Unit Introduction

Unit 3

Data collection techniques

Introduction

By now you have an understanding of what qualitative research is. You’re familiar with different qualitative research designs and the types of research questions that are best addressed by qualitative methods. In this unit we introduce you to techiniques for collecting data for qualitative studies. Through it we hope you will get to understand when and how to use at least three of the commonly used data collection techniques.

As you are aware, qualitative research seeks to understand peoples’ perspectives, or their “realities” (Green and Thorogood, 2004), and to explore the meaning of social phenomena as understood by people themselves, in their natural settings or contexts (Malterud, 2001). To achieve this, we collect data through interviewing people who are knowledgeable or are working in the area being studied. This enables us to document individual and group experiences, including personal knowledge and attitudes, perceptions of behaviour, and social, economic and cultural contexts - for better understanding of their realities. The three commonly used data collection techniques introduced in this Unit are interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and observation. We conclude the Unit by exploring a topic that you have already encountered – research ethics, which is of particular importance in relation to data collection.

It is obvious, but probably worth emphasizing, that research data may be derived from many sources, in many forms for different purposes. What you need to understand is what is appropriate when, and what form different data takes. The diagram below illustrates some of the wide variety of data sources used in qualitative research.



At the end of Unit 3, you should be in a position to:

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| * Provide a rationale for selecting a particular data collection technique.
* Demonstrate understanding of three data collection techniques (Interviews, Focus Group Discussions and Observation) and their use.
* Explain the ethical issues that should be considered in relation to data collection.
* Design tools for data collection.
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There are four Study Sessions in Unit 3:

SESSION 1 – Interviews

SESSION 2 – Focus group discussions

SESSION 3 – Observation

SESSION 4 – Ethical issues in qualitative data collection

This is the Unit in which you will really start engaging with qualitative research techniques: by the end of it, we hope you will be relatively confident to go out and collect your own data, but at the same time, to consider the ethical concerns related to collecting data.

**REFERENCES**

Green, J. and Thorogood, N. (2004). Ch1 – Qualitative Methodology and Health Research. *Qualitative Methods for Health Research*. London: Sage Publications: 3-26.

Malterud, K. (2001). Qualitative Research: Standards, Challenges, and Guidelines. *The Lancet*, 358: 483 - 488.

Session 1 – Interviews

Unit 3

Introduction

*“ A good interview is like a good conversation. Good conversation is a two-way affair. One person talks, while the other listens, responds, and encourages. In a good interview, the person who does most of the talking is the interviewee. While the interviewer asks questions and may talk a little about themselves, most of the time the interviewer listens, and the focus of the conversation is the experience of the interviewee. … Careful listening will lead to the interviewer asking good questions that make the interviewed person think, exposing what the person does, and how they understand it. The person will feel like they have been heard, and may comment that the interview allