptual understanding of your data or lead to further exploration of data towards later conceptualization. This strategy involves selecting several codes that appear related and are central to your research question, placing these in a matrix and examining data to identify details of where these codes overlap. This strategy helps to identify key patterns in data and contributes to a more conceptual understanding of these issues.

[Table 11.4](#) shows a matrix that conceptualizes women’s health-seeking strategies during childbirth in India. The matrix contains two codes each with three dimensions: the first code, ‘labour characteristics’, has the dimensions of normal, minor complications and major complications; and the second code, ‘financial resources’, has dimensions of poor, intermediate and wealthy. Examining data that correspond to each cell of the matrix reveals the different health-seeking strategies adopted according to the conditions of labour and the resources available. For example, women of intermediate financial means who had a normal labour gave birth at home, because this is what ‘strong’ women do, while wealthy women with a normal labour gave birth at a private clinic. While drawing up this matrix it became clear that poor women actually adopted two strategies due to the availability of a government incentive payment if they delivered at a clinic, so an additional column was added to the matrix to accommodate this nuance. In addition, the matrix revealed that there were no data on the outcomes for poor women with major labour complications, and only indirect reports about the strategies of wealthy

women. Therefore, the matrix can also assist in focusing further data collection to fill specific information gaps to further explain this behaviour. A matrix can also be used to build a typology, for example to define certain types of behaviour according to different circumstances; for this approach each cell may be used to differentiate a different ‘type’ of behaviour, outcome or belief.

Table 11.4 Matrix of women’s health-seeking strategies during childbirth, India  
Table 11.4 Matrix of women’s health-seeking strategies during childbirth, India

Financial resources				
		<b>Poor</b>  (No resource for bribes or fees)	<b>Intermediate</b>  (Resources can be gathered in emergency)	<b>Wealthy</b>  (Resources available for non-emergency treatment)

Financial resources					
		<b>Poor</b> (No resource for bribes or fees)		<b>Intermediate</b> (Resources can be gathered in emergency)	<b>Wealthy</b> (Resources available for non-emergency treatment)
<b>Labour characteristics</b>	<b>Normal labour</b>	<b>Birth at home due to lack of choice</b> '[those] who have no money are supported by traditional birth attendants'	<b>Birth at clinic for government's incentive payment</b> '[even] if the delivery is normal... she is taken to the clinic for the money (1400 rupees)'.	<b>Birth at home is the choice of strong women</b> 'Birth at home is best. If there are problems we go to the [clinic]' 'Women have babies at home to save money for feeding the baby.'	<b>Birth at private clinic</b> 'If they are rich then they go immediately to the private clinic doctor'. Note: participants only reported experiences of <i>other</i> women in this cell.

Financial resources					
		<b>Poor</b>  (No resource for bribes or fees)		<b>Intermediate</b>  (Resources can be gathered in emergency)	<b>Wealthy</b>  (Resources available for non-emergency treatment)
	<b>Minor labour complications</b>  (e.g. need medication)	<b>Continue birth at home</b>  'we all faced many problems but still gave birth in the home'	<b>Transfer to government clinic and receive no care</b>  'They say "if you have no money, come another day. now go home".'	<b>Transfer to government or private clinic and receive care</b>  'We had to spend 1200 rupees at the hospital. When there is a problem, it is a must, but the money comes from household needs'	<b>Pay for specialist treatment at private clinic</b>  'In the private hospital they give you service by how much money you spend. Only money speaks there.'
	<b>Major labour complications</b>  (e.g. need surgery)		<b>No data</b>		<b>Transfer to regional hospital (40 km distance)</b>  'When [government midwife] fails she says "take her to X hospital".'  <b>Transfer to regional or national hospital (110 km distance)</b>  'If she has a serious case, and has money, they take her to X hospital'

Source: Reprinted with permission from Sarah Lasswell

## Process or pathway

A further strategy for conceptualizing data is to consider whether a process or pathway is evident in data. Ask whether the data identify steps, stages, a process or strategy, which may be used to initiate a conceptual understanding of the data. For example, the central focus of your data may be to outline the process of marriage in a particular culture, identify job-seeking strategies, describe the process of migration or document the illness histories of people with a certain disease. Using the process or pathway approach to make sense of the data can highlight and sequence distinct stages, or uncover multiple pathways that are distinguished by certain characteristics or circumstances. Once the overall process or pathway is conceptualized it can be used as a framework to explain certain paths or describe the outcomes of different pathways. This approach to conceptualization is sometimes referred to as a 'career' approach, for example by describing a fertility, illness or crime 'career'.

Some studies are explicitly designed to identify a process or pathway. For example, a study on migration may be structured to ask about pre-migration, migration and post-migration experiences, therefore using a clear process approach from the outset. Therefore, it makes sense to use a process approach when conceptualizing such data. However, the process approach can also be used to conceptualize data that were not designed explicitly to uncover a process. For these types of data the process approach can bring conceptual logic to data and uncover subtle processes underlying data. To initiate this strategy you may consider whether there is a sense of time or timing around any issues in the data that may uncover a process. For example, consider the timing of behaviour, the use of time, a change over time, or event sequencing over time in your data.

A study examining how young people in Pakistan receive information about sexual health used timing to conceptualize the process of gaining knowledge about this topic (Hennink et al., 2005). In this analysis researchers constructed a chronology of when and how information was received by young people to identify whether there was any pattern by the stage of adolescence. From this activity it became apparent that information acquisition was triggered by events during adolescence, for example when a girl begins menses she is given information about menstruation, when a boy grows bodily hair he is given information about puberty, when a marriage is arranged young people are given information about marital relationships. Conversely, when there was no event to trigger information-giving, young people received no information about sexual health. Therefore, conceptualizing data around the notion of time led researchers to understand that knowledge acquisition is related to specific events during adolescence.

Another study (Hennink et al., 1999a) used a process approach to conceptualize knowledge and use of contraception among Asian women in Britain. The study developed a timeline of contraceptive histories for each woman in the study. The patterns evident in this timeline revealed that most women learned about contraception at marriage from their husband or at their first birth from health workers, and only women educated in Britain had any knowledge of contraception before they were married. Therefore, using a pathway approach to conceptualize data can provide an effective synthesis and clarification of data.

## Questioning data and analytic puzzles

Another strategy for conceptualizing data involves questioning data by formulating analytic questions that prompt your data searches. For example, researchers in India knew from survey data that the ideal age of marriage in their state was 18 years, and they wanted to explore whether this was also true for participants in their study village. They questioned their data by asking 'What do our study participants say is the ideal age of marriage?', 'How is the ideal age at marriage decided?' and 'Is it different for

boys than for girls?’ This led researchers to identify how the ideal age of marriage is determined by the study participants. They discovered that marriage was not linked with a certain age *per se*, but was determined by whether young women have ‘strong bones’ and the physical capacity to bear a child, and whether young men have the strength of character, maturity and ability to provide for a family. Questioning the data in this way provided important detail and nuance to understand the ideal time for marriage in this cultural context.

Silverman (2005) suggests different types of analytic puzzles that may be used to initiate a focused exploration of data. For example:

- A *developmental* puzzle examines how an issue or phenomenon arises, for example, ‘How does workplace stress develop?’ This type of question may lead to a description of the various influences on workplace stress.
- A *mechanical* puzzle examines how an issue works or outlines a process, for example, ‘How do labour migrants seek healthcare?’ or ‘What is the process of health screening for breast cancer?’
- A *causal* puzzle describes the pathway of influence on an issue, for example, ‘How does the gender of health providers influence service use?’

## X-ray view

Taking an X-ray view of data (Richards, 2005) can help to identify their core structure or ‘backbone’. An X-ray view can help to conceptualize complex data by focusing on the essential framework of the data rather than the details. Ask yourself what are the central components that hold these data together. An X-ray view involves looking past the detail of the data to the backbone or structural aspects. These may be issues in the data such as core barriers to service use, or they may be broader organizational or structural issues that hold together the issues in your data. For example, a study in Burkina Faso on the health benefits of women receiving micro-credit loans found that one of the main issues was the poor organizational structure of the loan institutions, not the behaviour of the women themselves. Therefore, women’s ability to improve their health through micro-credit loans was impacted by the bureaucratic and structural weaknesses of the lending institution (e.g. long approval time, delayed loans, small loan amounts).

## Typologies

A typology is a way to categorize data along a continuum to distinguish different types of behaviour, beliefs or attitudes. Developing a typology involves both describing and categorizing data. It is important to remember that a typology is not a list of issues; it is a classification of variations within a single issue. Therefore, a typology should have clearly defined categories that are independent of each other and do not overlap, so that participants can be categorized into only one ‘type’. Not all data are suitable for analysis by typologies and you should try not to force data into a typology. The typology is a versatile tool; it can be used at various stages in analysis, for example as a way to describe and compare data, as a tool to conceptualize data, as a structure for further analysis or as a way to present study findings in a report. The following are some examples of typologies.

A typology of pill-taking *behaviour* may highlight three different types of pill-takers:

- *regimented pill-takers* who follow instructions without fail;
- *haphazard pill-takers* who start but do not complete the course of treatment;
- *pill-averse* people who prefer to find an alternative solution to pill-taking.

A typology of *strategies* for payment of household emergencies may include five strategies:

- *save money* to pay for emergencies;
- *sell goods* or services to pay for an emergency;
- *borrow money* to pay for the emergency;
- *ask for credit* from the emergency service provider;
- *forgo purchases* to pay for the emergency now.

A typology of people's *motivations* for recycling household waste may include the following:

- people who are *independently motivated* to recycle;
- people who are *incentive-driven* to recycle;
- people who are *enforcement-motivated* by a policy or regulation;
- people who are *convenience-driven* to recycle;
- people who are *anti-recycling*.

## **‘The music not the dance’**

A further strategy for conceptualizing data is to focus attention on ‘the music not the dance’ (Richards, 2005). This involves understanding how the background context influences the focal issues. Focusing attention on the background can help you recognize underlying mechanisms that influence the main issues you are examining. For example, an organizational structure, service delivery process, social context or cultural norms may be background influences that have a pivotal influence on the central issues in the data. Richards (2005) states that this approach is very effective in analysing situations that we take for granted or contexts in which the social or cultural structure is familiar. This approach was used in a study of sex trafficking in Nepal (Hennink and Simkhada, 2004), where the researchers examined the social backdrop of labour migration and poverty to understand how sex trafficking exploited the normal economic migration of women and their vulnerable position in society. By focusing on the background context you can more fully understand and conceptualize the data as a whole.

## **Case study**

Use a case study of one participant to exemplify the broader story of your data. This may be a typical case that captures the common issues, processes or behaviours found in your data. Alternatively, you may present contrasting cases that exemplify divergent stories in your data, for example the experience of job promotion for a woman versus a man, or the contrasting challenges of seeking employment for a rural and an urban resident.

In President Obama's acceptance speech after winning the US election in 2008, he described the life of a 106-year-old woman from Atlanta (Ann Nixon Cooper) to exemplify the struggles and triumphs in America during her century-long lifespan and the country's continued ability to change and progress. He described that at the time of her birth it was just a generation past slavery, no cars or planes were yet invented, and women were not permitted to vote. But during her lifetime she witnessed women receiving the right to vote, people rise out of the economic depression, the renewed hope after world wars, the struggle for civil rights in the nation, the first moon landing, the development of the internet and the election of the first black president in the US. This shows how a particular case can be used to exemplify a broader story and in this example the life of one citizen is used to show the progress of a nation.



## Writing and presenting

One approach to conceptualizing data that is perhaps underused is writing and presenting. Writing and presenting your study findings are often considered activities that are conducted only at the completion of research; however, they can also be extremely beneficial *during* the analytic process to help you conceptualize your data. Writing and presenting are powerful tasks for conceptualization because they involve making sense of data for an audience, which requires core issues to be distilled into a logical coherent presentation. When you write about your data or present it verbally you need to identify the core ‘headline’ and a ‘storyline’ that concisely captures the issues, outcomes and implications of your data. This process can help you to more clearly conceptualize your data, and in addition, audience comments and questions can help to refine and strengthen your conceptualization or spur further analysis of the issues to more fully conceptualize the data. You may use this approach by presenting or writing for an actual audience, or by using a ‘three-minute summary’ to verbally summarize to colleagues the core issues in your data and how they are related.

## Social domains

Data may also be conceptualized by considering social domains. Social domains may be overarching realms, spheres, arenas or contexts that bring together a group of issues in the data. Identifying social domains can help to categorize seemingly unrelated issues that alone may seem insignificant but collectively become an important component of the data. You may begin by asking ‘What are the social worlds that affect the data? How do these relate to one another?’ There may be several domains in your data, and you may consider how each is related and whether issues fall under several domains. Once a number of domains have been identified, these can be represented in a conceptual diagram that essentially categorizes those issues that fall under each domain and those that straddle several domains.

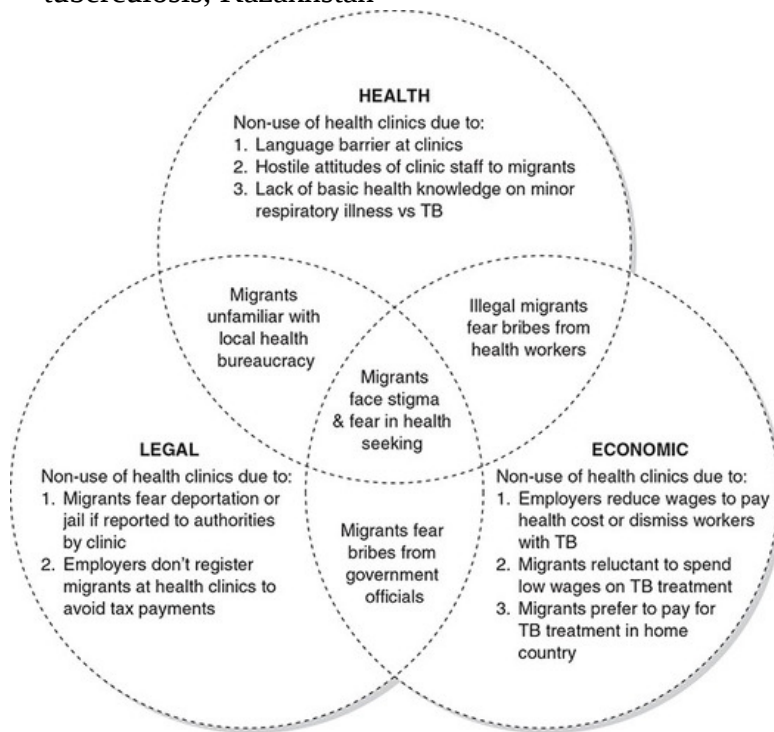
For example, [Figure 11.5](#) shows how three domains (health, economic and legal) were identified to conceptualize the broad range of issues raised in data on health service use by labour migrants in Kazakhstan. The conceptual diagram shows the three domains and differentiates codes by those that relate to a single domain, those that straddle two domains, and those that intersect all three domains. For example, the issue of giving bribes to receive health services is placed at the intersection of the health and economic domains, while the practice of bribing police to turn a ‘blind eye’ to illegal migrants relates to both the economic and legal domains. Using a social domain approach enabled a better conceptualization of the three critical domains that influence migrants’ low use of health services and how the seemingly disparate issues in the data could be better understood. The social domain approach to conceptualizing data can also be valuable in later analysis when making policy recommendations aimed at specific sectors of society.

## Drawing diagrams

Conceptualizing data can also be facilitated by drawing diagrams to visualize relationships in the data. Drawing diagrams involves data reduction and simplification to view broad patterns in the data. It is a strategy that can help to capture relationships and to notice where they are absent. Drawing a diagram begins by showing relationships between codes or categories, which may begin as a simple sketch with boxes and arrows. This task will quickly identify issues that are central in the data and those that are marginal. It will also highlight issues that are consistently mentioned together, and you will begin to notice a pattern of linkages in the data. Effective diagrams are well-supported by your data, with each issue and link originating from the data themselves (e.g. there is evidence in the data that the issues are linked in the way you are depicting in the diagram). Drawing can provide a clear visual representation

of the structure of the data that can spur further exploration of data and can be used to discuss initial understandings of your data with colleagues. Drawing a diagram may be a means to conceptualize data or may lead to an inductive conceptual model that captures the central message of your data.

Figure 11.5 Domains of influence on labour migrants seeking healthcare for tuberculosis, Kazakhstan



Source: Adapted from Huffman et al. (2012: 867)

For more on conceptualizing data see Miles et al. (2014) who describe strategies for ordering data to identify sequences, hierarchies and patterns towards categorizing and conceptualizing data. Bernard and Ryan (2010) also describe different ways to build conceptual models using qualitative data, and how to identify key constructs and linkages from data.

## Theory development

The final task in the analytic cycle involves developing an inductive theory that accounts for the phenomenon studied. Theory development is not an isolated task; rather it is slowly advanced during each stage of data analysis, as you build up a clearer understanding of the issues in your data and how these fit together. Theory development is closely linked with conceptualizing data, as here you begin to understand data as a whole and also search for explanations that form the basis of an explanatory theory.

Theory development begins with induction to develop a theory that is strongly embedded in data. However, your inductive theory is often then embedded within broader deductive theories, or compared to existing theory to emphasize the new concepts that were developed through qualitative research. Theory development is therefore largely inductive, but does involve an interplay with existing

deductive theories. It is the latter deductive tasks that link the analytic cycle back to the original design cycle (see [Part I](#)). Theory development involves continuously moving between three tasks: developing theory, refining theory and [validating theory](#), which are described below.

## What is inductive theory?

To understand theory development, we first need to clarify what is meant by ‘theory’ in qualitative analysis. An inductive theory is essentially an explanation for how something works as derived from empirical data. However, a theory is more than a set of findings; it provides a framework for understanding, explaining and predicting phenomena, and thus both advances our knowledge of a phenomenon and can be used to develop policy or practice. Strauss and Corbin (1998: 22) define theory as ‘a set of well-developed categories (e.g. themes, concepts) that are systematically inter-related through statements of relationship to form a theoretical framework that explains some relevant social, psychological, educational, nursing or other phenomenon’. Implicit in this definition are the analytic tasks that lead to inductive theory development. These tasks include identifying codes from the data, grouping codes into overarching categories (categorization), identifying empirically supported links between these categories (conceptualization) and constructing an explanatory framework for the phenomenon studied (theory development). Thus, the process of data analysis moves from description to conceptualization and builds up to theory development, with each task building on the next, such that the resulting theory incorporates aspects of all earlier analytic tasks. These tasks are all inductive and therefore lead to the development of inductive theory. Furthermore, a theory not only develops an explanation to answer your specific research question but also embraces the social context in which it occurs to create a broader understanding of the phenomenon and its relevance to society (Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

Theory development can be achieved in different ways. It can involve the development of entirely new inductive theory through the analytic process summarized above, or it can be achieved through the modification of pre-existing theory using new empirical data. Much of this chapter describes the development of new inductive theory, which involves the scientific discovery of new concepts or theoretical frameworks for understanding social phenomena. However, we wish to highlight that theory development can also be achieved by extending concepts in pre-existing theory to develop a more refined understanding of a social phenomenon or by expanding the contexts to which a theory applies. Snow et al. (2003) describe two approaches to theory development that involve the modification of pre-existing theory; they refer to these as ‘theoretical extension’ and ‘theoretical refinement’.

*Theoretical extension* does not involve the development of new theory *per se*, but demonstrates the relevance of a pre-existing theory or conceptual framework to a different context or social circumstance from that in which the theory was developed. This is done analytically through examining the ‘transferability’ of a theory, or concepts within it, between two or more contexts. Theoretical extension uses empirical research to broaden the relevance of an existing theory by demonstrating how it can be extended to a range of other social contexts that differ from the one for which the theory was originally developed or intended to be used.

Snow et al. (2003) give an example of theoretical extension by describing empirical research in traditional agrarian societies where the theoretical construct of ‘vengeance’ was developed, then other researchers who were conducting research on conflict amongst leaders in private corporations in the USA found similar constructs of ‘vengeance’ to that developed in the earlier studies. Even though these two research contexts were vastly different (traditional, agrarian society and modern business environments) the social forms of ‘vengeance’ were found to be very similar, therefore demonstrating

the extended relevance of the theoretical concept of ‘vengeance’ across vastly different social and cultural settings.

*Theoretical refinement* is another method of theory development that does not involve constructing entirely new theory, but the elaboration or modification of pre-existing theory using new empirical material. It may begin with theoretical extension described above or may be independent of it. Analysis of new empirical data may uncover a new theoretical concept or understanding that is not part of the original theory but contributes to it. The analytic process involves examining the ‘fit’ of an existing theory to explain a particular phenomenon in empirical data, then examining the components that do not fit the original theory to identify whether a new concept has emerged that extends the theory.

Theory development that involves the modification of pre-existing theory directly links the analytic cycle back to the original design cycle within the qualitative research cycle. This is because it involves embedding the empirical findings of your study within the original conceptual framework or theoretical constructs that guided the research design. This task can identify whether or not the empirical evidence highlights new theoretical constructs that extend pre-existing theory. In this chapter we largely focus on developing new empirical theory; however, we do suggest some strategies that contribute to theory refinement.

## Why develop theory?

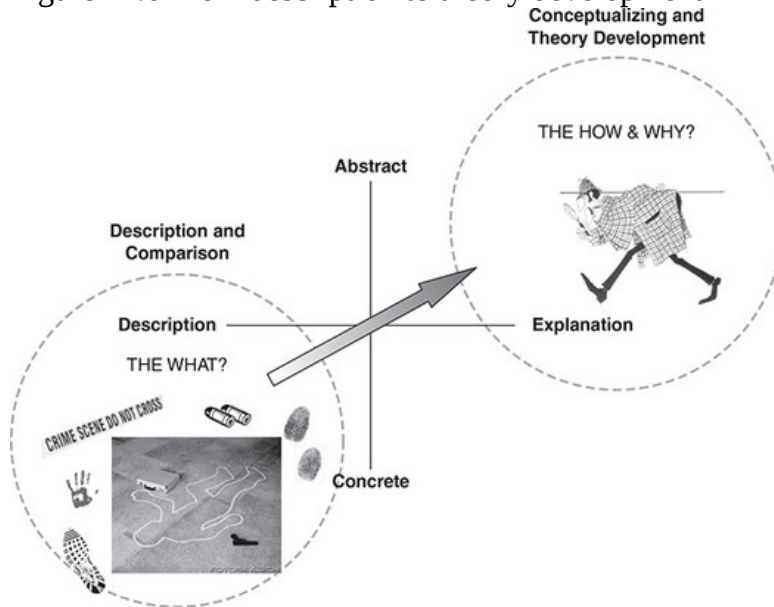
Developing inductive theory moves qualitative research beyond *description* and into the realm of *explanation*, and towards a broader conceptual understanding of a given social phenomenon. Theory development is important because it leads to a higher level of abstraction of data, bringing study findings to a more conceptual level. This conceptual understanding of the phenomenon is what enables a narrow research topic to relate to broader social processes, and for empirically developed theory to contribute to understanding and influencing broader social processes. Without the higher-level abstraction into theory development, study findings remain limited to description or to the context of a specific research project. Therefore, theory development enables qualitative research to contribute to the development of broader empirical theories of social behaviour.

The importance of theory development is depicted graphically in [Figure 11.6](#). The horizontal axis in [Figure 11.6](#) depicts the path from description to explanation and the vertical axis from concrete issues to abstract concepts. Data analysis begins with a description of concrete issues (the bottom left of the figure), typically focusing on ‘what’ type questions (*What* are the issues? *What* are the components of each issue? *What* is the context of each issue? *What* are the problems, processes and perspectives in the data?). Therefore, description provides the critical foundation of data analysis. However, description alone cannot explain a given phenomenon, it only describes it. Data analysis needs to continue with abstraction and conceptualization of data in order to explain the phenomenon and why it occurs (thus moving to the top right of the figure). At this point analysis can respond to ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions (*How* does it happen? *How* does it work? *How* does it influence behaviour? *Why* does it happen? *How* can it be changed?). Answering how and why questions is a basic reason for conducting qualitative research (see [Chapter 2](#)), so it is important that data analysis gets us to this point. Therefore, theory development is critical because it moves data analysis beyond descriptive accounts and towards explaining phenomena.

All this may be emphasized by using the analogy of a crime scene, superimposed on [Figure 11.6](#). Stopping analysis at description is akin to describing a crime scene without solving the crime (Richards, 2005). A thick description would involve describing the scene: the dead body, the weapon, muddy footprints, bullet casings and fingerprints. However, this description has not solved the crime, identified

how or why it happened or whether it is likely to happen again. This requires theory development, to link the evidence (or codes) into an explanation (or theory) of what happened and why, therefore moving beyond description to explain and conceptualize the data.

Figure 11.6 From description to theory development



Source: Adapted from Dahlgren et al. (2007: 122)

## How to develop theory

Although there are many ways to develop inductive theory, what is important is that it is systematically developed and well supported by data. Theory development from qualitative data is implicitly inductive as the codes, concepts, categories and conceptualizations arise from the data itself. The overall inductive process for theory development described throughout this chapter is shown in [Figure 11.7](#). Below we highlight some inductive strategies for developing theory (i.e. following the analytic cycle, explicit reasoning, comparing and inferring explanations). We also highlight a range of deductive strategies for theory development (i.e. using deductive logic, borrowing an explanation, referring to your own conceptual framework, or using an existing theory). These deductive strategies link the analytic cycle back to the original design cycle, to refine the emerging theory and highlight the contribution of the empirical theory to the field of study.

Inductive strategies for developing theory include:

*Use tasks in the analytic cycle.* Using the tasks and process in the analytic cycle will systematically build up an inductive explanation for the phenomenon studied and lead to theory development that is well grounded in data. The process of theory development is summarized visually in [Figure 11.7](#).

*Identify participant's explicit reasoning.* Identify explanations given by participants themselves to build a theory. These are often found in responses to 'why' questions. For example, participants may say that people do not undergo regular health screenings for fear of the results, lack of symptoms, the time involved, etc.

*Compare explanations.* Compare whether explanations differ by subgroups of participants to identify diversity and build nuance into a theory. For example, opinions about home birth may differ by women having a first or later birth.

*Infer an explanation.* Infer a theory by uncovering subtle reasoning, perhaps not apparent to participants themselves. For example, comparing people who seek free vaccinations with those who do not may reveal that non-users feel a stigma attached to free services. Hence, an explanation of stigma is inferred and can refine a theory.

Deductive strategies for developing theory include:

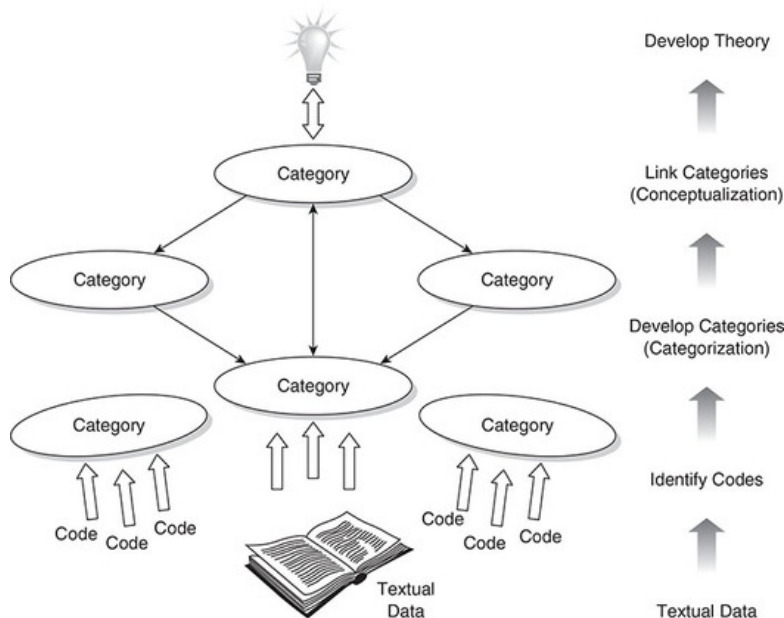
*Use deductive logic.* Identify logical explanations and check whether these are supported by your data to prompt inductive theory. For example, you may know from experience that the quality of childcare at gym facilities deters women from attending exercise classes, and use this to identify whether this explanation is also evident in your data.

*Borrow an explanation.* Identify whether explanations given in the research literature also fit your data to explain the issues. Take care not to force an explanation on to your data, but use this as a starting point to check the fit and relevance with your data.

*Use your conceptual framework.* Refer back to theory, concepts and explanations from your original conceptual framework for the study (from the design cycle). Compare these with explanations emerging from your analysis to identify whether a new theory is emerging or new concepts can be added to existing theory.

*Apply an existing theory.* Identify an existing theory that provides a framework to explain your findings. For example, the existing concept of *liminality* was used as a framework to explain the increased number of sexual partners among people employed in seasonal work (Hennink et al., 1999a). During seasonal work, people are in a liminal or temporary environment without the social expectations and consequences as in their home location, therefore their sexual behaviour changed. Liminality therefore provided the conceptual framework to explain the study findings.

Figure 11.7 Analytic tasks from textual data to theory development



## Refining theory



Once you have developed an emerging theory, you then begin to refine your theory to ensure it is robust, fits your data and effectively explains the phenomenon of interest. This involves continually checking the emerging theory against new cases or contexts in data to understand whether the theory adequately fits these and where adjustments to your theory are needed. Two strategies that facilitate theory refinement are explaining outliers and seeking negative cases in data.

- Explain outliers.* Identify outliers, exceptions or deviant cases in data that do not ‘fit’ the emerging theory. Consider whether your theory can explain why these are outliers or whether it can be revised to accommodate outliers. Do not ignore outliers; explaining them can add nuance and depth to a theory and may even reveal the gem of your study.
- Seek negative cases.* Consider negative cases, which are cases or contexts in which your theory is not valid. Negative cases strengthen the validity of your theory, and improve its relevance to your data. For example, Hennink et al. (2005) developed an emerging theory that young people in Pakistan receive information about personal and sexual development only in response to an event (i.e. signs of puberty, engagement for marriage, wedding night or childbirth). For this theory to be valid, there should be no information given outside of an event, therefore data were reviewed for these negative contexts to check the validity of the theory.

For more on developing theory from textual data see Miles et al. (2014) who describe using conceptual displays of data to construct explanations for relationships, sequences and change found in qualitative data. Further strategies for building theory from textual data can be found in Bernard and Ryan (2010), Charmaz (2014), Corbin and Strauss (2014) and Birks and Mills (2015).

Validating theory

How do you know that the theory that you have developed is valid? An important step in inductive theory development is to verify that your theory or explanation is empirically *grounded* or well supported by your data. Validating a theory means demonstrating that the theory indeed ‘emerged’ from the data, is supported by data and fit the data well.

There are three types of strategies that you can use to verify your theory (see [Table 11.5](#)). First, check that your theory is empirically grounded by using consistency checks, returning to data, and using the concept-indicator model to validate the concepts in the theory. Second, check the ‘fit’ of your theory with the data by using the ‘conditional matrix’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to determine the applicability of your theory and ‘testing’ alternative theories to check the robustness of the emerging theory. Finally, check the ‘real-life’ validity of your theory by taking interpretations of data back to a group of participants to identify whether they can relate to the emerging theory. Using these strategies may lead to refinement or revision of the emerging theory and identification of nuances in a theory, all of which strengthen the fit and validity of the final theory. A range of strategies for verifying empirical theory is shown in [Table 11.5](#).

Table 11.5 Strategies for validating inductive theory

Table 11.5 Strategies for validating inductive theory

Check consistency	Check the consistency of your theory across the data. When concepts, links and explanations are continuously repeated in data, internal validity is strengthened.
Return to data	Re-read data after your theory is developed to ensure explanations ‘fit’ and have a strong foothold in data. A theory that is distant from data or based on superficial analysis can lead to misleading explanations.

Use the concept-indicator model	Use the concept-indicator model (Strauss, 1987) to check that concepts in your theory are well-grounded in data. For example, a concept of ‘stigma’ may have developed from indicators in the data of ‘exclusion’, ‘discrimination’, ‘negative attitudes’, ‘community values’ and so on.
Apply the conditional matrix	Use the conditional matrix (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to delimit a theory by identifying conditions in which the theory applies. For example, a theory may hold true only for a certain subgroup of participants, in a specific context or when a range of conditions are present. Conversely, the theory should not apply when these conditions are absent.
‘Test’ alternative theory	Consider an alternative theory and identify whether it can also be supported by your data. If so, your original theory may not be valid or sufficient. A valid theory is well supported with data, and invalidates alternative explanations.
Seek participant feedback	Present the theory to study participants to verify your interpretations and explanations. This may also identify further refinements needed.

When is your theory adequate? Richards (2005: 130) states that a good and adequate theory should meet the goals of the study and answer the research question. It should also go beyond description to develop a new explanation or framework to account for, better understand and explain the study issues. An adequate theory should also offer more than participants could have reported themselves; therefore it involves categorizing, conceptualizing and theorizing. Finally, a theory should be useable for the intended purpose of the study, for example to contribute to other theories, policy or social programmes.

## Evaluating quality

How do you evaluate the quality of data analysis in qualitative research? Based on the type of analysis described in this chapter, consider whether the data analysis process is transparent and well-grounded in data to validate the concepts, categories and ultimately the theory developed. Describing the depth and nuance in the theory developed can also distinguish well-conducted analysis.

### *Appropriate*

- Are deductive and inductive analytic techniques used?
- Have comparisons been used effectively to identify patterns in data?
- Does the analysis go beyond description to explanation?

### *Transparent*

- Is the analytic approach identified?
- Are the analytic techniques used made transparent?
- Is the process of theory development outlined?
- Are concepts clear and well described?

### *Coherent*

- Do explanations follow logically from data?



### *Saturated*

Are categories and concepts developed well saturated?

### *Grounded*

Are codes, concepts and explanations grounded in the data?

Are inductive conceptual models well supported by data?

Are the nuances and context of issues identified?

Were outliers and negative cases sought to refine theory developed?

Does the analysis reflect the 'voices' of study participants?

### *Valid*

Are any validity checks described?

How were the codes and concepts validated?

Are analytic interpretation and theory development validated?

### *Reflexive*

How did researchers manage subjectivity in analysis?

Is analytic reflexivity described?

### *New information*

Does analysis identify new information that emerged inductively?

### Key points

- Writing an analysis plan keeps you focused on your research goals and enables you to check your progress.
- The core analytic tasks of the analytic cycle include description, comparison, categorization, conceptualization and theory development. These tasks are closely interlinked and conducted in a circular manner whereby they are repeated and conducted simultaneously.
- Making a 'thick description' forms the foundation of data analysis, and embraces the context in which issues occur, thereby providing meaning.
- Comparison allows you to identify patterns and associations in data, and can involve comparisons between inductive and deductive subgroups in the data.
- Categorizing involves grouping codes with similar attributes into broad categories.
- Conceptualization involves visualizing your data as a whole to develop a conceptual understanding of the issues. Categorization and conceptualization involve moving analysis to a higher level of abstraction from which to develop theory.
- Theory development is largely inductive, but also involves the interplay with existing deductive theories, which links the analytic cycle back to the original design cycle.
- Theory development moves qualitative research beyond description and into the realm of explanation, and towards a broader conceptual understanding of social phenomenon.
- An important task is validating the theory to ensure it is 'grounded' or well supported by data.

## **Exercises**

1. Develop a 'thick description' of an issue in your data. Identify the depth, breadth, context and nuance of the issue. Use examples from your data to add detail to the description.
2. Identify whether some codes have similar attributes, group these into categories and label each category.
3. Try to conceptualize your data as a whole using techniques described in this chapter.
4. Validate your theory using some of the strategies described. Is the theory well grounded? Does it offer more than description, to explain and account for your data?

Further reading

## On methods

Charmaz, K. (2014) *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis* (2nd edn). London: Sage Publications. This is an excellent book that synthesizes the tasks of grounded theory in an accessible way and is useful for both novice and more experienced analysts.

Corbin, J. and Strauss, A. (2014) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (4th edn). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. A landmark volume for outlining the practical tasks of conducting a grounded theory analysis.

Lewins, A. and Silver, C. (2014) *Using Software in Qualitative Research: A Step-by-Step Guide* (2nd edn). London: Sage Publications. This book provides a guide to using qualitative software to support data analysis, related to leading software packages for analysis.

Richards, L. (2009) *Handling Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide* (2nd edn). London: Sage Publications. This book provides practical guidance on setting up data in a project, working with data and making sense of data.

## On field practice

Hay, J., Shuk, E., Cruz, G. and Ostroff, J. (2005) 'Thinking through cancer risk: Characterizing smokers' process of risk determination', *Qualitative Health Research*, 15 (8): 1074–85. This article uses grounded theory to develop a heuristic model.

Polzer, R. and Miles, M. (2007) 'Spirituality in African Americans with diabetes: Self-management through a relationship with God', *Qualitative Health Research*, 17 (2): 176–88. This article is a good example of a well-written grounded theory analysis leading to the development of an inductive theoretical model.

Rajabiun, S., Mallinson, R., McKoy, K., Coleman, S., Drainoni, M., Rebholz, C. and Holbert, T. (2007) "'Getting me back on track": The role of outreach interventions in engaging and retaining people living with HIV/AIDS in medical care', *AIDS Patient Care and STDs*, 21 (supplement 1): S20–9. This article has a good description of the grounded theory analytic process, including a discussion on the development of categories and the development of an inductive model.

# 12<sup>1</sup> From Analysis to Participatory Action

<sup>1</sup> This is a new chapter in the second edition of the book and is co-authored with Dr Christine Fenenga.

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## Objectives

After reading this chapter you will:

- know how the process of participatory research design ([Chapter 4](#)) links to that of participatory action (this chapter);
- understand the *participatory* qualitative research cycle;
- know how to proceed from participatory research design to participatory action for social change;
- comprehend that *participatory action* is based on and starts with the voices of people;
- understand how important it is to validate your findings *with* your participants and other societal stakeholders;

- know all tasks in the participant-based action cycle;
- be aware that implementation of a participatory research project is tailored to the research context.

## Introduction

In [Chapter 4](#), we introduced you to our participatory approach to qualitative research. The four key characteristics of our approach were described:

- the objective of participatory qualitative research, to understand and *Verstehen*, *and* to contribute to social change, to achieve both academic *and* social change outcomes;
- the underlying ideological principles of Paulo Freire: to start with people themselves;
- the importance of embeddedness and involvement of participants and other societal stakeholders;
- the regulative cycle of Van Strien (1997), which emphasizes how qualitative research can be the basis for the co-design and co-implementation of interventions.

We described how our participatory approach starts with design, and presented the participatory design sub-cycle. This sub-cycle describes how to embed a research problem in society; how to involve participants and other societal stakeholders; and how to co-design and then co-define the social change questions and objectives of a project. Often, a feasibility study is conducted as part of designing a research project, and the results of the feasibility study are integrated into the design cycle and provide a strong background to a research project. The resulting findings from the participatory design sub-cycle are added to the task (task 2) of incorporating literature and theory (see [Figure 4.2](#)). In doing all this, a research project is more strongly embedded in society. Any resulting social change is more sustainable, because your participatory research project reflects the needs of participants and societal stakeholders.

We also described how the data collection and analytic cycles are integral parts of the participatory approach, representing your study participants' voices. As discussed, you can use further participatory methods in the data

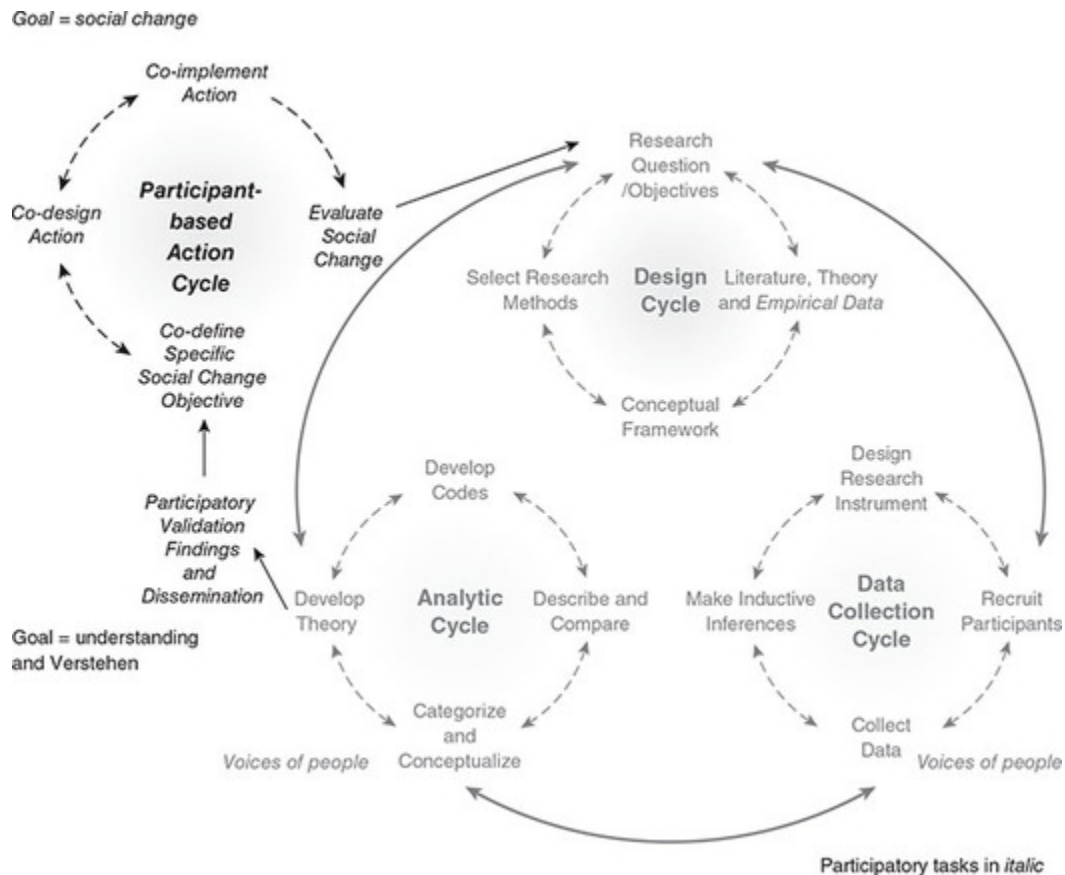
collection cycle, in addition to the methods described in [Chapters 7 to 9](#) on in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and observation. We also described the analytic cycle and how you can involve participants and/or stakeholders in the analysis of your data.

In this chapter, we discuss how you can take the findings of your participatory qualitative study, which represent the voices of your participants, and go further to achieve the social change objective that you defined when you designed your participatory qualitative research project.

## **From analysis to participatory action**

Moving from analysis to participatory action, we examine the processes of validation and dissemination. Additionally we discuss the process how to design participatory action through the [participant-based action cycle](#). All these three processes are added to the qualitative research cycle and depicted in [Figure 12.1](#).

Figure 12.1 The participant-based action cycle added to the qualitative research cycle



In the participant-based action cycle, we deliberately use the term ‘participant-based’: in our participatory approach, actions and interventions are always based on the voices of our participants, as collected through rigorous qualitative research. This principle is also why our participatory projects carry titles such as:

- towards a *client-oriented* care system in the Netherlands ([Case study 4.1](#)): indicating that the voices of the clients (residents) of the care organization De Hoven, as collected and analysed through rigorous qualitative research, are the basis for and integrated into the co-design of subsequent interventions *to improve the well-being of the residents* (the social change objective);
- towards *community-based* maternal health care in Malawi (see [Case study 8.2](#)): indicating that the voices of women, their families and community stakeholders, collected through focus group discussions, are the basis for and integrated into co-implemented interventions *to*

- improve access to good quality health services* (the social change objective);
- towards *community-based* monitoring and evaluation of health services in Ghana ([Case study 12.3](#)): indicating that voices from the community, participants and other societal stakeholders, collected through rigorous qualitative research, are integrated into co-designed interventions *to improve the quality of health services provided to the community* (the social change objective).

This focus on the voices of our study participants reflects Freire's (1970) approach described in [Chapter 4](#): to start with and from people's own perspectives.

The three processes of participatory validation, dissemination, and designing action are described in more detail in the next sections.

## Participatory validation

As discussed in [Chapter 4](#), if your research project is aimed not only at understanding and Verstehen, but also at social change, you have already involved participants and other societal stakeholders in the design cycle. Now, having finalized the analysis of your data, and moving from analysis to participatory action, you need to validate your findings.

Often, you will have already validated the information that you collected with your participants and/or relevant societal stakeholders during the data collection cycle (see for example [Case study 12.2](#)). The purpose is to check that you correctly interpreted the data, using inductive inferences (see task 4 in the Data Collection Cycle).

After analyzing your data, you again validate your findings with them. Validation, then, is a process that requires you:

- to *share* your research findings with participants and other societal stakeholders;
- to *check*: whether your findings reflect their reality, and are recognized as such;

- to determine if the data are *saturated* (an important quality criteria) or *new information* has been added.

Doing so, you also

- begin thinking about how your research findings and recommendations can be a *basis* for the development of subsequent interventions.

The tasks of sharing, checking and preparing for the development of interventions are conducted concurrently. [Case study 4.1](#), for example, describes how the findings of the participatory research in De Hoven were shared by the researcher with residents, management and caretakers. All recognized the description of the characteristics of the organization: participants indicated to enjoy it and experienced a feeling of happiness and warmth: ‘yes, this is who we are’. However, not all the findings were welcomed. Although the residents (participants in the research) indicated that the findings reflected their expressed needs, the caretakers were not aware that the residents were not always happy with how the care was provided to them, in a top-down manner. At the same time, in presenting the findings *and discussing* them with the caretakers, it became clear that the way forward would be: a commitment to focus and provide care based on the needs of the residents themselves. The caretakers agreed but indicated that they were unsure *how* to do this. During the process, the researcher became a spokesperson of the residents whose needs she first studied in her research.

Validation of your findings is not always easy. Examples from our participatory projects illustrate the types of interactions and discussions you can be involved in during validation. The case studies reflect different perspectives and reflect the positions of different stakeholders. As researchers, we have to be aware of our position and of the power relations that are present, during the process of validation.

In the research described in [Case study 12.2](#), on nutrition during pregnancy in India, one research question focused on the common custom of reducing food intake at the end of pregnancy. A common explanation for this behaviour in the literature was that women eat less at the end of their pregnancy because they want to have a small child which would be easier to



deliver. However, the qualitative research among women themselves yielded a completely different reasoning: pregnant women indeed did eat less in that period, but they did so – as they indicated – because their ‘stomach’ was already ‘full with the child’ and thus little space was left in the stomach for food. They just *could* not eat more. Women even became angry and felt offended when they heard the common explanation and indicated: ‘do you think that we do not care for our unborn child? Why would we want it to be small and unhealthy; do you think we do not care about our children’s health?’ While presenting the research findings from the women’s perspective to other stakeholders, NGOs and government officials, they (NGOs and officials) immediately returned to the common opinion: women in the villages eat less because they want to have a small child. It took quite some time to convince them of the findings of the research, i.e. of the voices of women themselves, which were the basis for the subsequent interventions (see [Case study 12.2](#)). As a researcher there was a duty not only to defend the research but also to represent the women in the villages and make *their* voices heard in society, and thus convince the stakeholders on the basis of the qualitative evidence collected.

Regarding the *sharing* of your findings and *presenting* them, Johnson (2017) recommends the organization of a ‘culminating event’ as an important part of the *dissemination* of community-based qualitative research. She describes including a short presentation by the research team and subsequent dialogues with stakeholders, participants and constituencies (Johnson, 2017: 140–53). In the presentation of findings, methods such as verbal presentations, or visuals with pictures and quotes, or videos, can be used.

Johnson (2017) makes an important distinction between presenting the findings, and subsequent dialogues about the findings between the different stakeholders: ‘researchers should not shy away from heated discussions... and ensure that the discussion and feedback is constructive and respectful’ (Johnson, 2017: 142).

New insights derived from feedback and discussions can be very useful and provide relevant information on findings and recommendations for actions in your research. You thus add the outcomes of the discussions in your data.

In the participatory qualitative research project on abortion and contraception in Kosovo (Basha and Hutter, 2006; see [Case study 3.1](#)), the United Nations Fund for Population (UNFPA), asked us as researchers to conduct qualitative research to gain insight into the perceptions of Kosovar women about induced abortion and the use of contraceptives. The level of induced abortion at that time was very high in Kosovo and the level of contraceptive use very low. In general, UNFPA adopts the principle of informed choice based on the international reproductive and sexual health and rights approach: to provide full and honest information on contraceptives to women and they will make their own (informed) choice. As researchers, we conducted both in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, among different groups of women, all over Kosovo. We worked with an advisory board of relevant societal stakeholders such as representatives of the Kosovar Ministry of Health, the association of gynaecologists, and NGOs. While presenting and sharing our final research findings through a PowerPoint presentation with different stakeholders, in what Johnson (2017) called a Culminating Event, the dialogue made the differences in opinions regarding induced abortion and the use of contraceptives very clear. One of the main recommendations of the research was to focus more on the prevention of pregnancies, rather than on induced abortions. This would mean creating more awareness about contraceptives, among all women, including unmarried women. While the UNFPA and the Ministry of Health clearly supported the findings and recommendations of the research, other stakeholders had difficulty in accepting these recommendations, especially regarding possible changes in policies and actions about abortions and contraceptive use. Among them was the association of gynaecologists, who had a stake in conducting induced abortions, and faith-based groups. See [Case study 12.3](#) to understand how the validation process worked.

In summary, the process of validation involves not only presenting your findings, and checking with your participants whether your findings reflect their reality, it also involves sharing your findings with other societal stakeholders. In this way, you bring your research findings back into society. When presenting your findings to other stakeholders, you have to be aware of *your* and *their* positionality and existing power relations, and

the differences between these two positions. In the process of validation, you will have taken a first step into the participant-based action cycle.

## **Dissemination**

At the point of validating your findings and entering the participant-based action cycle, you must start disseminating your research findings to a wider academic and societal public. For academic peers, this is typically through reports, articles, book chapters, conferences and seminars, policy briefs (see also [Chapter 13](#)), and also blogs popularized for community dissemination or policy makers. It might be difficult to combine the dissemination to both academic and community audiences. Often you do have to decide which to do first.

For example, in [Case study 4.1](#), research and interventions were closely connected, and funded as such. Results of the analysis were written down in a preliminary report. The findings were immediately presented, shared and validated with participants and stakeholders, and informed the subsequent task of co-designing the interventions. Only later was the internal report published, including the preliminary report and findings of the validation meetings. A final academic article took even more time to get published. Likewise, in [Case study 12.3](#) the interventions were part of the project itself, and funded as such, and the academic outcome was published at a later date. On the other hand, in [Case study 12.2](#), first the academic outcome was published (as per contract with the university) and only then were interventions co-designed with an NGO and local policy makers. Which activity gets priority often is determined by how the project is framed and funded.

In disseminating your findings to other societal stakeholders, you have to be able to ‘translate’ your academic findings, which are framed in academic concepts and language, into more colloquial language.

## **Designing action: The participant-based action cycle for social change**

Here, we elaborate on the next tasks that you perform in moving from analysis into participatory action for social change. The aim of the *participant-based action cycle* is to collaborate with participants and relevant stakeholders and come to a co-designed and co-implemented action, based on the voices of your participants. The tasks in this cycle are to:

- co-define a *specific* social change objective(s) (task 1);
- *co-design* action(s) (task 2) that will lead to this social change objective;
- *co-implement* the action or intervention (task 3);
- *evaluate* the social change (task 4).

Below, we describe these tasks with examples from participatory research projects or reference to case studies in other chapters. [Case studies 12.1](#) and [12.2](#) also illustrate the different tasks.

## **Task 1 Co-define the *specific* social change objective**

While the definition of the social change objective in the participatory design sub-cycle was quite broad (see [Chapter 4](#)), for example to contribute to improved well-being of your participants, the validated findings allow you to co-define more *specific* social change objective(s). A general social change objective in the design cycle may be

‘to enhance the well-being of the participants’,  
and can be refined after your research results into, for example,  
‘to improve health knowledge and awareness on pregnancy among adolescents’. After you have defined your more *specific* social change objective(s), you will be able to take the next step.

## **Task 2 Co-design an action or intervention**

Based on the specific social change objective(s), and in collaboration with participants and stakeholders, you co-define actions or interventions that

lead (or contribute) to the defined social change objective. Co-defining appropriate, acceptable and feasible actions requires working from the findings of your research and the socio-cultural knowledge of participants and relevant stakeholders. In the words of Freire, you engage in critical dialogues, enhancing the chance to achieve – together – the defined objectives. An intervention based on a specific social change objective, for example, to

‘improve health knowledge on pregnancy among adolescents’ could be developed into  
‘the development of specific health education materials’, or  
‘organizing *health education classes* at secondary schools’, or  
‘developing *a policy brief* for the local health authorities’. Being open to interactive discussions and critical dialogue is essential to hear the views of everyone involved. Creating an action plan based on the data from the study that is prioritized by the participants and relevant stakeholders requires careful preparation. While all those involved may seem to agree on a certain direction of social change, it is the researcher’s role as moderator and facilitator to ensure that all involved are heard. As well, those with limited power should feel their voice is heard. Second, milestones and outcomes to reach the social objectives should be realistic and ideally involve all participants and stakeholders, not just one group. Clear agreement about how to monitor progress (indicators and time frame) need to be agreed upon. It might be useful to establish an implementation advisory committee to guide the process, composed of a few participants, stakeholders, and someone from the research group. This might sound easier than it sometimes is. [Case study 12.1](#) provides an example of a disagreement between the different societal stakeholders in co-designing action.

## Case study 12.1

### **An example of disagreement in co-designing action in India**

In our research about reproductive health in India in the late 1990s (a follow-up of the research project described in [Case study 12.2](#)), women who were interviewed indicated that they do not use the oral pill as they perceived it to have too many side effects. Also, those who lived with their in-laws felt they were unable or not allowed to use the oral pill. As researchers we discussed this with other societal stakeholders: how can we come to a specific social change objective and co-design action based on this? Would we follow the reproductive health and rights discourse, where every woman has a right to receive honest and open information on all contraceptives and make their own decision whether or not to use it, and thus provide information on all contraceptives to all women? The participating NGOs and local policy makers indicated that they could not do so, as they could not provide information on the pill to women who had no children yet. Because, at that moment, this was the policy of the Government of India: women who didn't have children were not informed about the pill as it was believed to lead to infertility. Out of fear for claims and problems, in a social environment where children are highly valued and a woman's status depends on having children, the NGO and policy stakeholders indicated that it was not right to create awareness about the pill. Other participants in the project felt it was not right to deny this information to women. The dialogue was critical, and not easy. At the end, and after some time, the issue was solved by itself: the Government of India changed its policy to informed choice, and our project could focus on creating awareness about the pill also among women who had no children yet. The example illustrates the importance of reflection on your own positionality and power.

Derived from: Hutter et al. (2006), about reproductive health intervention Spandana, a collaboration between PRC Groningen, PRC Dharwad and the Family Planning Association of India (FPAI), Dharwad branch.

### **Task 3 *Co-implement the action***

The implementation of the intervention generally takes a minimum of 6–12 months to achieve results. Implementation starts with a short initiation period, in which the intervention is tested among a few people; are the activities feasible, is the educational material culturally appropriate and

understandable for the target group, is the length and content right? This testing phase is followed by a rolling out period to a greater number of people. An implementation advisory committee can play a guiding role by reflecting on quarterly results and providing feedback on intermediate results to the implementers.

## **Task 4 *Evaluate* the social change outcome**

The last task in the participant-based action cycle is the evaluation of the intervention's social change outcome, which is ideally done jointly with the participants and stakeholders. For example, if your social change aim is defined as 'adolescents will understand more about pregnancy', you might measure this by looking at the (decreased) number of unwanted teenage pregnancies, or by the (increased) number of adolescents adhering to the prenatal care visits at the clinic.

In addition, you might conduct qualitative evaluations and hear perceived effects by the participants and stakeholders themselves (See Springett and Wallerstein, 2018 for more information on participatory evaluation). In the community-based project on maternal health in Malawi, described in [Case study 8.2](#), the interventions, based on focus group discussions, included the recommendation to use bicycle ambulances (a co-designed intervention), so that pregnant women could reach the hospitals in time for delivery and thus survive (the social change objective). Quantitative outcomes of this participatory project indeed showed an increase in the percentage of women attending antenatal clinics and having hospital deliveries. *Qualitative* evaluation interviews revealed unexpected outcomes, for instance women felt more taken care of and loved by their husbands, as they were the ones who cycled them to the hospital. Women also indicated they felt more empowered by the information provided to them on care during pregnancy and delivery (Sibande and Hutter, 2012). (See [Case study 8.2](#) about focus group interviews for qualitative evaluation.)

Not every participant and stakeholder group will be equally active during the participant-based action process, so it is important to ensure clear communication about the progress (during task 3) as well as about the final outcome (during task 4). This can be done through newsletters or a radio



interview or organized dissemination workshops, where findings and further plans can be communicated.

Also, the processes and tasks in the participant-based action cycle follow an iterative path; you can move from one task to the next, and return again to a prior task. However, this participant-based action cycle is a relatively more single-direction process than the other cycles, because the action/intervention and its evaluation logically follow from co-defining specific social change objectives and co-designing the intervention.

## **The overall *participatory* qualitative research cycle**

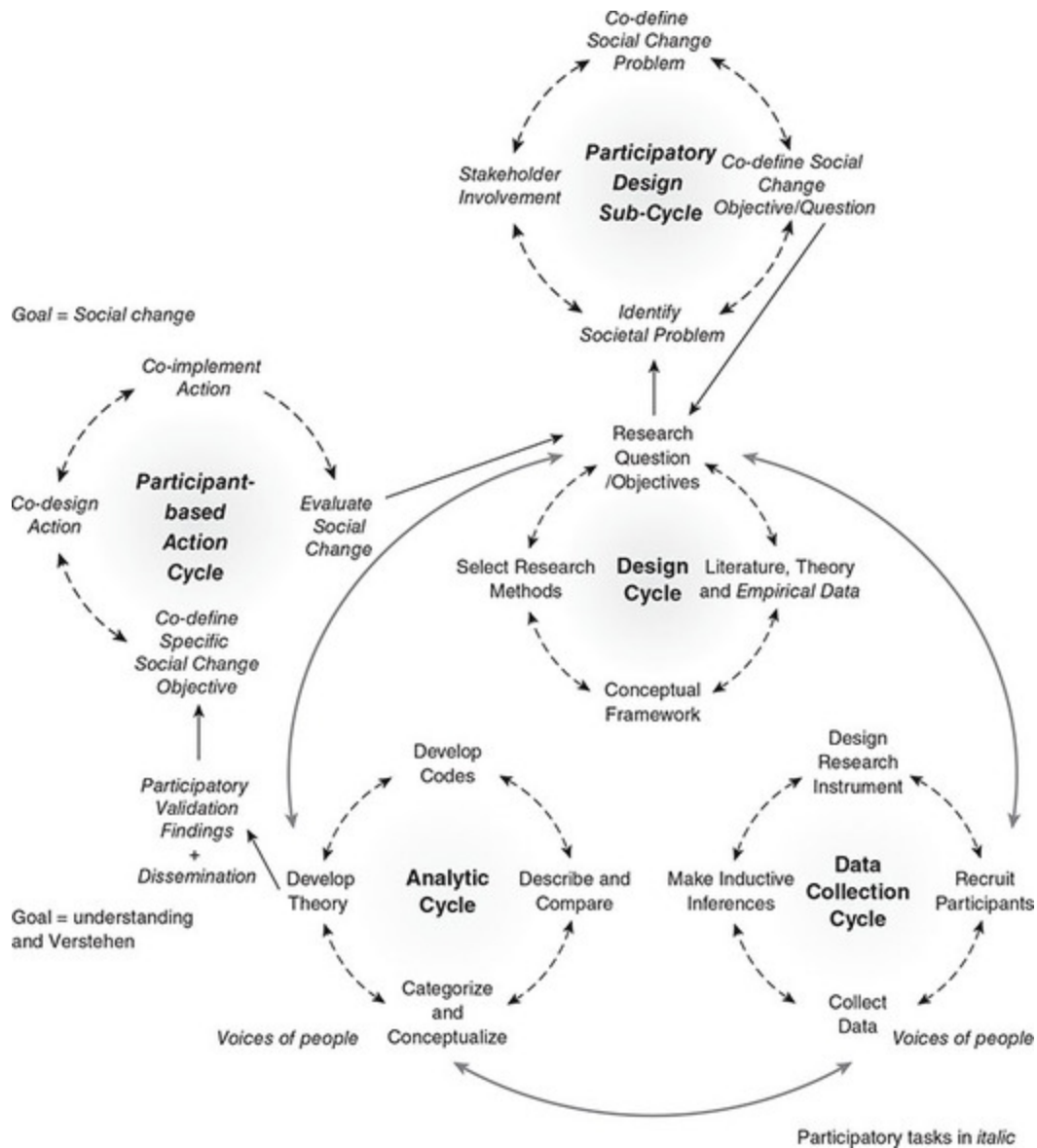
Having described the processes of validation and dissemination and the participant-based action cycle, we now link this chapter to that of [Chapter 4](#) on the participatory approach to qualitative research, to describe the entire process of participatory research from the design cycle on to designing participatory actions. As such, we present the overall [\*participatory qualitative research cycle\*](#), including all the tasks that you must perform if you want to conduct a participatory qualitative research project. The overall *participatory* qualitative research cycle is illustrated in [Figure 12.2](#).

Overall, the *participatory* qualitative research cycle consists of:

- the qualitative research cycle, as described throughout this book;
- our participatory approach to qualitative research;
- the participatory design sub-cycle, as described in [Chapter 4](#);
- the [\*participatory validation\*](#) and dissemination of findings; and
- the participant-based action cycle, as described in this chapter.

Figure 12.2 The Hutter–Fenenga *participatory* qualitative research cycle





Below, we present the two case studies that describe all steps you can take for making the qualitative research cycle more *participatory*. The first case study focuses on nutrition and health of pregnant women in India in the 1990s (Hutter, 1994). The project was the basis for development of our participatory research approach. The second case study focuses on health insurance in Ghana (Fenenga, 2015), was conducted in the period 2011–2014 and includes several additional aspects of the participatory approach to qualitative research. We will refer to some of the relevant differences in the two case studies in the subsequent section.

## Case study 12.2

### **Nutrition during pregnancy in India: For culturally relevant education and increased awareness**

The research project was conducted between 1990–1994, with a fieldwork period of 18 months in 14 villages in Karnataka, South India.

#### **Design cycle**

The research project was explicitly defined as an *academic* research project, to obtain a PhD degree. The academic objective of my research on nutrition of pregnant women in India in the 1990s, as based on background literature and my own former academic research and own interest, was:

- to understand the nutritional behaviour of pregnant women in India in their social and cultural context.

A more implicit, non-academic, objective was

- to provide feedback of the findings to the study population so that the findings would benefit not only me in my academic career but them as well.

At the time of defining my research design, I knew that I wanted to ‘do something’ with my research findings, but at that moment I did not yet know exactly what I would be able to do. My social change objective was still rather vague. Only in a later stage, after finalizing my research, was the social change objective made more specific, as based on the voices of my participants. The necessary basis for social change was set through a collaboration with a local NGO from the very beginning (see below).

#### **Stepping into the participatory design sub-cycle**

My research objective was, therefore, first of all academic, given my contract with the university. The design of my research was made participatory by:

- Checking whether the topic of my research was indeed relevant to society and not only academically interesting but also a societal problem (task 1). As a researcher I might be interested in the topic, but would it be relevant to Indian society as well?
- Based on earlier contacts of my university with the NGO called the India Development Services (IDS) in Dharwad, I travelled to India to conduct a feasibility study. The objective was to see – together – whether the topic of my research would indeed be societally relevant. IDS supported me in the feasibility study and introduced me in the villages. They discussed the research topic with me and shared their experience in the research area. Several stakeholders (IDS, university, district policy makers) (task 2) were interviewed, and I collected further information through focus group discussions with women themselves.
- The feasibility study made clear that research on this topic would be highly relevant, both academically and societally (task 3). Through the feasibility study, the research was embedded in society, the research questions became more grounded, and thus the possible academic quality could be enhanced. In addition, the collaboration with IDS provided a good future opportunity to ‘translate’ my research into action, and thus to contribute to social change.
- Based on the feasibility study, my academic research question became ‘What is the nutritional and health behaviour of pregnant women in the villages, how does it affect the health of the child, and how does the behaviour take place in the social and cultural context in which they live? The general social change research question then became ‘How can my research improve the nutritional and health situation of the women and children in my study population?’ (task 4).

## **Stepping back into the design cycle**

After finalizing the feasibility study, I stepped back in the design cycle. The feasibility study was included as a background in further designing my

research project, next to the background literature and theoretical framework. Methodology and methods were selected as according to the tasks in the design cycle.

## **Data collection and analytic cycle**

Fieldwork and ethnography were conducted in 14 villages. The methods applied were participant observation, interviews and focus group discussions. Through this, the emic perspective of women on pregnancy, delivery and health was identified. I worked with local research assistants who lived in the villages themselves. This turned out to be essential as validation of findings could take place interactively throughout the process of data collection, either in dialogues with the assistants or through follow-up interviews with key informants. I worked with and from a local research institute, Karnatak University in Dharwad.

I thus collected the voices of women themselves on food and health behaviour during pregnancy and delivery, and on childbirth and care in the first month of life.

I thus identified the social and cultural context in which women lived, within their communities.

I validated the preliminary findings after data collection with the research assistants, participants and key informants including IDS and the university. Interviews with the women and key informants were fully transcribed. The analysis included the construction of many *in-vivo* codes to capture the local context and cultural background.

The emic perspective of the participants was described in the thesis by using quotations from the participants themselves and by referring to local concepts related to food, health, pregnancy and delivery, and as based on the *in-vivo* codes; the socio-cultural context and the circumstances in which participants lived was extensively described.

The research aimed at obtaining the academic outcome first: I defended my PhD successfully. Only after that, I stepped into the participant-based action

cycle.

## **Validation and stepping into the participant-based action cycle**

Having defended my PhD thesis, I focused on the specific social change objective, wanting to bring back the results of the thesis to the women and children in the study population and enhance their nutritional and health status.

I presented the academic findings of my research to IDS and other societal stakeholders in Dharwad. The voices of the participants were central and the basis for further actions. I worked – more or less – according to the four tasks in the participant-based action cycle.

First, I worked in collaboration with a translator and a publisher. These two were actually completely new stakeholders as I never thought before about translating and publishing my thesis in a local language. After my defence, however, the idea and opportunities popped up: a link was established with a local publisher and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs was willing to provide funding. This nicely illustrates the need for flexibility in applying the participatory approach. Our specific social change objective (task 1) was to ensure that the research findings would reach the participants, but in a less academic way. Together with a translator, we formulated a plan (task 2) to write a popularized version of my thesis, in English and in the local language Kannada (task 3: action, intervention). The objective was to share my findings with those among whom I conducted my research, but also to make the findings more broadly known in society. Books were distributed for free to different libraries in the state of Karnataka. No formal evaluation of the intervention took place. From anecdotal information I learned that women who were involved in the research did read the booklet in Kannada and said:

‘we thought we were not important; but now someone has written about us, so obviously we *are* important’.

Additionally, based on the voices of the women themselves, and collaborating with IDS who worked together with other societal stakeholders, a more specific social change objective was defined: to increase awareness on health and nutritional issues among women in the villages (task 1). We planned together to design an intervention (task 2) where existing health education materials would be adapted to the findings of my thesis, thus making the existing health education material more culturally relevant. The implementation was mainly done by IDS while I provided input as the researcher about my research findings. The NGO used the materials that were produced (see an example below in [Figure 12.3](#)) in their work in the villages. The material was later used as basis for another participatory research project, called Spandana, a collaboration between researchers and the NGO Family Planning Association (FPAI) Dharwad. No formal evaluation of the intervention took place.

Inge Hutter, Professor, International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, of Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands

Figure 12.3 Culturally relevant education materials based on participatory research in India, prepared by IDS



*Source:* India Development Service and Hutter, end 1990s

## Outcomes

### Academic

Hutter, I. (1994) 'Being pregnant in South India, nutrition and well-being of pregnant women', PhD thesis. Amsterdam: Thesis Publishers.

Hutter, I. (2001) 'Nutrition and reproduction: The socio-cultural context of food behaviour in rural South India', in C.M. Obermeyer (ed.), *Cultural Perspectives on Reproductive Health*, International Studies in Demography. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 37–58.

Hutter, I., Rajeswari, N.V., Hallad, J.S. and Ramesh, B.M. (2006) *Reproductive Health and Child Spacing in Rural Karnataka. From Research to Action*. Delhi: Manohar Publishers.

### Societal

Hutter, I. (1997) *She is with a Stomach*, popularized version of PhD thesis, in English. Dharwad, India: Manohara Grantha Mala Publishers.

Hutter, I. (1997) *Aula hotte idaaale* [She is with a Stomach]. Popularized version of PhD thesis, in Kannada. Dharwad, India: Manohara Grantha Mala Publishers.

## Case study 12.3

### Health insurance in Ghana: Engaging clients in monitoring and evaluating health services

In contrast to [Case study 12.2](#), this project started with a question from a societal stakeholder rather than from a question identified by the three researchers that were involved in the study. Second, from the beginning this research project explicitly included an action component: designing and

evaluating an intervention. As an academic objective each researcher had to write a PhD thesis and publish a minimum of four scientific papers and a joint policy paper.

This mixed method study took place on request of the National Health Insurance Authority (NHIA) in Ghana between 2011 and 2014. The National Authority is responsible for the management and implementation of the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS), a social insurance scheme introduced in 2003 with the goal to improve access to quality healthcare for the entire population of Ghana. The concern of the NHIA in 2010 was the low enrolment and retention of clients in the scheme, hampering the achievement of universal healthcare coverage in Ghana and threatening the sustainability of the scheme. The question presented by the NHIA was simply: Why do clients not actively use the health insurance scheme? What are the barriers we have overlooked? The objectives of this study were therefore:

- To understand what motivates healthcare clients to enroll and remain in the NHIS. More specifically, to study if and how socio-cultural values and social capital (defined as relations of trust and support) influence people's decision to actively participate in this scheme.
- Based on the findings, to design and test interventions that effectively facilitate clients' active participation in the NHIS.

## **Stepping in the participatory design sub-cycle**

The design of this scientific study was made participatory by:

- Identifying the societal problem (task 1): What was the problem the NHIA perceived? What social changes were required? Which people have to be involved? And how could we realize these? From my first encounter with the members of the NHIA about this study, they stressed the need to engage all stakeholders (clients, healthcare providers and health insurers). This view was based on their belief that the NHIS's success depended on active support of all stakeholders. The 'client-provider-insurer tripod' (see [Figure 12.4](#)) made each of these groups interdependent, and trust between the stakeholders of key



importance. Making all stakeholders part of the process would allow them to contribute their input, gain understanding of the issues and support this study and subsequent results.

- Collaborating with the three identified stakeholder groups which I mapped. And organizing stakeholder meetings (task 2), inviting them to give their views, co-defining the problem. Collaboration and clear communication with the stakeholders thus was a crucial component of my work as researcher. Stakeholders' local knowledge helped me understand the context better. Thus, the participatory approach was fundamental in contextualizing and embedding the project as well as creating support and ownership of the process of social change.
- Shaping the objectives and research questions during these stakeholder meetings (task 3). In addition, we conducted some focus group discussions in some communities to further fine-tune the objectives of the study (task 3, co-definition of research problem). Note that while I focused my research questions on the clients and developed the interviews through an iterative process with the clients, two colleague researchers simultaneously studied the low enrolment problem from the angle of the health insurer and the healthcare providers respectively. This allowed comparison of findings. By encouraging voices to be heard from our stakeholder groups and engaging them from the start of the study up till the end, we believed this facilitated reciprocal learning, co-creation of new information and broad support for social change.
- Making the research questions both academic and societally relevant (task 4). The societal research question was: how to make the NHIS more client-focused. The social change objective was to help stakeholders to make the NHIS more client-focused, leading to more people understanding, enrolling and benefiting from the scheme, while also stimulating a more active role of clients in their own health (empowerment). This was expected to ultimately contribute to better health of the population.

## **Back into the design cycle**

During the design of my research (design cycle) I did an extensive literature review on barriers in health insurance enrolment, socio-cultural schemas and social capital. This helped to find empirical data on this topic, to develop my deductive conceptual framework and define broad research questions.

But very importantly, I included input from stakeholder meetings and initial focus group discussions to embed my study in the local context (grounding) and strengthen my conceptual framework and research questions. Based on this I could develop my methodology and methods. To really gain an in-depth understanding of client's perspectives and behaviour I chose to use qualitative methods. Since I also intended to use the action component of designing and evaluating an intervention (see participant-based action cycle), I also used quantitative methods, in particular for measuring the effect of the interventions.

## **Data collection cycle and analysis cycle**

While collecting my qualitative data, comprising the voices of the clients and key informants that were interviewed, I already started analysing and interpreting the first data. Important topics that clients brought up were included in the interview guide such that the guides were co-created with the participants, helping me to fine-tune the tools to better capture their perceptions and experiences and taking better account of their local cultural values and beliefs.

After completing the analysis of all data, I validated the results through organizing meetings *with* the clients. Key results, illustrative anonymized quotes and pictures of the visited villages were posted on the walls of the meeting room for clients to carefully observe. While viewing the pictures and quotes, clients exchanged views about the illustrated findings. Subsequently, I verbally presented the findings followed by a group discussion, in which clients were asked whether the findings were accurate and complete. Where appropriate, certain results were rephrased or added. Validation through this combination of visual and verbal presentation was very effective and evoked enthusiastic responses from clients about other, similar experiences. In the validation, we did not hear new results. Some of

the important findings were that when people are falling ill, their decision when and where to seek care depends very much on their cultural beliefs about what the cause of their illness was. Those feeling it is a curse of God will seek care at their church; others may feel they can get cured by visiting the traditional herbalist. The more western-oriented regular health service is just one of the places people may come to seek help. Many seem to seek care from different (health)care providers, quite often for the same illness event. While the health insurance company aims to improve access to quality health services, the clients can only benefit from insurance when seeking care from the regular health services. Clients in the study like to see the scope of insurance expanded to other providers. This aligns with their cultural beliefs and customs. Another finding from the study exposes the differences in 'socio-cultural lenses' used to explain 'quality of care'. These socio-cultural lenses are based on where people live, their level of education, their profession, their status in the community. Where healthcare providers explain 'quality' mainly from a biomedical technical perspective, many clients use a holistic view. For clients, compassion, patience and a listening ear form very important components of quality, in contrast with doctors and nurses pointing at quality as adherence to treatment protocols and the right number of instruments at the labour ward. While in practice all these components seem important, the differences in views do easily lead to miscommunication, misunderstanding and reduction in trust between clients and healthcare staff. In this process I, together with my research colleagues, took the role of facilitator and change agent, meanwhile realizing that we, as stakeholders, brought our own cultural lenses.

## **Participatory validation**

While validation of results took place with the clients, the other two stakeholder groups (health insurance staff and healthcare providers) followed the same process. The three groups subsequently were brought together in order to present the validated results to the entire group. The following paragraph describes this plenary component.

As mentioned earlier, trust is key in the stakeholder processes. Each stakeholder has his or her own socio-cultural lens, interest and preference. A trained doctor will have a different view on 'illness' and 'the need for

healthcare' than a farmer with a primary school education level, working daily on his rural field to grow crops for his family. Power relations easily compromise the results of stakeholder meetings. While among positive effects of plenary stakeholder meetings we found exchange of views, interactive learning, co-creation of new knowledge, generating common understanding and support for change, it is important to note this can only be realized in a trustworthy environment where participants feel free to express themselves and interact with other stakeholders without limitations. Facilitation of stakeholder meetings can be quite challenging and thus need careful preparation. The stakeholder mapping, in which you map the different stakeholder groups in terms of their position and relationships in the cultural context, can be a helpful tool to conduct before facilitating such stakeholder meetings. Experienced facilitation of the stakeholder meetings is a first step in creating a safe environment.

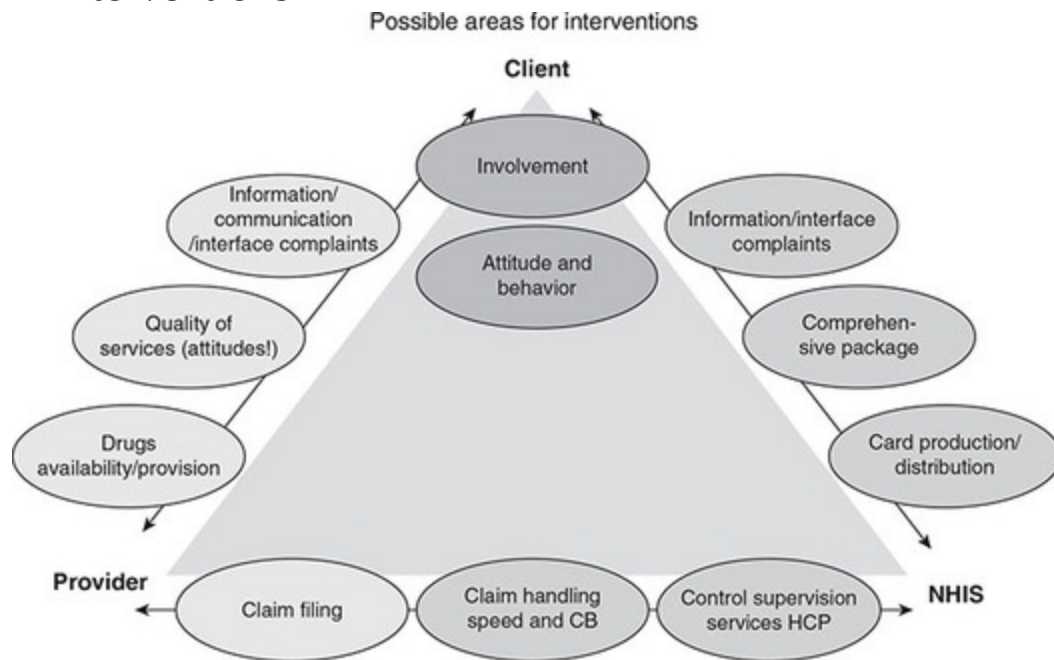
The validation sessions we organized prior to the plenary session were a second step to make clients at ease within a smaller homogeneous group. Despite these conditions we did experience differences in openness in communication when comparing the meetings in the two study regions. For example, one client agreed to tell her story which she shared during the validation meeting, also in the plenary; unfortunately she must have felt constrained in the wider group and presented a quite different story in the plenary. It was obvious she feared telling her negative clinic experience in the presence of health professionals listening. But generally, discussions went well, and many participants expressed their appreciation to have heard the many different stakeholders and opinions.

## **Participant-based action cycle**

Based on the findings shared in the plenary meetings in both regions, clients, providers and NHIA defined jointly with the researcher specific social change objectives (task 1) and based on that we co-designed an intervention (task 2). To stimulate participation in the discussions, smaller mixed stakeholder groups were formed and asked to draft and present action plans for change.

Although results from the three stakeholder groups pointed at several areas that required improvements (see [Figure 12.4](#)), stakeholders in both regions concluded that strengthening the role of clients in health(care) should be emphasized in the action plans.

Figure 12.4 Client–provider–insurer tripod with possible interventions

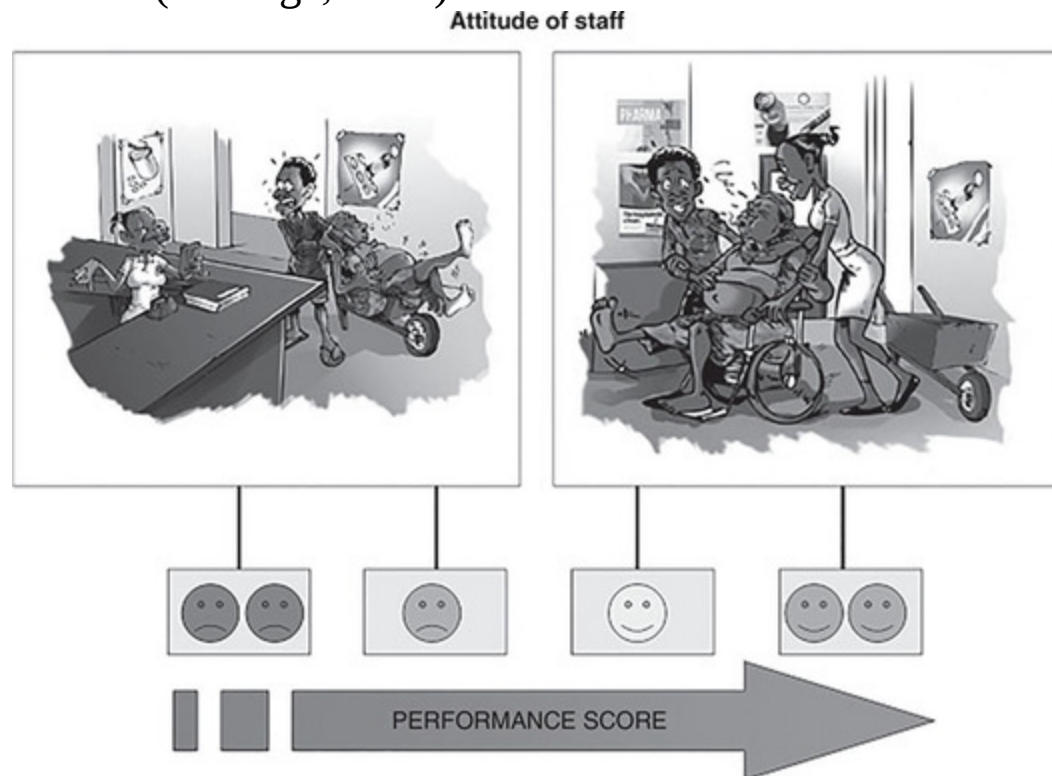


Source: Fenenga (2012) Stakeholder meetings to design interventions

This role of clients was believed important since so far the NHIS implementation focused predominantly on strengthening the collaboration with healthcare providers to offer the right services to the clients. Stakeholders, in particular the NHIA staff, realized that clients, as primary users of the health insurance, had received limited attention. What did clients actually think about the services and did they get the right information? Hence the interventions were designed to engage clients in monitoring and evaluating the care. This also required efforts from the healthcare providers and NHIA in adapting their procedures to interact with healthcare users to realize a client-focused NHIS. The interventions were implemented together with the stakeholders (task 3) for a period of a year.

Specific tools and materials were developed to enhance the active role of clients in monitoring services and providing regular input to healthcare providers and NHIS. A Ghanaian artist helped us to develop culturally appropriate cartoon scoring cards for clients to monitor the quality of services (see [Figure 12.5](#)).

Figure 12.5 Performance scoring card related to Attitude of Staff (Fenenga, 2015)



Clients had regular meetings with health care staff and staff of the NHIA. Posters with key monitoring findings were posted on the wall of the clinics for other clients to see. After a year, the evaluation of intervention results (task 4), conducted through interviews and a survey, demonstrated that enrolment had increased, clients gradually picked up a more active role and perceived the services as being of better quality. Results of the interventions were, once again, shared in stakeholder meetings in the two regions. Clients, healthcare providers and the NHIA were generally positive about the increased interaction and improvements. Key elements of the interventions were institutionalized in the NHIS system. A more detailed description of the study can be found in the list of references.

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## Outcomes

## Academic

Duku, S.K.O., Nketiah-Amponsah, E., Fenenga, C. J., Arhinful, D.K., Janssens, W. and Pradhan, M. (2018) *The Effect of Community Engagement on Healthcare Utilization and Health Insurance Enrolment in Ghana – Results from a Randomized Experiment*, Tinbergen Institute Discussion Paper TI 2018-017/V.

Fenenga, C.J. (2012) *MyCare – Engaging Clients in Monitoring Healthcare and Health Insurance*. PharmAccess Foundation Publication.

Fenenga, C.J. (2015) ‘A matter of trust: Clients’ perspective on healthcare and health insurance services in Ghana’, PhD thesis. Amsterdam: Ipskamp Publishers.

Fenenga, C.J., Nketiah-Amponsah, E., Bailey, A. and Hutter, I. (2015) ‘A participatory action approach for client-centered health insurance’, *International Journal of Action Research*, 13 (4): 1–19.

Fenenga, C.J., Kaba-Alhassan, R., Duku, S., Janssens, W. and Hutter, I. (2016) ‘Disparities between explanatory models of clients, healthcare provider and health insurer’, *Journal of Health Science*, 143–154.

Fenenga, C.J. (2016) ‘Methods Applied’ (pp. 23–24) and ‘COHEiSION – Towards a client-oriented health insurance system in Ghana’ (pp. 60–63) in *Global Health Policy and Health Systems Research Programme — Impact and Lessons learned*. NWO publication.

Fenenga, C.J., Buzasi, K., Arhinful, D.K., Duku, S.K., Ogink, A. and Poortinga, W. (2018) ‘Health insurance and social capital in Ghana: A randomized controlled trial’ *Global Health Research and Policy*, 3:35.

## Societal

See Fenenga (2012) and Fenenga et al. (2016) above.

### The implementation of participatory projects: Tailored to the context

With the case studies presented above, and others mentioned in this chapter, we aim to demonstrate that the participatory approach to qualitative research can in practice be applied in different ways. There is no fixed blueprint; one has to be flexible in applying the different principles and taking the different steps. To explain this, we present the most important differences and lessons from the two cases studies from India and Ghana in [Table 12.1](#).

Table 12.1 Summary of different steps taken in the participatory approach cycle in the two case studies

Table 12.1 Summary of different steps taken in the participatory approach cycle in the two case studies

Stage	India case study (1990–1994)	Ghana case study (2011–2015)
<b>Research design</b>	<p>Developed primarily as <i>academic research project</i>, with researcher defining research question and implicit non-academic objective</p> <p>Empirical data and theory to define conceptual framework</p> <p>Overall: more research for action</p>	<p>Developed primarily as <i>social change research project</i>, based on social problem defined by stakeholders</p> <p>Empirical data and theory to define conceptual framework for academic rigour</p> <p>Participatory from the very beginning</p>



Stage	India case study (1990–1994)	Ghana case study (2011–2015)
<b>Participatory design sub-cycle</b>	General social change objective and more specific academic research question defined with involvement of participants through <i>feasibility study</i> (embeddedness)	Involvement of participants and stakeholders at early stage; <i>stakeholder mapping</i> of interests and power relations and defining social change objectives and research questions (embeddedness)  Included an intervention to be tested right from the beginning
<b>Data collection</b>	<i>Focus on pregnant women in the community</i> , using ethnographic methodology with observations, interviews and FGD to collect the voices of the women and key informants in their social cultural context; with research assistants from community and local research institute.  <i>Validation</i> during data collection process	Primary focus on <i>healthcare clients</i> but <i>from start also involvement of other stakeholders</i> , using qualitative methods (FGD, interviews) complemented with quantitative methods  Involvement of voices of participants in data collection tools (inductive process)
<b>Data analysis</b>	Emic perspectives of women (and key informants) in the community, using quotes,	Emic perspectives of clients in the community, using quotes, including socio-cultural values,

Stage	India case study (1990–1994)	Ghana case study (2011–2015)
	referring to local concepts/in-vivo codes	beliefs and behaviour. <i>Simultaneously perspectives of other stakeholders were studied</i> (by two other researchers). This allowed comparison and triangulation of data.
<b>Validation</b>	With research assistants, community women, key informants, NGO and university	With all research team, participants and stakeholders
<b>Dissemination</b>	<i>First the PhD thesis</i> was published, after that social change outcomes, such as popularized version and Kannada version were developed.	Social change objective part of research project, dissemination on project first; then PhD thesis
<b>Participants-based action cycle</b>	<i>Only after PhD defense did researcher step into the participant-based action cycle.</i> Defining of specific social change objectives and design of intervention (popularized version in local language, various educational materials). Start-up implementation	After validation, defining of specific social change objectives and design intervention with participants and stakeholders. Implementation completed. Intervention booklet with guidelines
<b>Social change outcome</b>	<i>No evaluation component</i> included in the project	<i>Evaluation with participants and</i>

Stage	India case study (1990–1994)	Ghana case study (2011–2015)
	itself.	<i>stakeholders</i> . Positive social change outcomes communicated through final broad stakeholder workshop with policy leaders also. Defined <i>policy brief</i>
<b>Academic outcome</b>	Multiple scientific publications	Thesis and multiple scientific publications

You may have also noticed the differences in how the researchers applied the principles of participatory research. For example, the first case study in India – which was the basis for the development of the participatory qualitative approach – was primarily defined as an academic research project and participatory aspects were rather vague at the start, only becoming clearer after the academic research was conducted. The project was more of a research-for-action project, although all tasks for a participatory approach *were* taken. The second case study in Ghana was, from the very beginning a social change project. In addition, the level of involvement of stakeholders to define the social objective(s) and research question(s), varied. And the involvement of stakeholders and application of stakeholder mapping varied. The extent of stakeholder involvement is usually based on the *type of social problem*. For example, in the case of Ghana’s NHIS it was clear from the start that changing anything in the services for clients would affect the healthcare providers and health insurer. This strong arena of stakeholders appears less pronounced in the case study of India, where changing the nutritional status of pregnant women would affect the situation of stakeholders to a lesser extent. Hence the steps made are not entirely similar.

These reflections on the application of participatory projects help us to further develop our participatory approach.

# Different roles of the researcher

[Chapter 4](#) summarized the different roles the researcher can take in a participatory qualitative research project. This chapter identifies further additional roles. It illustrates that, as a researcher, you have to be able to:

- *re-present the voices* of your participants to other societal stakeholders;
- *manage the different power relationships* and reflect on their and your own positionality;
- where relevant, bring in *negotiating skills*;
- bring your *research findings back* into society;
- use *colloquial language*, rather than academic language;
- act as *a change agent*;
- *evaluate or co-evaluate* the social change achieved.

Put simply, as a researcher you have to be willing and able to contribute not only to the increase of academic knowledge, but also to society.

Clearly, a reflection on your own subjectivity and awareness of your own positionality is also very important (see also [Chapters 2, 4, 5 and 7](#)).

## Evaluating quality

All quality criteria of qualitative research also apply to participatory qualitative research. In addition to the quality criteria for the participatory approach as described in [Chapter 4](#), quality criteria related to validation, dissemination and the participant-based action cycle are:

### *Participatory*

Have the principles of the participatory approach been applied? Are participants and other societal stakeholders involved? In which way? Is a specific societal change objective co-defined? Can you reflect in discussions on how you co-defined the objective, how you co-designed and co-implemented action?

### *Embedded*

Are the findings of your research validated with your participants and other relevant societal stakeholders?

Did you add their remarks and comments to your findings, and how did they help you as researcher? And did you include them in the design of the subsequent actions?

### *Appropriate*

Are the different tasks regarding validation and dissemination of your findings and the subsequent tasks in the action cycle taken in an appropriate way?

### *Coherent*

Are all tasks in the participant-based action cycle coherently interlinked?

### *Transparent*

Are all tasks described in a transparent way?

### Key points

Overall, a participatory approach to qualitative research, as discussed in [Chapters 4](#) and [12](#):

- requires, a social change objective is formulated, in addition to an academic objective;
- involves participants and/or relevant societal stakeholders from the very beginning of the research process;
- has a strong emphasis on co-defining a participatory qualitative research project;
- involves the rigorous application of qualitative data collection and analysis complemented with possible participatory methods;
- involves moving from analysis to validation of your findings with participants and stakeholders;

- involves co-defining a *specific* social change outcome of your qualitative research project;
- involves co-defining and co-implementing an intervention based on the voices of our participants; and an evaluation.

## Exercise

1. Having conducted a participatory qualitative research project, how can you validate your findings with participants and other societal stakeholders?
2. Define — with your participants and societal stakeholders — a *specific* social change outcome. Whom do you want and need to involve, and why? What kind of interventions would be possible to take the voices of your participants further?
3. Describe the tasks that you think you have to take in the participant-based action cycle. Who are your prime participants? Who are the relevant stakeholders? What could be the action and how will you evaluate?

### Further reading

Johnson, L.R. (2017), *Community-based Qualitative Research; Approaches for Education and the Social Sciences*. London: Sage Publications.

Among the refereed publications, we feel this book is close to our participatory approach to qualitative research. Chapter 8 (describing the process) and Chapter 9 (case studies) describe the process of moving from qualitative research to participatory action.

Loewenson, R., Laurell, A.C., Hogstedt, C., D'Ambruso, L. and Shroff, Z. (2014) *Participatory Action Research in Health Systems*. TARSC, AHPSR, WHO, IDRC Canada, EQUINET, Harare. This book

contains many case studies applying participatory action research in the health field.

Springett, J. and Wallerstein, N, (2018) 'Issues in participatory evaluation' in M. Minkler and N. Wallerstein (eds), *Community-based Participatory Research for Health*. San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons, pp. 199–220. The chapter deals with the elements of *participatory* evaluation, in comparison to conventional evaluation; its use in community-based projects; and presenting a case study of a youth policy initiative in New Mexico.

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## 13 Academic Writing of Qualitative Research

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## Objectives

After reading this chapter you will:

- distinguish the dual functions of writing as analysis and as presentation of results;
- understand tasks that prepare you for writing qualitative research;
- recognize how to use the qualitative research cycle to structure your writing;
- understand how to write qualitative research for an academic audience;
- learn narrative and visual formats to present qualitative study findings;
- learn how to use quotations effectively;
- understand how to assess quality in writing qualitative research.



# Writing qualitative research

Qualitative research can be written for many different types of audiences, including academic, government, non-government, policy, advocacy or practitioner audiences. While there are some similarities in writing qualitative research for these different audiences, there are also distinct differences in writing style, format and scientific rigour. In this chapter we focus on writing qualitative research for academic audiences.

Writing completes the qualitative research cycle and brings together the components of all its sub-cycles (the design cycle, data collection cycle and analytic cycle). Although the broad aim of academic writing is to convey the study findings in a clear and compelling way for the target audience, writing in qualitative research actually serves a dual function. It is both a process and an outcome of the research itself: you will often write throughout the research process as an analytic tool in addition to writing the final product of the research. Writing also conveys quality of a qualitative study, perhaps in a more pronounced way than writing for other research approaches.

Writing in qualitative research is not simply a final task in the research process. It is often considered part of the analytic process of qualitative research and can be an effective tool to refine data analysis. Writing begins the process of considering the ‘story’ of your data and the best way to tell it. As you begin to piece together the central message of your analysis, you will inevitably ask further questions about the data, seek clarifications, look for evidence and identify gaps in information, all of which will lead you to return to the data for further analysis. This becomes a circular process from initial writing to further analysis and back to writing with a clearer understanding of the issues. The process of writing therefore offers another way of thinking about your data, reflecting, refining and understanding data more clearly. Writing is also the final product of the research process, and it is this aspect of writing that we focus on in this chapter. In writing qualitative research, the researcher is an informed messenger charged with effectively conveying the issues of the study to an audience. Therefore, you need to carefully consider the key message of the study, your target audience and how to communicate the study findings.

Writing qualitative research is distinct from reporting other types of research. It involves mostly reporting on *textual* (not numerical) data, which requires an approach to writing that respects the nature of this type of data and the tradition in which it was collected. Reporting textual data collected through interviews or group discussions from participants who were purposively selected, focuses on identifying, describing and explaining issues, rather than conveying the measurement of issues through their prevalence or frequency in data. Writing in qualitative research can also give credible ‘voice’ to your study participants to highlight *their* issues from *their* perspective, and presenting research findings in this way requires practice. Qualitative writing also involves reflexivity to accurately portray the research issues without undue influence of the research team. Another characteristic of qualitative writing is its focus on contextualizing issues, such as the socio-cultural context of study participants, the physical context of the study sites or the context of the research issues described by participants.

An additional function of writing for academic audiences is to reflect the quality of the study. Qualitative research is not conducted in a standardized way; therefore, there is a greater need for transparency than for other types of research, to describe the procedural steps you used and methodological decisions you made that demonstrate the scientific rigour of the study. Qualitative methods cannot be summarized in a formulaic way nor the results summarized in a table of outcomes from statistical tests whereby readers could glean the rigour of the procedures used. Therefore, writing for an academic audience needs to show procedural credibility throughout the research report.

Writing qualitative research can be challenging. Qualitative research produces a large volume of data that can be difficult to synthesize in a concise way while still reflecting contextual depth. Qualitative data are often complex and multi-faceted, yet you need to identify a logical ‘story’ from the data that demonstrates this complexity while also showing conceptual clarity. Furthermore, qualitative writing needs to report study participants’ unique issues, but also communicate broader concepts in the study results. Balancing all these aspects can make writing qualitative research a challenging task.

In this chapter we focus on writing qualitative research for academic audiences, such as for academic journals, or a research thesis/dissertation. We describe tasks to consider before you write, such as the format, presentation and audience; we describe how to write different sections of an academic article; and then describe how to respond to common critiques of qualitative research such as from journal reviewers. We conclude the chapter by suggesting how to assess the quality of academic writing of qualitative research.

## **Before you write**

### **Gather your writings**

Writing qualitative research can seem daunting at first, knowing where to start and how to begin to write. However, you have actually been writing throughout the research process. So before you begin to write, gather all the writings you have done already in the project. You will likely have a range of documents that can assist you in the writing process, such as your original study proposal, an early literature review, you may have kept notes, memos or a field diary during your data collection and may also have analytic notes, summaries, early descriptions of codes, concepts, data search summaries, or sketches/network maps developed in analysis software that depict early explanatory frameworks, etc. In addition to these process documents you may also have a series of more formal writing where you synthesized your study or preliminary findings, for example, for seminars or conference presentations, or progress summaries submitted to a research funding agency; you may have also prepared abstracts or a preliminary report of the study. Therefore, you already have a whole body of writing on your study, and you rarely start writing with a 'blank page'. A first task in writing is therefore to take stock of all the writing you have done so far for the study; assemble, review and organize these documents so that you can use them throughout the writing process. A useful starting point is to review all the documents you developed from doing each of the tasks in the 'Design Cycle'.

## Synthesize your study findings

Writing qualitative research can be challenging without first synthesizing your study findings. An intermediate step between data analysis and writing is to identify the core findings, set of issues, or main storyline of your results that you wish to present. This may be clear from your analysis; however, it often takes additional time to reflect and distil your results, identify the most significant findings and how to weave these together into a compelling message that responds to the study objectives. One of the challenges in writing the results of qualitative research is to remain focused on presenting the core findings that relate to the research question. The findings of most qualitative studies are complex and detailed and there will be multiple findings, interrelationships, subgroups of participants and results that could be presented. It is easy to become lost in the detail and volume of study findings and lose sight of the overall focus of your writing. Therefore, take time to synthesize your results and distil the core messages before you begin writing.

Good academic writing weaves together the issues considered important by your study participants, that respond to the study objectives, and that are relevant and novel to the academic field. You may use different strategies to synthesize core findings of your qualitative study before you begin to write, for example:

- Write bullet points of your main findings, how these fit together and identify the overarching message of these results.
- Write the core themes from your analyses, compare these to similar published studies to distil the most novel findings from your study, and structure your writing around these novel contributions.
- Draw a diagram or concept map that captures the main results and depicts the broader framework of the study findings and use this to structure your writing (see later section on ‘presentation format’ for examples).
- Debrief with the study team to discuss the core findings and focal message of the results.
- Identify whether your results may be written into several academic articles and delineate the focus of each.

You often cannot present all the results of a qualitative study in a single article. You may have multiple results of interest to different audiences from a single study. In this case, consider writing several articles and identify whether each has a compelling stand-alone message.

Finally, make time for writing. Since writing is often part of the analytic process in qualitative research, the act of writing can help crystalize the study findings and core messages that become the focus of your academic report. Remember you are not just ‘writing up’ your qualitative study but continuing to distil, refine and return to data to clarify the study findings. Good reflective writing takes creative ‘space’ and time, so think about how you will organize your writing time so that you are able to reflect deeply on the data during the writing tasks.

## **Consider the audience**

Before you write consider your target audience, as this will determine the format and content of your writing. For academic audiences, your primary target is often a peer-reviewed journal in your field of study or a research thesis, which require a specific format (see [Table 13.1](#)). It is common to write a range of academic outputs from a single study, for example:

- one-page summary of key findings;
- policy brief;
- progress reports and final report to research funding organization;
- executive summary;
- academic journal article;
- dissertation or thesis;
- news release.

Knowing the requirements of academic writing will determine how you present the study findings, in terms of the style, format, length, content, and the key messages you convey. In academic writing greater emphasis is given to the review of academic literature, the theoretical framework and methodological procedures. For other types of audiences these requirements differ, for example a policy audience often requires a concise report that highlights key findings and recommendations; a practitioner audience needs

clear, actionable outcomes. Take time to identify the required style and format of academic writing, perhaps by reading academic articles in your field.

## Format of academic writing

Much academic writing follows a similar format, shown in [Table 13.1](#). This format is used for many different types of academic writing from peer-reviewed journal articles to research theses. The qualitative research cycle offers an effective way to structure your writing to help you cover the main components of an academic report. Reflecting back on the tasks you completed in each component of the qualitative research cycle not only helps to structure your report but also provides the procedural detail with which you can demonstrate scientific rigour throughout the research process. We describe how to write qualitative research for each of the sections of an academic report next.

Table 13.1 Typical structure of an academic report

Table 13.1 Typical structure of an academic report

Abstract	The abstract provides a concise summary of the study aims, methods, results and implications.
Background	The background section contextualizes the study by introducing the research issue, situating the study in the academic literature, identifying relevant theories and providing the conceptual framework of the study, thereby building an argument for the importance of the study and highlighting the study objectives.
Methods	The methods section describes how the study was conducted, detailing the process and procedures of data collection and analysis and reflecting scientific rigour in the research process.

Results	The results section presents the study findings in a clear and compelling way in response to the study objectives, using evidence from the study to support the findings.
Discussion	The discussion section provides an interpretation of what the study results mean in a broader context and identifies the implications of the study and any recommendations.
Conclusion	The conclusion briefly summarizes the study objective, core findings and their significance and any ‘take-home’ messages from the study.
Acknowledgements	Acknowledgements identify any individuals or institutions who contributed to the study but are not authors on the report.
References	List of sources referred to in the report.

## Writing a qualitative research article

Much academic writing uses the structure shown in [Table 13.1](#). Next we describe the content of a typical academic report (i.e. for an academic journal or graduate thesis). The methods and results sections often present the greatest writing challenges for qualitative researchers, so we focus on these sections in greater depth. Writing styles, structure and requirements will inevitably vary by discipline, and some academic journals now provide specific guidance on writing qualitative research.

## Study abstract

Most academic writing requires a summary of the study that precedes the main body of the article. This is typically an abstract – a concise paragraph

of 150–250 words that summarizes the content and significance of the article. Some academic journals require a structured abstract using the following headings: Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion and Conclusion. An abstract synthesizes the key points of the study and is searchable in electronic databases, and readers often decide whether to view an article based on the abstract alone, therefore, you need to carefully consider the most salient results to include in the abstract. For a qualitative study it is important to clearly identify that qualitative research was used, so that the results are interpreted correctly.

The abstract is often the last part of the article to be written. An effective writing strategy is to select key sentences from the different sections of the article and weave these together into a coherent flow to become the abstract. Select key sentences on the research problem and study objectives from the *Introduction* section, sentences that summarize the research process from the *Methods* section, key findings from the *Results* and *Discussion* sections, and the overall take-home message or study implications from the *Conclusion*. Then review and edit the paragraph to ensure it effectively summarizes your study, particularly the study findings, their importance and implications. After the abstract you include a list of searchable key words related to your study topic, qualitative methods, or the geographic region where the study was conducted.

## **Background section**

The background section contextualizes the study, by highlighting the research problem, situating the study within the academic literature, identifying relevant theories and building an overall argument for the importance of your study. You may draw upon all the tasks conducted in the design cycle when you are writing the background section. One approach to writing the background section is to move from broad to narrow, whereby you start by presenting the broader context of the study topic, then with each paragraph provide more focus until you present the objectives of your particular study.

Begin by identifying the research issue. This may involve providing a definition of the issue and citing data to demonstrate the broad scope of the



issue, who is affected and the outcomes. For example, if your study focuses on diabetes you may first define diabetes, report its global prevalence and identify the socio-demographic characteristics of those at risk.

Next, synthesize the academic literature on the topic. This helps to position your study within the broader academic context. Focus on what is known about the study topic as well as any gaps in the extant literature that your qualitative study hopes to fill, to build a case for the relevance of your study. The focus of the literature review will inevitably be shaped by the nature of your research question, the concepts of interest or the particular study population. Also, provide the theoretical context to your study by describing any relevant theories or the conceptual framework that guided your study design. You may be applying an existing theory to your qualitative study or examining specific concepts from the literature that underpin your study objectives. Much of this information is already described in your study proposal, which is the outcome of the tasks you conducted in the design cycle, so this is a good starting point from which to build the background section. You may also provide the reasoning for using a qualitative approach for your study; this will be linked to your research purpose but you may also highlight limited prior research using qualitative methods to underscore a new approach to investigating the research issue. The justifications for using qualitative research will come from the decisions you made during the ‘design cycle’ (covered in [Part I](#) of this book).

Describe the setting of your study. Provide readers with sufficient information to understand the context of the study so they can interpret the study findings. This may include a description of the broader socio-cultural, political or historical context that influences the research issue, the physical context of the study site or the resource environment in relation to study issues.

The background section also includes your study objectives, which may be written as a research question or statement of purpose. Describe why qualitative research is suitable for your study objectives (see [Chapter 3](#)), as this begins to demonstrate scientific rigour. In a mixed methods study, using

both quantitative and qualitative methods, you may have several objectives relating to the different components of the study.

Finally, a background section may conclude with a paragraph that states concisely the focus of your study, including your research question, focal population and the approach used. By the end of the background section readers should understand how your research problem was derived, the significance of your study, its contribution to the knowledge base and the main objective of your study.

## Methods section

The methods section is a critical part of any academic writing. The basic purpose of the methods section is to describe how the study was conducted. You are essentially describing all the tasks you completed in the ‘data collection cycle’ (covered in [Part II](#) of this book). A comprehensive methods section will describe:

- **what** was done (the research tasks);
- **how** it was done (the procedural detail for these tasks);
- **why** it was done this way (the methodological reasoning for each task and decision).

These three elements are particularly important in a qualitative study because there is no standard approach to conducting qualitative research; instead the approach comprises principles and techniques that are used in a flexible way. Therefore, you need to describe how *you* applied these principles to *your* specific study, the procedural steps that you used and the methodological decisions that shaped your research process. Stating *what* was done comprises the basic content of the methods section; a reader needs to be able to understand the main research tasks you undertook in your study. Describing *how* you conducted these tasks provides the procedural detail and adds context to the data collection process, for example when describing how in-depth interviews were conducted, state who conducted the interviews, where they were held, how long they were, whether they were recorded, the questioning strategy used, etc. This contextual detail places readers into the study situation to better understand

how data were generated. Describing *why* tasks were done in the way they were provides the methodological reasoning that contributes most directly to the scientific rigour of the study. For example, state why you decided to use in-depth interviews for your study, why you used the recruitment strategies you did, why you selected the analytic approach you used for analysis, etc. Often researchers focus only on *what* was done without also describing why it was done that way. Providing transparency on your methodological decisions allows you to demonstrate how your study was conducted with scientific rigour. The methods section thus becomes your opportunity to showcase the scientific rigour of your study to support the validity of your findings. Therefore, you need to provide as much procedural detail as possible within the word limit available, which requires writing concisely yet providing depth, to ensure that every sentence conveys something important.

It is important to convey in your methods section that your study was conducted in the interpretive paradigm. You may do this by using terminology associated with the interpretive paradigm, such as: reflexivity, saturation, purposive sampling, inter-coder agreement, and so on. However, depending on your discipline you may need to briefly explain what these concepts mean, so that readers unfamiliar with these terms can still follow your process. Describe how you applied these concepts in your study, for example: describe the iterative process you used, how you used reflexivity, how purposive recruitment worked in your study, how you determined saturation for your sample, and so on. Using appropriate terminology and describing how you applied concepts will clearly situate your study within the interpretive paradigm, and remind readers to view your study within these parameters.

The typical content of a methods section for an academic study is detailed in [Table 13.2](#). You may use this table as a checklist while writing your methods section. It includes prompts for you to consider not only the research tasks conducted but also the methodological justifications for the choices you made during the research process. Some additional considerations on each topic are given below.

## **Study site**

Set the scene for the reader by describing the study site. Indicate where and when the study was conducted and what influenced your selection of the study site(s). Briefly describe any relevant socio-cultural, demographic and geographic characteristics of the study site(s) and any other features that are relevant to the research problem. Your study site may be an institution, such as a hospital or school, whereby you would similarly describe the nature and characteristics of the organization in which the study took place and why the organization was selected. You may also identify any organizations that you collaborated with to conduct the study and describe the role of each, for example, local collaborators may have refined the research instruments for cultural appropriateness, translated interview guides, provided field staff, managed the fieldwork logistics or contributed to data analysis.

## **Study design**

State your overall study design to allow readers to understand how all components of the study fit together. A cross-sectional study design is the most common, and often the study design will not be identified unless it differs from this, such as a longitudinal, case-study or mixed methods study design. Explain why the study design selected is best for your study. For a mixed-method study design comprising both quantitative and qualitative data collection, describe how the qualitative component fits into the overall design (see [Chapter 3](#)). For a longitudinal study design, describe what you are assessing over time, and the purpose of each round of data collection in relation to the study objectives.

## **Study population**

Provide a clear description of your study population, highlight the eligibility criteria for study participants and any exclusion criteria. Indicate why this population are suitable for your study objectives. If you have multiple study populations (e.g. patients and doctors), describe each group and how each contributed to your study objectives.

Specify the recruitment strategy you used and describe the process of participant recruitment in as much detail as possible. Avoid simply stating that you used ‘purposive sampling’ as this is a theoretical concept rather than a strategy *per se*; instead describe how you applied this concept in your study. There are many ways to achieve purposive sampling (see [Chapter 6](#)) and these may be used in different ways and influenced by the study context in which they are applied. Providing a detailed account of your recruitment process reflects procedural rigour and conveys how your process was appropriate and adequate for your study. Even with limited word limits it is possible to provide concise details on the recruitment process. If your recruitment process was iterative (evolving) and inductive (guided by early data collection), describe this circular process, how it worked and why it strengthened your study (see [Chapter 6](#)). For studies that use both qualitative and quantitative data, the recruitment strategies and sample sizes will be different and require separate descriptions and justifications.

State your final sample size and why it is adequate for your study. Sample size is a linchpin for assessing scientific rigour, so providing strong justification for the adequacy of your qualitative sample will dispel criticism of a ‘too small’ sample from those less familiar with qualitative research. A clear description of how you achieved diversity in the sample and how you assessed saturation contributes to scientific rigour and validity of the study findings. If saturation was not used, provide a description of how an adequate sample size was determined for your study.

## **Data collection**

Provide enough detail about data collection to allow readers to follow your process as if they were present in the study situation. Describe the tasks, decisions and challenges of data collection to enable a better understanding of how data were generated. State the date and duration of data collection and who collected the data. Describe the characteristics of the field team (e.g. age, sex, cultural background, language skills), their experience, and how they were trained for the study.

If an iterative process of data collection was used, describe this at the outset as it reflects the use of a core principle of qualitative data collection that

contributes to data validity. Qualitative data collection is flexible and may evolve as the study progresses. This inductive process involves making changes to the field process that are guided by ongoing data collection (see [Part II](#) of this book). This is a critical strength of qualitative research as it allows data collection decisions to be guided by empirical data from the study itself. Nonetheless, the inductive process may appear haphazard to readers unfamiliar with the nature of qualitative data collection, so providing a transparent description of the data collection process and the rationale for changes made will help to dispel the impression that data collection was unsystematic. Indicate how the inductive process worked in your study: state which aspects of data collection evolved, how they changed and what guided these changes. Grace et al. (2008) indicate that an inductive process was used by stating: ‘We analysed the findings from each phase and used them to design subsequent phases, allowing progressive focusing of the research ...’ (p. 2), and they detail exactly how this was done throughout their methods section. Similarly, Handlovsky et al. (2012: 453) indicate that their research instrument evolved by stating: ‘Amendments were made to the interview guide throughout the course of the interviews to gain clearer understandings of the key concepts’.

Identify all the methods of data collection you used. Describe the purpose of each method in relation to the study objectives so the contribution of each method is clear and distinct. You may structure the data collection section by describing each method of data collection separately, which enables you to provide all the contextual details for each method in turn. This is particularly useful if there was a sequential flow in how methods were used or in a mixed methods study using both quantitative and qualitative data collection. Describe the context of data collection – the location, languages used, length of sessions, how data were recorded, who was present, and so on. Specific details to include for different methods of data collection are shown in [Table 13.2](#). Describe the research instrument and how it was developed. For example, an interview guide may use components of a theoretical framework, concepts from the literature, or use a topic structure. The research instrument is rarely included in an academic journal article, but may be included in the appendix of an academic thesis or report.

Describe how you practised reflexivity to minimize any potential influence of the researchers or research process on data generated (see [Chapter 2](#)). Reporting reflexivity demonstrates an understanding of principles in the interpretive paradigm, the influence of subjectivity on data collection and attention to data validity. You may report how you managed personal reflexivity (the researcher's background and assumptions) or interpersonal reflexivity (the study setting or interpersonal dynamics between researchers and participants) to improve data quality. Reflexivity may also be reported in the data analysis section to indicate how you managed subjective interpretation of data and study findings by analysts. For a fuller discussion of writing on reflexivity with example extracts see Hennink (2014).

## **Data analysis**

Your analytic approach, procedures and decisions need to be transparent so that even readers unfamiliar with qualitative data analysis can follow your analytic process that led to the conclusions you presented. However, the description of data analysis remains the weakest area of published qualitative research. Common weaknesses include: data analysis being treated like a 'black box' where analytic procedures are absent; 'name-dropping' an analytic approach by stating an approach was used with a reference but providing no detail on analytic tasks, procedures or decisions made; incorrect labelling of an analytic approach, whereby the tasks described do not follow the stated approach; and 'text book' descriptions of analytic processes with no indication of how tasks were applied to the specific study data (Hennink, 2014). With these limitations it is difficult to assess the quality of data analysis and therefore the validity of the study findings.

There are many approaches to data analysis, each with distinct analytic processes and procedures (see [Chapter 10](#)). Identify which analytic approach you used and your rationale. Selecting an appropriate analytic approach for your data and the study objectives is an indicator of scientific rigour. Describe the nature of your data (e.g. field notes, transcripts, etc.) and how data were prepared for analysis. Data preparation may involve making verbatim transcripts, developing codes and applying these to data, assessing inter-coder agreement, and so on (see [Chapter 10](#)). Identify



whether you used a software program and describe how you used it, since qualitative data analysis software is simply a facilitator to your analytic process.

The main content of the data analysis section focuses on describing the analytic tasks you conducted and how data analysis was validated. Provide as much transparency as possible on your analytic process, tasks and decisions. Use terminology that is appropriate to the analytic tasks used. Describe how analytic tasks were applied to your particular study, by providing examples of the codes you developed, the specific comparisons you made, conceptual themes that emerged related to your research issues, and so on. In a mixed methods study using both quantitative and qualitative data, the process of analysis and indicators of rigour are different, so the analysis of each type of data need to be described separately.

Describing how data analysis was validated is often overlooked, but it provides an important indicator of the scientific rigour of your analysis. Indicate any checks or techniques used to ensure that your analysis is empirically supported (see [Chapter 10](#)). This demonstrates that the results you generated were the result of systematic analysis rather than subjective interpretation.

## **Ethical approval**

A statement of ethical approval is needed for all academic research. This may be a single sentence that states ethical approval was granted, the name of the granting institution(s), and a reference number. For collaborative research, ethical approval may have been granted by multiple institutions. Indicate how ethical issues were addressed throughout the study, for example: how did you obtain informed consent, seek permissions for recordings, protect anonymity of study participants and confidentiality of data, protect participants from harm and ensure incentives were not coercive (see [Chapter 5](#)). These details may be included in one section on ethics or described throughout the data collection section.

Table 13.2 Typical contents of a methods section

Table 13.2 Typical contents of a methods section



**Study site**

- Where was the study conducted? Why were the study site(s) selected?
- When were data collected?
- Were local collaborators involved in the study site?

**Study design**

- What is the study design? (e.g. cross-sectional, longitudinal, mixed methods, etc.)
- Why was this study design suitable for the study objectives?

**Study population**

- What are the characteristics of the study population(s)? (e.g. inclusion/exclusion criteria)
- How were study participants recruited? (e.g. strategies, incentives)
- How many participants were recruited? (e.g. number of interviews/focus groups/observations)
- Why was this sample size adequate for the study objectives? How was saturation assessed?
- Was an inductive process of recruitment used?

**Data collection**

- Which method(s) of data collection were used? Why were these methods selected?
- Who collected the data? (e.g. study team characteristics, field training)
- How was reflexivity used during data collection?
- How was the inductive process of data collection used?

### *Interviews and focus group discussions*

- How was the question guide developed? (e.g. concepts from literature, local collaborators' input)
- What questions were asked? Was the instrument pilot-tested?
- How were the interviews/focus groups conducted? (e.g. language, place, duration)
- How were data recorded? (e.g. digital recorder, note-taker used)
- What were the data collection challenges?

### *Observations*

- What type of observation was used? (e.g. participant/non-participant)
- How were observation sites selected?
- Who or what was observed?
- How were the observations conducted? (e.g. by whom, where, when, duration, how many observations)
- How were observations recorded? (e.g. structured, unstructured)

### **Data analysis**

- How were data prepared for analysis? (e.g. were data transcribed, translated, anonymized; how were codes developed, data coded and inter-coder agreement checked?)
- What analytic approach was used and why? (e.g. grounded theory, content analysis)?
- What was the process of analysis? (e.g. analytic tasks)
- Was data analysis software used?
- How was data analysis validated?

### **Ethical approval**

- Was ethical approval received for the study?

- How were ethical issues addressed? (e.g. informed consent, confidentiality)

### **Study limitations**

- What are the study design limitations and how were they minimized?

## **Results section**

The purpose of the results section is to present the study findings in response to the research question or objective. It is important to distinguish between the presentation of your results and their interpretation, one way to do this is by placing these in the results and discussion sections respectively. Since qualitative research typically involves simultaneous analysis and interpretation throughout the research process, your results are already interpreted to some extent. This type of interpretation is necessary to generate meaningful study findings and to understand the context and nuances of the results presented. However, further interpretation of what the study finding mean, their implications or comparisons to findings of other empirical research is the focus of the discussion section (described later). Therefore, focus on presenting your study findings in the results section and discussing their implications in a broader sense in the discussion section. In addition, the results presented should be a logical outcome of the methods you used to collect and analyse data as described in the methods section. If you used content analysis, narrative analysis or grounded theory your results will look very different (see [Chapter 10](#)), therefore there should be clear consistency between the methods you used and the type of results generated to demonstrate scientific rigour.

Developing an effective structure is the key to presenting the results of qualitative research. An effective structure takes the reader through the findings in a clear and logical way and highlights how each component relates to the overall study objectives. This is critical for presenting the often complex findings of qualitative studies, whereby readers need clear signposts to follow the results presented. Novice qualitative researchers

often lack a coherent structure when writing study results, which then resembles a ‘shopping list’ of issues with no clear narrative to guide readers through the main issues and their relevance. An effective structure can therefore help to clearly convey the central message of your results, while a poor structure can obscure it. An effective structure can also lead to a more concise and focused presentation of the study results, which is important when writing within strict word limits of academic journals. There are many ways to structure your results, as shown in [Table 13.3](#). Ultimately, the nature of your study findings and the objectives of your study will determine the most suitable structure to use.

Table 13.3 Approaches to structuring qualitative results

Table 13.3 Approaches to structuring qualitative results

Key concepts approach	Use key concepts that are the outcome of data analysis as subheadings to structure the results. Develop a coherent narrative to describe each concept and how they all link together to better understand the phenomenon.
Research design approach	Use your research design to organize your results (by study objectives, or subgroups of participants, or study locations, etc.)
Problem-solving approach	Clearly state the research problem and why it is important. Then organize your study findings to highlight different facets of the problem and suggest evidence-based solutions.
Narrative approach	Identify the core ‘story’ of your data and describe the issues influencing the story. There may be several ‘storylines’ in the data, or alternative scenarios for different types of participants (e.g. for rural vs. urban sites, for men vs. women) that can be interwoven into the narrative.

Policy approach	Use a journalistic approach by capturing the story in the title, and then presenting the core findings or conclusions in the first paragraph. The rest of the document should expand the story, providing details and evidence for the research issues.
Case study approach	Use a single case study to represent typical issues in the study population. Alternatively, use two case studies to highlight common but different experiences and explain the differences. For example, describe the healthcare scenario of a person with health insurance compared to a person without insurance.
Chronology approach	Present study findings in the form of a chronology, process or stages of a phenomenon. Identify the various stages and describe the issues and influences at each stage. For example, describe the progression of an illness, delineating the various stages and issues faced at each stage.
Theory development approach	Use the study findings to discuss how they ‘fit’ into an existing theory, or the extent to which they define new theory or concepts.

## Presenting an argument

An argument presents a strong *intellectual* structure for your results. An argument presents a line of reasoning to make sense of the corpus of results and incorporates narrative descriptions of issues or extracts of data to build the argument. An effective argument has the following characteristics. It needs to be *credible* and *convincing* by using study results to demonstrate that the argument presented is the most plausible interpretation of the data in response to the research objectives. This involves not only presenting evidence from the data to support the argument but also using data to negate other potential explanations. An argument should be *systematically*

*developed* by demonstrating how the results presented were derived and verified. An effective argument is *rich and nuanced*, presenting not only the main line of argument but also any variability and nuances of the issues described. This reflects the rich contextual detail expected of qualitative research findings. Finally, it should be clear how you selected data presented in the argument, what these data represent, and how data are relevant to the overall conclusions reached. An effective argument is *transparent* so that readers understand not only the main message of the results but also how these were derived, why they are plausible and that they were based on rigorous analysis of data.

There are different types of arguments that can be used to structure your qualitative study results; some examples include the following:

*A developmental argument:* Explain how a social phenomenon developed (e.g. how do children become obese?)

*A mechanical argument:* Describe how a phenomenon works (e.g. how does a micro-credit loan lead to women's autonomy?)

*A comparative argument:* Outline the significance of a comparison (e.g. why does unemployment cause greater stress for men than women?)

*A causal argument:* Show how and why a certain context perpetuates a social problem (e.g. how do 'food deserts' contribute to childhood obesity in US cities?)

## Using quotations

Using quotations from study participants is a long-standing tradition in reporting qualitative research findings. Quotations provide readers with a direct link to the social world of study participants and expose the emotions, expressions and language of participants themselves, which can reflect the issues more vividly than your descriptive text. Quotations can therefore provide 'a direct link between the more abstract content of the results and the actual data; in addition, they are also the strongest connection between the reader and the voices of the original participants' (Morgan, 2010: 718). Using quotations therefore gives 'voice' to the study participants themselves and remains a hallmark of writing qualitative results.

Presenting quotations is often seen as a means of validating issues by providing extracts of data to show that the issues identified were indeed present in the data in the way that you described. However, using quotations as the only tool to demonstrate validity of your results can lead readers to expect a quotation for all issues raised, so that the absence of quotations is criticized for making unsupported claims. While some issues can be effectively represented by a quotation many other findings cannot, yet they are equally valid and well-grounded in your data and the simple absence of a quotation should not negate these findings. Some issues may be evident throughout your data but there is no clear or succinct expression of the issue that could be quoted. Other findings may present more conceptual issues or build an explanatory theory that is derived from higher order analysis (see [Chapter 11](#)) and therefore there will be no quotation that illustrates the concept or theory, yet these results are strongly supported by data. It is a mistaken expectation that quotations provide the only evidence that your results are empirically grounded. This can lead to a concerning scenario whereby higher credibility is given to qualitative studies that present simple descriptive results with quotations, than those presenting results of systematic analysis that led to powerful explanatory theories of a social phenomenon. Keep in mind that there are many ways to demonstrate the validity of your results in addition to the use of quotations (see section below), so take care not to overly rely on quotations for demonstrating validity. [Table 13.4](#) highlights issues to consider when including quotations in your results.

It can be tempting to include many quotations from study participants in your results; however, we encourage you to be judicious on the inclusion of quotations so that they make a clear contribution to the results presented. Be clear on the purpose of each quotation and how it contributes to your results. Quotations need to support the narrative argument of the results. Avoid presenting a string of quotations without embedding them into the overall story of the results. Quotations are most effective when they add contextual depth and richness to the narrative text and therefore if a quotation contributes little more than can be stated in the text consider excluding it. For example, a quotation stating ‘The clinic is too expensive for us’ contributes very little that cannot be stated in the text. However, an alternative quotation, such as ‘Oh, that clinic is too expensive (sigh), I can’t

buy medicine for my children *and* pay their school fees too, so each time one is sick we have to make a difficult choice’, conveys much more contextual depth about the issue, including the consequences, trade-offs and emotions surrounding the high cost of the clinic. Purposeful selection of quotations can therefore strengthen the impact of your study results.

Quotations need to be clear and relevant to the issue raised in the text so don’t leave it to the reader to make assumptions about the relevance of a quotation. Quotations are fragments of data taken from a broader context of an interview that is unknown to the reader. Therefore, select enough text in the quotation to provide context to the issue, but not too much so that the issue becomes obscured. Including the question asked or a section of dialogue between a participant and the interviewer or other participants (if a group discussion) can provide valuable context to understand the quotation. See Hennink (2014) for strategies to present quotations of interactive dialogue from focus group discussions.

Verbatim data captures natural speech, which contains incomplete thoughts, repetitions, false starts, rambling speech and speech fillers (um, ahh), therefore you may need to edit an extract to improve its readability or reduce its length. While editing for clarity and readability is acceptable, take care not to inadvertently alter the meaning of the statement. Editing often involves adding a few words to make sense of the statement or removing sections of redundant speech that are not related to the issue being highlighted. In these cases, you would replace the missing words with ellipses (...), or indicate words that were added by placing these inside square brackets, for example:

‘Most of the nurses complain about [long hours], but they can’t change them ... they just gotta do the hours ... coz there’s no other place for nurses to work ‘round here, you see’.

When reporting quotations from data that were translated from their original language, it is useful to retain in the quotation some words or phrases in the original language (see [Chapter 10](#)). Certain words or expressions hold specific cultural meaning, which may be lost when



translated or there is simply no literal translation of an expression. Retaining particular words in their original form as spoken by the participant conveys the nuances of the study context and adds cultural validity to the issue reported. Typically, the cultural phrase would be italicized and a translation included in brackets, for example:

‘We don’t pray in the mosque, because here we practise *purdah* (gender segregation), so women pray at home’.

It can be tempting to include many quotations in the results section; however, the overuse of quotations can actually detract from the clarity of the study findings. The number of quotations to include will be determined by their purpose – one quotation may be used to highlight a typical response to an issue, two quotations may be used to demonstrate contrasting perspectives, or a series of quotations may be used to demonstrate the range of issues raised.

Assess the balance between the narrative text and the quotations. In academic writing, the narrative text guides the reader through the study results by describing the issues, concepts or emerging theory, while quotations are used to exemplify the issues raised and provide contextual detail. If too much of the results section is taken up with quotations, it equates to swamping the reader with the raw data with little narrative text to present the outcomes of your analyses. For a useful check, remove all quotations from your results section and then assess whether the remaining text still provides a robust presentation of the study results, or are you essentially presenting a string of quotations for each issue. Similarly, including very long quotations can become tiresome for a reader and detract from the main points being made. Therefore, quotations are most effective when used judiciously and embedded within broader narrative text.

Also, consider how you selected quotations to avoid presenting overly dramatic quotations that may not be a true depiction of how the issues are presented throughout the data as a whole. Bogdan and Taylor (1975: 145) suggest that ‘you should resist the temptation to overuse certain colourful materials at the expense of others. If you cannot find an alternative

example, the point you are trying to make may not be as important as thought originally.’

Labelling quotations can provide contextual information to help readers understand the quotations more accurately and can be useful when comparing quotations from different types of participants. Typically, the attribution of quotations appears after each quotation, for example ‘(24-year-old married woman from rural village)’ or ‘(Female head teacher at urban secondary school)’. The type of information that you include in a label will depend on what you consider relevant to the study topic and participants. Take care that the information provided in the label or the content of the quotation itself does not reveal the identity of the study participant (see [Chapter 5](#) on ethics).

Table 13.4 Guidelines for using quotations

Table 13.4 Guidelines for using quotations

Purpose	What is the purpose of the quotation? (e.g. typical or contrasting views)  What issue does the quotation highlight?  Does the quotation show anything more than can be said in the text?
Clarity	Is the issue in the quotation clear or does it need explanation?  Is there sufficient context in the quotation to understand the issue?  Should the quotation be edited for clarity or the question asked included for context?
Relevance	Is the quotation relevant to the argument made in the text?  Do quotations exemplify issues described in the text?

Balance	<p>Is there balance of narrative text versus quotations?</p> <p>Are quotations embedded into an argument in the text?</p>
Length	<p>Is the quotation long enough to provide context to the issue highlighted?</p> <p>Is the quotation too long, making the issue unclear?</p>
Number	<p>How many quotations are included for each issue?</p> <p>What is the justification for including each quotation?</p> <p>How many quotations are in the entire results section?</p>
Selection	<p>How was the quotation selected?</p> <p>Can alternative examples be found for the issue?</p>
Attribution	<p>Are characteristics of participants attributed to the quotation? (e.g. 'young unmarried male', 'rural woman')</p>
Ethics	<p>Is the quotation anonymous?</p> <p>Can the participant be identified from any information in the quotation or the label?</p>

## Presentation format

### Narrative format

A common format for presenting qualitative research results is to use narrative description. This involves writing detailed accounts of issues, their interlinkages and meanings in the context of the study objectives. Narrative descriptions allow you to provide rich contextual detail, delineate issues,

identify nuances, explain perspectives and provide depth in understanding the phenomenon studied. The narrative text is often interspersed with quotations from participants or descriptive case studies that present the issues within the life context of study participants. However, narrative descriptions are often text dense and can become tedious to read, therefore they are most effective when there is a clear structure or argument that guides the reader through the various parts of the results and make clear how they contribute to the study objectives.

You can make narrative descriptions more engaging by varying the presentation format. Godfrey and Townsend (2008) present brief case studies in a text box format to highlight different strategies for coping amongst the elderly (see [Figure 13.1](#)). This format not only clearly delineates the three types of coping found in the study, but each mini case study also provides depth and context about that coping strategy. This type of format enables you to present results in a concise and compelling way and still convey depth, variation and context of the issues.

## **Visual format**

Qualitative study results can also be presented in a visual format. This may range from presenting issues in a structured list, using a flow diagram to depict a process, or developing a conceptual framework to explain the phenomenon studied. A visual format can help to clarify complex results, show core linkages between different components of data, and convey the central message of the results, thereby making the results more accessible to readers. Whether or not you use diagrams to present your study findings will depend on the nature of your results and if these lend themselves well to visual presentation. There are many way to present study results visually. Effective diagrams facilitate communication of the study results by providing a visual summary of the core message of the study, but they also need to be embedded in the narrative argument that structures the results and be based on systematic analysis of data.

Ideas for visual presentation of your results often begin during data analysis. As you analysed your data you may have developed sketches to identify how issues linked together. These sketches may have helped you

understand your data during the process of analysis and often can be further developed into diagrams that present the study findings in visually compelling ways. You may use several diagrams in the results section, but their overuse diminishes their effect. There are infinite possibilities for visual presentation of study findings some examples are described below.

*A case study* can describe the experiences of a single participant to convey the overall message of the study results or several case studies may be used to highlight contrasting experiences. [Figures 13.1](#) and [13.2](#) shows different presentations of case studies.

*A structured list* can bring together a group of issues around a particular topic. The list may be ranked, grouped or simply present attributes of an issue. [Table 13.5](#) shows a structured list highlighting the problems with a recreation facility.

*A typology* can categorize distinct types of behaviour, strategies or participants. For example, a study on schoolteachers may classify teachers by their teaching style, such as ‘a police officer’, ‘a friend’, ‘a counsellor’. [Table 13.6](#) shows a typology of ‘protection styles’ for contraception amongst seasonal workers in Britain.

*A flowchart* can highlight a process by showing the stages or sequencing of events depicted in data. [Figure 13.3](#) shows the process of sex trafficking from Nepal to India, highlighting four key pathways in which girls are trafficked.

*An inductive model* is a conceptual framework that describes or explains the study phenomena. It demonstrates how the study findings link together to understand the issues more conceptually. It is usually presented as a diagram (see [Figure 11.5](#) in [Chapter 11](#) for examples).

*A theoretical framework* may depict a new theory developed in the study or how the study findings extended an existing theory (see [Chapter 10](#)). [Figure 13.4](#) uses an ecological framework to explain the influences of micro-credit loans on women’s lives.

Figure 13.1 Example presentation of case studies

### How People Managed Before the Intermediate Care Episode

#### Out and About

Ms. Bennet, 77 years old, lived in sheltered housing just off a bustling main shopping center in the locality where she had lived all her life. Although she had no close family, she had a large circle of acquaintances and several close friends with whom she went on weekly shopping trips and to the theater and cinema. She also took an active part in social and leisure activities in the housing complex where she lived, attending coffee mornings, playing bridge, and doing bits of shopping for neighbors. Ms. Bennet had suffered from a long-term autoimmune disease characterized by fluctuating muscle weakness, diagnosed in early adulthood but controlled with medication. She described herself as being fit and active and did not really think of herself as "old".

#### Restricted to the Locality

Mr. McKenzie, 75 years old, lived alone in a council house in the same neighborhood where he had been for more than 30 years. Although he experienced multiple health problems (diabetes, hypertension, arthritis), he looked after himself with help from his son, who did the shopping. He no longer felt able to use the bus to travel any distance, but he had many friends in the neighborhood, and they got together to play dominoes or to chat in the local café. His daily life revolved around family and friends.

#### Restricted to the Home

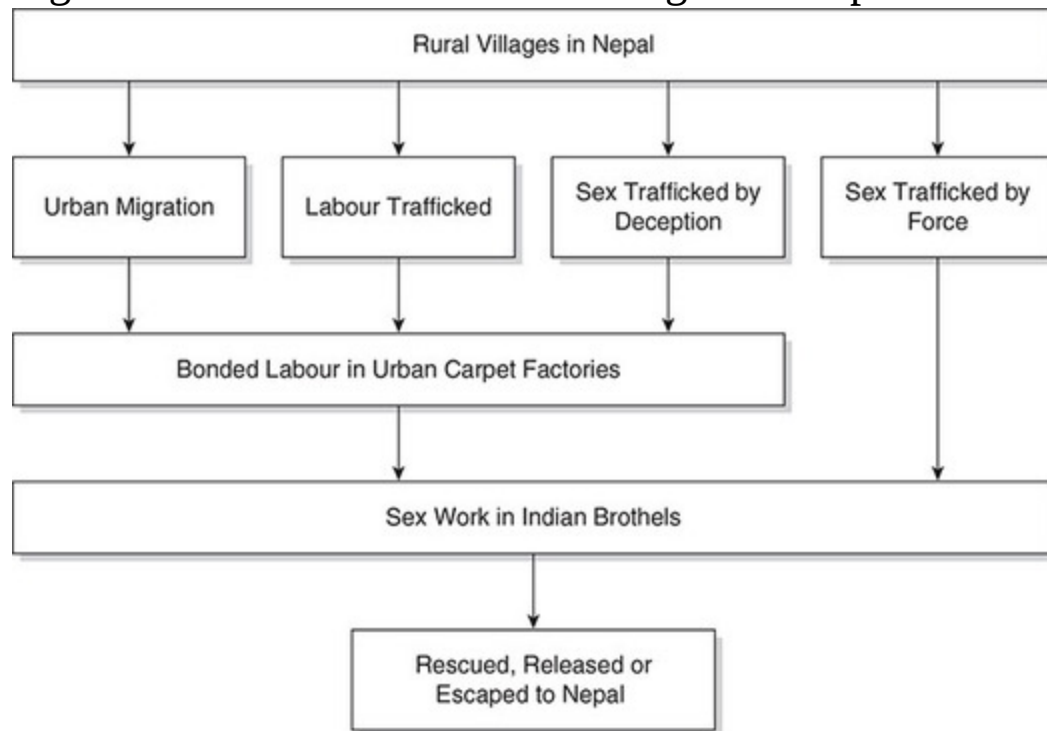
Ms. Beattie, 79 years old, lived alone in a council-rented flat that she had moved to some 35 years earlier, shortly before her husband suddenly died. She had no family, but a good friend lived upstairs, and she described others on the block as "very neighborly". She was registered blind and had emphysema and arthritis. She had not been out alone for more than 4 years. She left the house for only two reasons: to go to the day center twice weekly, for which she was collected in the minibus, and to get her pension at the post office a little way down the street, for which her friend went with her. Social services provided help with shopping; otherwise, she managed by herself.

*Source:* Reproduced with permission from Godfrey and Townsend (2008: 943)

### Figure 13.2 Case study of a migrant worker, India

Hanmath (not his real name) is originally from a village in Karnataka state in India, where he is a farmer. The state has had drought for several seasons, so Hanmath was unable to grow any crops to sell or to feed his family. One day a neighbour told him to go to another state, Goa, where it is easy to find work as a labourer. Because of Hanmath's desperate situation he decided to go to Goa, as he knew some of his relatives had also gone there to find work. He left his wife in the village with their three young children and promised to come back for them. At first he lived with a cousin and looked for work. The first few months were very difficult, as Hanmath could not speak the local languages (Hindi or Konkani) and he had to rely on others to translate for him. This made him feel vulnerable and dependent on others. One morning his cousin took him to the chemical factory where he worked and he got a job as a daily labourer. He changed jobs several times in the next two years but managed to get promoted to labour contractor. This is when Hanmath brought his family to Goa and they lived in a migrant settlement called Zarri. He was able to send his children to a school in the migrant settlement, which he prefers because they are amongst other migrants and will then learn their native language. Hanmath prefers to live in the Zarri settlement as he feels that it is not safe for the family to live outside, he has suffered abuse from the local community calling him derogatory terms for migrants, and he experienced discrimination at the health services for being a migrant. Hanmath has now lived in Goa for ten years, but still hopes to return to his village in Karnataka after he retires from work. He strongly believes that one should live one's last days peacefully in one's own village.

Figure 13.3 Process of sex trafficking from Nepal to India



Source: Adapted from Hennink and Simkhada (2004: 9). Reproduced with permission.

Figure 13.4 Benefits of micro-credit loans to women

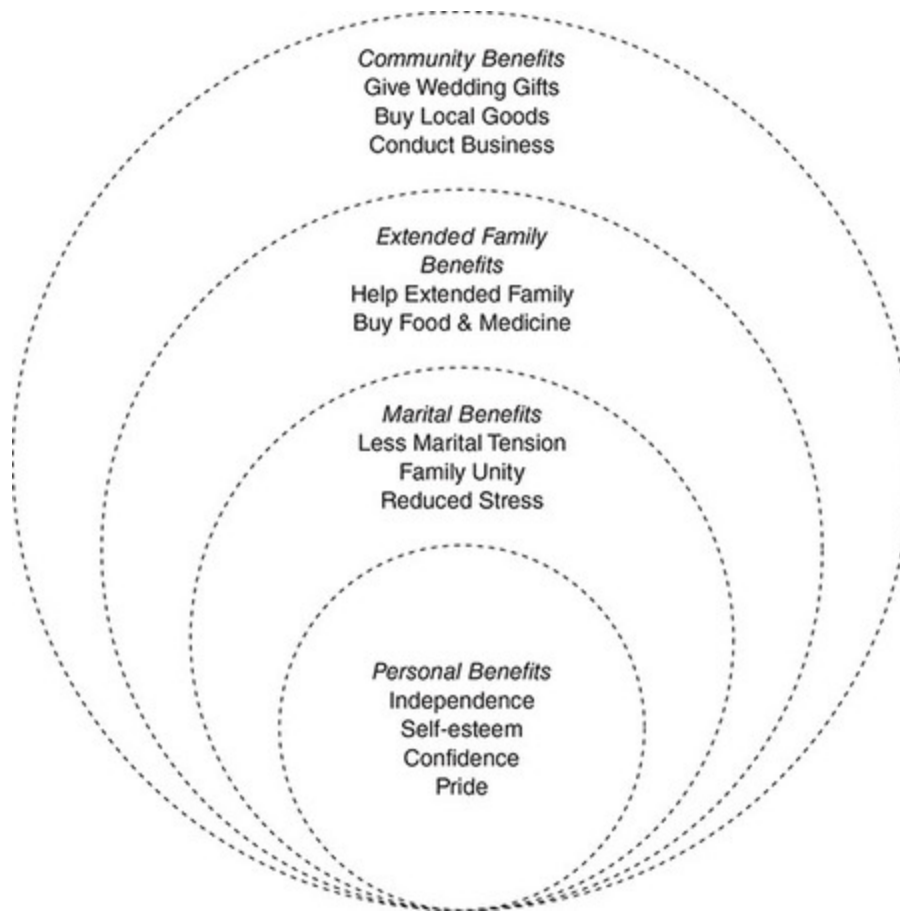


Table 13.5 A structured list of issues

Table 13.5 A structured list of issues

Problems with a recreation facility	
Location	Poorly lit at night
	Few car parking places
	Too far from bus stop
	Infrequent bus schedule
Hours	Limited opening hours on weekends (particularly Sunday)



Problems with a recreation facility	
	Inflexible opening hours during school holidays
Premises	Broken heating system
	Crowded bathroom space
	Long waiting time for showers
	No privacy in shower cubicles
	Broken/blocked soap dispensers
	No hair dryers in women's bathroom
Activities	Few classes for elderly
	Poorly supervised pool area
	Restricted childcare hours
	Crowded yoga classes
	Few low-impact classes
	Unsafe running equipment
	Restrictions on indoor running track
	No activities for younger children
Cost	Costly membership fees

Problems with a recreation facility	
	No one-time use fees, only annual membership fee
	No family discounts
	Expensive fees for personal trainer
	Extra charge for pool use

Table 13.6 Typology of ‘protection styles’ for contraception amongst seasonal workers, Britain

Table 13.6 Typology of ‘protection styles’ for contraception amongst seasonal workers, Britain

Pregnancy prevention	Refers to seasonal workers whose only motivation for contraceptive use is pregnancy prevention. Little concern for protection from sexually transmitted infections. Typical methods used: contraceptive pill, condom or withdrawal.
Relationship-oriented	Refers to seasonal workers whose motivation for contraceptive use is influenced by their relationship. They may use condoms first then use the contraceptive pill as relationship progresses.
Determined	Refers to seasonal workers who are absolutely determined to use condoms to protect against sexually transmitted infections, regardless of their partner’s preference or whether partner currently uses the contraceptive pill or other contextual influences
Situational	Refers to seasonal workers who <i>intend</i> to use a condom but are influenced by situational factors such as alcohol

	consumption, non-availability of condoms, or when physical pleasure overtakes rational intentions.
Passive	Refers to seasonal workers who leave contraceptive decisions to their partner.
Unconcerned	Refers to seasonal workers who show no concern for either pregnancy prevention or protection from sexually transmitted infection.

*Source:* Reproduced with permission from Hennink et al. (1999a: 47)

## Using numbers

A common issue in reporting qualitative research is whether results can be presented numerically. If you used content analysis or generated your data through methods such as free listing or pile sorts, then your results will involve the presentation of frequency counts, percentages or even simple statistical tests. Numerical results are the outcome of these approaches to analysing qualitative data. However, in other approaches to qualitative research (e.g. narrative analysis or grounded theory) the results are typically presented in narrative form, such as descriptions of issues, quotations from study participants, case studies, or a conceptual theory. In these types of qualitative studies, you may want to report the number of times an issue was mentioned; however we suggest considering this carefully. There are different views on the appropriateness of reporting numbers in qualitative study results, as described below.

A common stance is to avoid reporting numbers in qualitative research results. Instead focus on reporting the issues themselves – provide rich contextual detail on the nature of the phenomenon, its variation and nuances; describe how issues are patterned across the data; provide contextualized explanations that capture the complexity of issues; and use data extracts to reflect the language and emotions of study participants. This type of reporting of the results maximizes the use of the qualitative approach and allows you to say much more about your study phenomenon

than reporting the number of participants who said something. This is not to say that simple counting is not used at all in qualitative analysis. Making simple tally charts of issues is often used as an analytic tool to identify patterns of issues within the data. 'Simple counting techniques, theoretically derived and ideally based on members' own categories can offer a means to survey the whole corpus of data ordinarily lost in intensive, qualitative research' (Silverman, 2005: 220). However, it is not the intention to report this type of counting but rather to use it as an analytic strategy to distinguish different behaviours, pathways, or perspectives amongst participants that spurs further analyses on their contextual influences. Silverman (2005: 219) cautions that 'it is usually mistaken to count simply for the sake of counting. Without a theoretical rationale behind the tabulated categories, counting only gives a spurious validity to research.' Our advice is to remain true to the tradition in which qualitative data are collected and generally to avoid reporting qualitative data in numerical terms.

In some situations, you may indeed wish to convey the distributions of issues across the data. So, another approach is to use non-numerical terms to indicate the commonality of issues across your data, such as 'many', 'most', or 'few'. Using such descriptive terms instead of reporting numbers indicates the pervasiveness of an issue without the suggestion of statistical prevalence. However, some journal reviewers or editors may criticize this approach and request (perhaps mistakenly) that researchers present the actual numerical frequency of the issues reported. This can lead qualitative researchers to feel compelled to report the frequency of issues in addition to their narrative description. However, quantifying issues in narrative data can be misleading because it suggests to readers that data are representative and therefore results are generalizable in the statistical sense, as would be expected in quantitative studies. It also suggests that the frequency of issues in qualitative data represents their distribution in a broader population, which can be very misleading as this is not the intention or strength of most qualitative approaches. However, the decision on whether or how to present numbers in a qualitative study is up to you. If you decide to report frequencies, justify your reasoning for this and report numbers carefully. You may need to add qualifying text to avoid misinterpretation of the numerical data presented.

## **Presenting mixed methods results**

Qualitative and quantitative methods are commonly used together in mixed method research designs. Each approach generates a very different type of data. Therefore, one of the challenges in mixed methods research is to identify the most effective way to present the results of each type of data.

Presenting results of mixed methods research will be influenced by the type of study design used, the purpose of each method of data collection and the nature of the results from each approach. The data from each approach first need to be analysed according to the research paradigm in which they were collected – positivist or interpretive. Once the results of each type of data are generated, you need to identify the most effective way to present the results from each type of data.

A first decision is to identify whether data from one approach should lead the presentation of results. This will be guided by your study design and research objectives. For example, findings from the quantitative component may lead the results with qualitative data used to provide context; alternatively, the quantitative findings may be used only to identify the broad scope of the issues with the qualitative data leading the results to explore the phenomenon in greater depth.

Another decision is whether to integrate or separate the results of each type of data. Integrating results is effective when each approach focused on similar topics, such that you may present the prevalence of an issue using results from the quantitative data, then use the qualitative data to describe the context or experience of that issue. In this way the combined results present the study findings in a comprehensive and compelling way. One of the challenges of integrating results is that qualitative methods generate much more data and require more contextual explanation in the presentation of findings than do quantitative methods, requiring careful selection and concise presentation so as not to overwhelm the report with one type of data. Another issue in integrating results is that the findings from each approach may be contradictory. In this case, try to explore potential reasons for the discrepancy and present explanations for this. If contradictory findings cannot be explained, state this so that it can be explored by others

in future research. When integrating study results from different methods of data collection, the source of the data reported should be made clear for the reader, so that results can be interpreted correctly. This may seem obvious; however, when presenting results of interviews and focus groups the source of data may be unclear, similarly if presenting results from pile sort data and survey data both may be presented in numerical form.

Alternatively, results of each type of data may be presented separately. This approach is appropriate when the data collected from each approach does not overlap, and therefore cannot be integrated as described above. In these situations, you may present results by each method of data collection, such as presenting the results of a survey then report results of focus group discussions. Similarly, you may present results by different research objectives, if these aligned with a different type of data for each.

For examples of presenting the results of mixed methods research consider viewing articles from academic journals such as the *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* or *International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches*.

## **Discussion and conclusion sections**

The discussion section is where you interpret what your study results mean and discuss their implications. In many ways, writing the discussion section for a qualitative study is similar to other types of studies. The shape of your discussion section will be determined by the nature of your results and the requirements of the academic journal. There is no single strategy for writing a discussion section; here we describe the common elements of a discussion section.

It is common to begin the discussion section with a brief paragraph to restate the purpose of your study and your methodological approach to reorient the reader to your study goals. Then provide a concise statement of your results in one or two sentences to highlight the key outcomes rather than specific details. Underscore what is new, different or important about the study or the findings. You may highlight the focus on a new issue, a novel study design, the first use of a qualitative approach on the topic, or

how the study results provide novel insight into the phenomenon studied. Identifying how your study adds to the corpus of knowledge on the topic is a key criteria for publishing your work.

Most of the discussion section will contain your interpretation of what the study findings mean in the broader context of the academic literature. Describe how your study findings support the findings of similar studies, identify how they are different and try to explain why. Reflect on findings that are surprising and what this may mean – perhaps this is due to the study context, type of participants recruited or the result of a deeper understanding of the issues through using qualitative methods. Help the reader to interpret the study findings in light of the broader socio-cultural context of the study, the physical environment, available community resources and so on. The discussion should not repeat detail provided in the results section but interpret what the results mean in a broader context.

Highlight the implications of the study findings in terms of policy or programme recommendations, if applicable. Recommendations need to be well supported by your findings, feasible and contextually relevant. For example, a recommendation to build a new health clinic may not be feasible in resource-poor neighbourhoods, such as your study setting, but extending the skills of existing community nurses to meet the health needs highlighted by your study may be more feasible. An implication may also be the need for future research in specific areas to further understand the issues. You may also identify the theoretical implications of your study by referring back to the conceptual framework you developed at the outset of the study (in the ‘Design Cycle’). Reflect how well your study findings fit this framework, whether they are contextually different and why.

The discussion section typically includes some comment on the wider relevance of your study findings beyond the context of your particular study. While qualitative research is not generalizable in a statistical sense, it can have resonance outside the specific context of a study. Be clear on which aspects of the results are transferable to other contexts or populations and why. Often categories, concepts, processes and explanations developed in qualitative research have broader relevance and are transferable to other settings (Flick, 2009; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003; Silverman, 2011).

It is usual to describe any limitations of your study in the discussion or in a separate section thereafter. Doing so will not detract from the quality of your work, but add to its validity by ensuring that study results are understood within the limitations of your study. The main focus is to highlight any methodological limitations of the study (e.g. in the study design, study population, participant recruitment, data collection or analysis), or unforeseen fieldwork challenges that affected the research process (e.g. unusual weather conditions, civil unrest). A common pitfall in writing the limitations section for a qualitative study is to report the limitations of qualitative research in general (i.e. lack of generalizability, small sample sizes), rather than the limitations of *your* study specifically. Reporting the shortcomings of qualitative research is not informative as these issues are well known and anticipated when you selected a qualitative approach. Instead focus on reporting the study *design* limitations as these are the parts that you had control over, for example, your study may have focused only on women, therefore a valid study limitation is the exclusion of male perspectives (if relevant to the research topic). Wherever possible indicate to what extent the study limitations were minimized.

A conclusion section can be incorporated as the final paragraph of the results or more commonly a separate section. The conclusion is typically a short paragraph that summarizes the main objective and findings of the study and their significance. The conclusion may also distil the core ‘take-home’ message that you want readers to remember from your study.

## **After you write**

### **Responding to critiques of qualitative research**

When you present your qualitative study at a professional conference or submit an article to an academic journal you typically receive comments and questions about your study. These critiques provide valuable feedback on your study and can indicate how well you have conveyed the research process and study findings. How you respond to critiques of your work can determine whether or not your study is published, the grade you receive on a graduate thesis or how well the study is received at a conference.



Responding to critiques of qualitative research can be challenging; therefore, we focus this section on common critiques of qualitative research and our suggestions on some ways to respond.

Some critiques of qualitative research may provide editorial suggestions that can improve the structure, clarity and readability of your work. They may also ask project-specific questions, query your methodological decisions or offer further interpretation of the study results – all of which can lead to important revisions and improvements to your work. However, other critiques may reflect a reviewer's misunderstanding of qualitative research and the principles that guide it, and your work may be judged by inappropriate criteria. Often these critiques assess a qualitative study by standards of quantitative research and suggest changes that do not align with the nature of qualitative research. Experienced qualitative researchers have most likely received these type of comments, for example, suggestions that the sample size is too small, the study lacks generalizability, on the subjectivity of qualitative research or the lack of rigour due to the flexible process used. Responding to these type of critiques can be challenging for those less experienced in defending qualitative research, and often require thoughtful and convincing responses rather than any changes to your work. In responding to these types of comments, we encourage you to use the principles of the interpretive paradigm. These principles guided your study to ensure scientific rigour and therefore provide the strongest justification for defending the validity of your work. Below we provide examples of common critiques of qualitative research and demonstrate how you can respond by referring to the principles of the interpretive paradigm that we describe throughout this book. Writing transparently about your research process and providing methodological justifications (as suggested in this chapter) can also reduce the likelihood of receiving these types of comments.

## **Sample size**

One of the most common critiques of qualitative research is to question a 'small' sample size. Although your sample size may be adequate, it may lack justification. In response to this type of critique, you may indicate that large samples are not needed for the goals of qualitative research, which

does not seek statistical inference but a contextual understanding of a phenomenon. You may describe how you applied the principle of saturation to determine an appropriate sample size for your study and indicate the parameters by which you deemed that saturation was achieved (see [Chapter 6](#)). You may describe the use of purposive sampling to actively seek variation in the sample, and the use of an inductive process to adjust recruitment to include information-rich sources in the sample. These approaches to participant recruitment follow principles of the interpretive paradigm and lead to an adequate sample size for a given study – therefore they also provide the strongest justification of the sample size in your study. In addition, you may cite methodological experiments on saturation (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al., 2016, 2019), which demonstrate saturation can be reached in relatively small samples and compare these with your sample size (see [Chapter 6](#)) in your response to these types of critiques.

## **Generalizability**

Another common critique of qualitative research is that the results are not generalizable. In response to this type of critique, you may indicate that statistical inference is not the purpose of qualitative research and nor is it possible with small samples that are purposively recruited. Instead, highlight the appropriateness of a qualitative approach for your study objectives to gain a contextualized understanding of the phenomenon studied. You may also indicate how concepts found in the study are transferable to other contexts or study populations, thus providing broader relevance of the study findings beyond the study context itself (see [Chapters 6](#) and [11](#)).

## **Iterative process**

The iterative process of qualitative research allows flexibility to change or refine data collection strategies as the study progresses. It is common to receive a critique of this approach questioning the reliability of results when the strategies for data collection changed or evolved during the fieldwork. It may be suggested that making changes to the study population, participant recruitment, or research instrument during data collection compromises the

validity of the study data. In response to this type of critique, you may indicate that using an iterative process is a *strength* of qualitative research rather than a limitation. You may explain that the iterative process is also inductive, whereby changes are guided by data as it is being collected, therefore changes made are *evidence-based* by using data to guide the changes and therefore this process adds rigour and validity to the study. The inductive process enables you to: recruit additional ‘information-rich’ participants to the study sample or seek diversity of experiences; refine the research instrument to capture issues of relevance to the study population; or identify saturation to determine an adequate sample size – all of which *strengthen* the rigour of the study and validity of the data. You could even go as far as to say that a qualitative study that does *not* use an iterative process has limitations.

## Subjectivity

Qualitative research is often criticized for its ‘subjective nature’. While it may be argued that all research is subjective in some way (see [Chapter 2](#)), this criticism is usually aimed at qualitative studies. A critique may suggest that data quality are compromised due to the subjective influence of researchers, for example in designing the interview questions or in asking impromptu follow-up questions that may be biased towards the researchers’ own assumptions. In responding to critiques about subjectivity in qualitative research, you may indicate how the research team practised reflexivity to balance subjective expectations of the study topic or study population (see [Chapter 3](#)). You may also detail the procedural strategies used to gain the emic perspective of study participants, such as asking open-ended questions to allow participants to share their own perspectives, using active listening and probing to go deeper into issues raised by participants, and inductively refining the research instrument to follow issues of relevance to study participants. These strategies all minimize subjectivity and prioritize capturing study participants’ own perspectives on study issues.

## Reducing words

Qualitative research is often criticized for being overly lengthy, and a critique may suggest reducing ‘unnecessary detail’ in the methods or results sections. Most writing can be more concise with careful review, so a first response might be to identify any areas of redundancy or repetition. After this, you may respond to requests for reducing the length of a methods section by arguing that transparency is needed to demonstrate procedural rigour in the research process that contributes to data validity. You may also explain that there is no standard way to conduct qualitative research and therefore it is necessary to describe and justify the procedures used to demonstrate the scientific rigour of the study. In response to reducing the length of the results section, you may explain that contextual detail is warranted so that the results are interpreted correctly by readers. You may also identify ways to present results in visual format to reduce the volume of narrative text (see earlier section in this chapter) or reduce the reliance on quotations in the results.

## **Evaluating quality**

You may ask two broad questions to assess the quality of writing in qualitative research: Does the writing effectively synthesize the study findings beyond a list of issues or string of quotations? Is sufficient procedural detail given to assess the scientific rigour of the study? The following list highlights a range of questions to guide you in assessing the quality of written qualitative research for academic audiences. It includes aspects that are generic to academic writing and those that are specific to writing qualitative research.

### *Appropriate*

Is the writing (style, length and format) appropriate for an academic audience?

Is the interpretive paradigm reflected appropriately in the writing?

### *Transparent*

Is there sufficient description of the study background and methodology used?

Are any underlying theories described?  
Are the implications of the study clearly outlined?

### *Coherent*

Is there coherence between the study aims, methods, results and implications?  
Is there a clear narrative or argument to frame the study findings?  
Are the results of mixed methods research presented coherently?

### *Grounded*

Are the results presented well supported by the data?  
Is there sufficient depth, detail and nuance to the study findings?

### *Interpretive*

Are data used to highlight the 'voices' of participants?  
Is there evidence of inductive techniques?

### *Reflexive*

Is the positionality of the researchers described?  
Is reflexivity discussed?

### *Culturally appropriate*

Does the writing adequately reflect context (e.g. cultural, physical, methodological, theoretical)?

### *Ethical*

Are ethical principles evident in writing of study results?

### Key points

- Writing has dual functions in qualitative research – as analytic process and presentation of findings.

- Writing can be challenging due to the volume and complexity of qualitative study findings.
- Identify the core findings, set of issues, or main storyline of your results that you wish to present.
- Clarify the requirements of academic writing – style, format, length, content.
- Your writing may be structured by the tasks outlined in the qualitative research cycle.
- Provide a transparent and comprehensive description of the study methods, from which readers can understand the research process and your attention to rigour.
- Develop an effective argument or structure within which to present your study findings.
- Use quotations from study participants thoughtfully and to support your underlying argument.
- Qualitative study findings can be effectively presented in narrative and visual formats.
- Use the principles of the interpretive paradigm to respond to critiques of your qualitative study.

## **Exercises**

1. Synthesize your results to distil the overall message of your study and identify how the study findings support this message.
2. Write your methods section and ask a colleague to review it for gaps in process or logic.
3. Identify the different ways to present your study results, including both narrative and visual formats.

Further reading

## **On methods**

Belgrave, L., Zablotsky, D. and Guadango, M. (2002) “‘How do we talk to each other?’ Writing qualitative research for quantitative readers’, *Qualitative Health Research*, 12 (10): 1427–39. A useful perspective on writing qualitative research for quantitative audiences.

Mason, J. (2002) *Qualitative Researching* (2nd edn). London: Sage Publications. Chapter 9 contains an excellent discussion on making arguments with qualitative data.

Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., McNaughton Nichols, C. and Ormston, R. (2014) *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. London: Sage Publications. See chapter on ‘Writing qualitative research’ for a comprehensive discussion on writing and presenting qualitative research.

## **On field practice**

Hay, J., Shuk, E., Cruz, G. and Ostroff, J. (2005) ‘Thinking through cancer risk: Characterising smokers’ process of risk determination’, *Qualitative Health Research*, 15 (8): 1074–85. A good example of writing participant recruitment, data collection and data analysis.

Hirsch, J., Higgins, J., Bentley, M. and Nathanson, C. (2002) ‘The social constructions of sexuality: Marital infidelity and sexually transmitted disease – HIV risk in Mexican migrant community’, *American Journal of Public Health*, 92: 1227–37. This article shows effective formats to present the study methods and results.

Polzer, R. and Miles, M. (2007) ‘Spirituality in African Americans with diabetes: Self-management through a relationship with God’, *Qualitative Health Research*, 17 (2): 176–88. An exceptionally well-written example of a grounded theory study, with transparent detail on the process of developing a theoretical model, and examples of presenting findings in visual formats.

Rajabiun, S., Mallinson, R., McKoy, K., Coleman, S., Drainoni, M., Rebholz, C. and Holbert, T. (2007) “‘Getting me back on track”: The

# Postscript Assessing Quality in the Qualitative Research Cycle

Assessing the quality of qualitative research is an important part of the research process. For qualitative research, quality is reflected throughout the research process – all the tasks conducted and decisions made contribute to the overall rigour of a study to produce valid results. Throughout this book, we describe how to design, conduct, analyse and report qualitative research in a rigorous manner. We also include at the end of most chapters some criteria for quality assessment in study design, data collection and data analysis.

We presented our qualitative research cycle (QRC) as a framework for conducting qualitative research, and here we describe how the QRC can also be used to reflect on the quality of a qualitative study. Three core principles are reflected in our qualitative research cycle, which we believe are important indicators of quality. These principles are interconnected and include:

- *coherence* between the tasks conducted across the three cycles in the QRC;
- applying *deductive and inductive* reasoning across all cycles; and
- practising *reflexivity* throughout the research process.

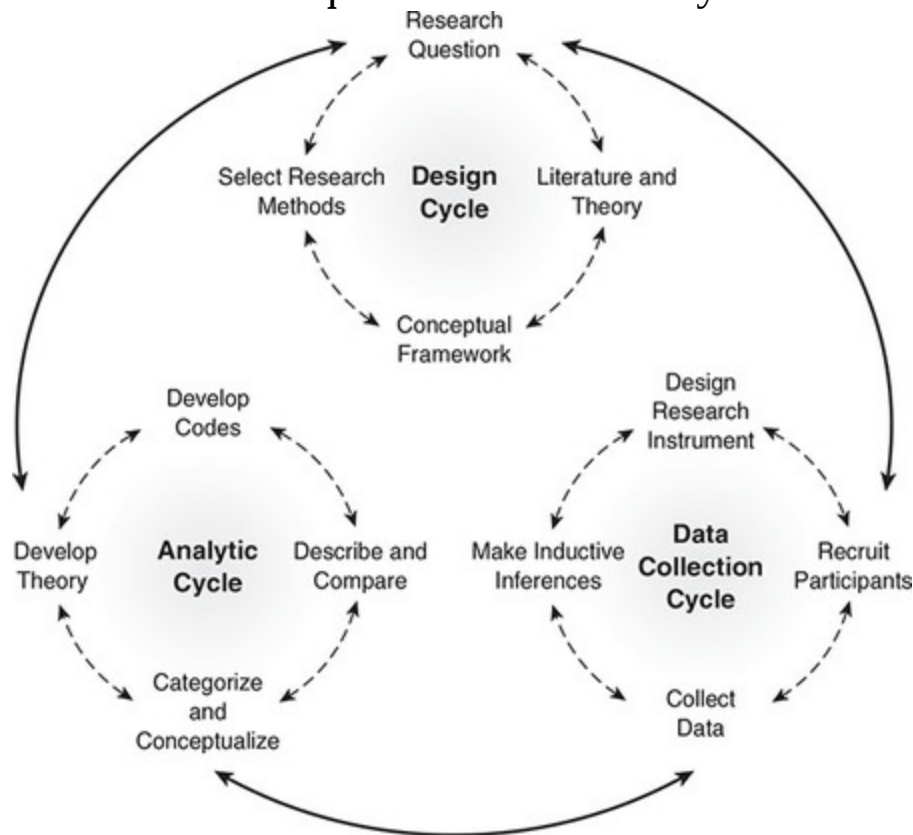
We describe below how each of these principles are embedded in our QRC and can be used to reflect on the quality of a qualitative study. Overall, the three principles of coherence, inductive and deductive reasoning, and reflexivity are closely interconnected and together form the basis for assessing quality in our qualitative research cycle. We see the principles of coherence and deductive and inductive reasoning as the end goals for quality in a qualitative study, and practising reflexivity as a tool to reach these goals throughout the research process. Critical reflection throughout the research process can guide researchers to develop coherence across the qualitative research cycle, use inductive and deductive reasoning to strengthen a study and manage subjectivity throughout the study.



# Coherence in the QRC

Coherence refers to the inter linkages between the tasks conducted in each of the cycles of our qualitative research cycle. When tasks conducted in one cycle are integrated into subsequent cycles, a study becomes cohesive and well-integrated, which is a fundamental component of quality.

## Hutter–Hennink qualitative research cycle



To assess whether there is coherence in a study, consider how the tasks conducted in one cycle defined or refined the tasks conducted in other cycles, so that clear interlinkages can be demonstrated. For example, how were the theoretical concepts from the design cycle operationalized in the data collection cycle, how did these concepts influence tasks in the analytic cycle, and how were the concepts reflected in the study findings? Identifying the interlinkages across the three cycles reflects rigour throughout the research process. There are many interlinkages that could be identified, which will likely differ between various studies, so we encourage actively identifying these interlinkages in your study to demonstrate the

coherence of concepts or tasks throughout the research process. Coherence can then be clearly demonstrated when reflecting and writing about the research process in an article or report. We also encourage being attentive to areas where there is little or no coherence in the research process and to reflect on the reasons for this. For example, if concepts from the design cycle are not well integrated into the data collection instrument, or if the methods of data collection selected do not fit the research questions, there will be limited coherence in the study, which reduces its quality.

An important component of coherence is identifying whether and how an iterative process was used. Using an iterative process is a core principle of qualitative research and an indicator of quality. To assess the iterative process, consider, for example, how data collection was shaped by the other tasks in the data collection cycle and by tasks in other cycles. For example, how did data collection refine the study instruments or influence participant recruitment in the data collection cycle? How did data collection refine the research question or concepts in the design cycle? How did data collection begin to shape data analysis in the analytic cycle? Using an iterative process strengthens a qualitative study by using data itself to shape, refine and direct the study; it allows the voices of study participants to guide and focus the study to explore issues in much greater depth – it is therefore a critical criterion of quality in all three cycles of the QRC.

## **Deductive and inductive reasoning in the QRC**

Both deductive and inductive reasoning are applied throughout the research process in our qualitative research cycle. We believe that the integration of deductive and inductive reasoning is a core strength of our approach and thus a key component of quality. Deductive and inductive reasoning is not only present within each of the cycles of our qualitative research cycle (as described throughout this book) but also across the three cycles as we describe here.

In the design cycle, deductive reasoning is dominant in order to embed relevant theoretical concepts and the research questions into a conceptual framework. Although the (deductive) conceptual framework initially guides tasks conducted in the data collection cycle, the conceptual framework is

also refined (inductively) by data collection to reflect concepts raised by study participants. Thus, inductive and deductive processes operate between the design and data collection cycles. In the data collection cycle, inductive approaches are dominant to capture the emic perspective on the research issues. However, data collection begins deductively by operationalizing concepts from the design cycle, but it then transforms to an inductive process once data collection begins. Thus deductive and inductive reasoning are integrated across both cycles. In the analytic cycle, there is also an interplay between deductive and inductive reasoning. Data are analysed through both a deductive framework (from the design cycle) and an interpretive framework (from the data collection cycle), thus incorporating induction and deduction from both the design and data collection cycles into the analytic cycle. So, inductive and deductive reasoning are strongly present throughout our qualitative research cycle and are used to integrate the cycles in a cohesive way.

For quality assessment we encourage reflecting on how inductive and deductive processes were incorporated across the whole research process, how the integration of deductive and inductive reasoning strengthened the study, and how inductive and deductive reasoning were applied across the different cycles to integrate study design, data collection and data analysis. We encourage transparency in reporting inductive and deductive strategies used in a qualitative study, which can be done most directly when reflecting on the research process by indicating when, how and why deductive or inductive approaches were used and how they were integrated throughout the study. For example, consider describing how the conceptual framework of the study both guided data collection and was refined by data collection; how data collection began with deductive concepts and then transformed into an inductive process; and how data analysis involved a balance of deductive and inductive processes.

## **Reflexivity in the QRC**

Reflexivity involves conscious self-reflection by researchers to assess whether their subjective knowledge, expectations or interpretations may have influenced any part of the research process. Showing awareness of these influences and making adjustments to the research process is a critical

component of quality in a qualitative study. We encourage practising reflexivity throughout our qualitative research cycle and being transparent in reporting how subjectivity was managed.

Using reflexivity throughout the qualitative research cycle encourages continual attention to subjectivity so that adjustments are made at each stage of the study. In the design cycle, consider the characteristics of the research team, their experience or perceptions of the study, and how this may shape their approach to the research tasks. Also consider the disciplinary background of the researchers and whether this guided them towards including certain theories or conceptual frameworks in the study design and not others. In the data collection cycle researchers have the most direct contact with study participants and therefore the greatest potential for subjective influences on data generation. At this stage of the study, consider whether certain preconceptions of study participants guided the design of the research instrument, whether researchers' positionality and power may influence participation in the study, and how the location of data collection or the interviewer's question framing and probing may have influenced the data generated. In the analytic cycle, interpreting data and developing explanatory theory have the potential for subjective interpretation. Reflexivity in data analysis involves continual and conscious self-reflection on the development of codes, coding data and interpreting data during analysis. Demonstrating how researchers balanced subjectivity in the interpretation of data, presentation of results and development of implications is a critical element of quality in a qualitative study. Overall, reflexivity does not involve using checklists of tasks but thinking critically to reflect on the actions taken during the research process and their implications on data generated in the study. Our examples here provide a starting point for considering reflexivity to lead to a habit of being reflexive in qualitative research.

Assessing reflexivity in qualitative research requires that researchers are transparent in writing about the research process, highlighting the potential for subjectivity and describing adjustments made to maintain validity in data and results. Reflective thought and resulting adjustments to research tasks are often overlooked when presenting qualitative research; however, these are important indicators of quality in a qualitative study.

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# Glossary

## **Action**

Within the participatory approach to qualitative research, action refers to an intervention based on the qualitative research findings that is co-designed by all stakeholders with the objective to achieve social change.

## **Active listening**

An interviewing strategy used to generate rich data that involves listening to a participant's response and asking specific follow-up questions based on the response to go deeper into the issues raised by a participant.

## **Analysis plan**

A project-specific plan of analytic tasks to guide the analysis of data and focus on responding to the research question or study objective.

## **Analytic cycle**

A component of the overall qualitative research cycle that comprises core tasks of qualitative data analysis towards developing inductive theory.

## **Anonymity**

The process of removing all identifying information of the participants before data analysis and reporting findings.

## **Beneficence**

An ethical principle whereby researchers strive to maximize the benefits of research for wider society, and minimize the potential risk for study participants.

## **CAQDAS**

Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software.

## **Case study analysis**

Case study analysis involves narrative analysis on a single case through developing a synopsis of events and associated meanings and identifying the core narrative of the experience.

### **Categorization**

An analytic task that involves grouping codes with similar characteristics together to represent a broader concept, which may become components of an explanatory theory.

### **Code**

Codes capture topics, issues or concepts in data, and are used to index data for analysis (this is called 'coding').

### **Codebook**

An evolving list of all the codes that will be used to label (or code) data that typically includes the code name and instructions on how to use each code.

### **Coding**

A process of indexing data by a set of codes (or labels) to enable retrieval of text on specific topics for analysis.

### **Coherence**

Refers to the interlinkages within and between each of the sub-cycles of our qualitative research cycle, to ensure a study becomes cohesive and well integrated.

### **Conceptualization**

An analytic task that involves understanding how individual components of data are linked together into a broader conceptual framework to help understand or explain a phenomenon as a whole.

### **Confidentiality**

An ethical principle to maintain the confidentiality of information collected from study participants, typically through removing personal identifiers, restricting data access, and secure data storage.

### **Constant comparative method**

Part of the grounded theory method that involves a process of constantly comparing and contrasting data at every stage of analysis to identify patterns and explanations.

**Content analysis**

Content analysis involves counting and quantifying elements in qualitative data (e.g. words, images, concepts).

**Data collection cycle**

A component of the overall qualitative research cycle that comprises the core tasks and inductive process of qualitative data collection.

**Deductive conceptual framework**

A framework that presents the different theoretical concepts that guide the research in the form of a process diagram.

**Deductive reasoning**

A 'top down' approach of deriving an explanation or hypotheses from existing literature or theory.

**Deference effect**

When a study participant says what they think an interviewer wants to hear rather than voicing their own opinion about an issue (also known as 'social desirability bias').

**Design cycle**

A component of the overall qualitative research cycle that comprises the core tasks in the design phase of a qualitative study.

**Discourse analysis**

Discourse analysis focuses on how language, expressions, societal expectations and structures construct a social reality (or discourse) around a specific phenomenon.

**Discussion guide**

The data collection instrument used in focus group discussions, comprising topics or questions used by the moderator to guide the discussion.



**Embeddedness**

A characteristic of the participatory approach to qualitative research that helps to understand and interpret how the perspectives of study participants are embedded in their relational, institutional and cultural contexts. It is often operationalized by involving relevant societal stakeholders in a participatory study.

**Emic perspective**

Refers to the 'insider's' perspectives, typically the views, opinions and behaviours of the study population, and the subjective meanings that they attach to their experiences.

**Epistemology**

Refers to the questions: What is represented as knowledge? What is the relationship between the researcher and study object? and What counts as evidence?

**Etic perspective**

Refers to the 'outsider's' perspective, typically the researcher's perspective, opinions and beliefs.

**Field diary**

A written record of the researcher's own thoughts, reactions and interpretations that is used specifically in the method of observation and in qualitative fieldwork in general.

**Field notes**

A written record of the people, places and activities observed by the researcher when using the method of observation, and in qualitative fieldwork in general.

**Focus group discussion**

A method of qualitative data collection involving an interactive discussion between six to eight pre-selected participants, led by a trained moderator and focusing on a specific set of issues.

**Gatekeeper**

Refers to prominent and influential people in a local community who can influence community members to participate in a study.

**Grounded theory**

Grounded theory is an approach to collecting and analysing qualitative data to develop empirical theory to explain phenomena, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

**Group probe**

A strategy used in focus group discussions to promote interaction between group members, whereby the moderator uses an issue raised by one participant to seek the reaction of other group members.

**Harm minimization**

An ethical principle to ensure that research participants are not harmed in any way by participating in a study.

**Hawthorne effect**

A type of reactivity or observer effect, whereby study participants may modify or improve their behaviour in response to knowing they are being observed.

**In-depth interview**

A method of qualitative data collection that uses an unstructured or semi-structured format to collect detailed narrative data from a study participant.

***In-vivo* code**

A code name that uses a term, phrase or metaphor directly from the data that generally refers to a specific concept, behaviour or object.

**Inductive conceptual framework**

A conceptual model, based on empirical data, that explains the research findings and demonstrates how inductive concepts link together to understand the study phenomenon.

**Inductive inferences**

A process used during qualitative data collection, whereby initial data collected guides further data collection to initiate a circular process, which enables deeper exploration of the phenomenon studied.

**Inductive reasoning**

A 'bottom up' approach of using empirical data to describe, explain or understand a phenomenon.

**Inductive theory**

Inductive theory is a set of inter-linked concepts derived from empirical data that provides a framework for understanding and explaining some phenomenon.

**Informed consent**

An ethical principle to ensure that research participants are informed about their role in a study, any potential risks of participating and that they voluntarily consent to participate.

**Inter-coder agreement (ICA)**

A measure of consistency between analysts in the coding of data, used to balance subjective interpretation in coding.

**Interpretive paradigm**

A research paradigm based on understanding people's lived experience from their own perspective, often called the 'emic perspective' which guides the conduct of qualitative research. It includes studying subjective meanings that people attach to their experiences. The paradigm emphasizes importance of subjective interpretation and observation in understanding social reality.

**Justice**

An ethical principle that emphasizes treating research participants in a just and fair manner.

**Methodology**

A set of principles that indicate how we gain knowledge: the research methods, procedures and practices used to study a social phenomenon.

**Mixing methods**

Refers to research designs that combine different methods, which may include quantitative and qualitative methods or mixing various qualitative methods in a single study.

**Moderator**

The key person who leads and manages the discussion in a focus group.

**Motivational probes**

Short, verbal prompts used by an interviewer to encourage the interviewee to continue talking (e.g. a-ha, m-hm, ok).

**Narrative analysis**

Narrative analysis focuses on understanding people's own constructions of their lives and experiences, whereby each text is examined as a whole to maintain the narrative flow and context of each individual's experience.

**Non-directive interviewing**

An approach to data collection, used in focus group discussions, that moves away from interviewer-dominated questioning towards generating data through spontaneous discussion between participants.

**Non-participant observation**

A type of observation where the researcher only observes study participants, without participating in any activities with them.

**Ontology**

Refers to the questions: How do we view the social world? and What does reality look like?

**Open-ended question**

A type of interview question designed to allow interviewees to answer from their own experience, knowledge or feelings, rather than leading them to answer in any particular way.

**Paradigm**

The lens through which we interpret reality. An approach to doing research that encompasses a specific set of guiding principles on ontology, epistemology and methodology.

### **Participant observation**

A type of observation that involves *both* observing and participating in activities of the study participants.

### **Participant recruitment**

Strategies for inviting sampled people to participate in a study.

### **Participant-based action cycle**

A participatory cycle added to the qualitative research cycle consisting of involving participants and stakeholders to co-define a specific social change objective; co-designing and co-implementing an action; and evaluating the social change action.

### **Participatory approach to qualitative research**

A research approach aiming at both theory development *and* social change, that requires involving study participants and other societal stakeholders in the research process from the study design onwards.

### **Participatory design sub-cycle**

A sub-cycle of the design cycle, to be applied when conducting qualitative research that aims to achieve both academic and social change outcomes. It consists of four steps: embedding the research problem in society; involving participants and stakeholders; co-defining a social change problem; and co-defining the social change objective and question.

### **Participatory qualitative research cycle**

Refers to the elements of the participatory approach to qualitative research that are integrated into the qualitative research cycle: the participatory design sub-cycle; the processes of validation and dissemination of research findings; and the participant-based action cycle where research findings are transformed into action/intervention – in collaboration with other societal stakeholders- and can lead to social change.

**Participatory validation**

A process of validating the study findings with participants and other societal stakeholders.

**Pilot-test**

Involves testing the effectiveness of a data collection instrument by conducting a mock interview, reviewing the outcome and modifying the instrument where needed.

**Positionality**

The way researchers portray themselves during data collection, which can influence data generated.

**Positivist paradigm**

A research paradigm based on the principles of objectivity, measurement, and the ontology of a single factual reality, which guides much quantitative social science research.

**Probability sampling**

Strategies for selecting a sample that is statistically representative of a broader population, so that study results can be extrapolated to a parent population.

**Purposive sampling**

Non-probability based sampling used in qualitative research, involving purposefully selecting participants with specific characteristics to provide data richness and sample diversity.

**Qualitative research cycle**

A conceptual framework depicting the cyclical process of qualitative research, comprising three interlinked cycles – design cycle, data collection cycle and analytic cycle.

**Quotation**

Exact words of study participants used to exemplify issues, convey language, expressions or emotions of study participants.

**Rapport**

A relationship of trust between an interviewer and interviewee that creates a comfortable environment for an interviewee to share their experiences openly.

**Reflexivity**

The practice of acknowledging the potential influence of the researcher (e.g. their background, values or assumptions) or the research setting on data generation and interpretation.

**Research ethics committee**

An independent, multidisciplinary and legally mandated committee that evaluates research proposals to ensure ethical guidelines are followed.

**Research objective**

A statement of the overall purpose, goal or aim of the study.

**Research question**

An overarching question that captures the research problem and will be answered by the study.

**Sampling**

How we select study participants from a study population.

**Saturation**

The point in data collection when no more new issues emerge, data begin to repeat with no added understanding of the issues, so that further data collection becomes redundant. Reaching saturation indicates the sample is adequate for a qualitative study.

**Snowball sampling**

A sampling strategy (also called 'chain sampling') whereby a study participant is asked to refer other eligible people to the study, often used to sample a 'hard to reach' study population.

**Social change**

Refers to changes in human behaviour and relationships that transform social and cultural institutions over a period of time.

**Stakeholder mapping**

An activity that involves mapping the interests of various individuals or groups in relation to the study goals, to understand how social change can potentially be reached.

**Stakeholders**

Individuals, groups or institutions in society that are important and influential for the research topic at stake and can be involved in a participatory qualitative research project to achieve a social change outcome of the study.

**Structured observation**

An approach to observation that involves using a structured checklist to observe and record specific items.

**Subjectivity**

Refers to the potential influence of the researcher or research setting on the data generated in a study.

**Theoretical sampling**

An approach to sampling used in grounded theory, whereby people or materials are selected to fill gaps in understanding of the phenomenon studied, as additional data continue to strengthen and refine an emerging theory.

**Thick description**

A term developed by Clifford Geertz (1973). It refers to using description to identify both an issue and its context, since the context provides the social or cultural meaning to the issue and thus leads to a 'thick' or detailed description of the issue.

**Topical probes**

Written prompts on an interview guide to remind the interviewer to ask on specific topics to go deeper into a question.

**Transcript**

A written version of a recorded interview or group discussion. A *verbatim* transcript is an exact word-for-word replica of the recording



and may have varying levels of detail in addition to spoken words (e.g. linguistic details or speaker interactions).

**Validating theory**

A process of verifying that a theory is empirically derived, well supported by data, and adequately fits the data.

**Verstehen**

Refers to the process to comprehensively understand the phenomenon from the perspective of the study participants.

**Vignette**

A short scenario or anecdote on an issue related to the study topic, used in an interview or group discussion to promote reaction and discussion.

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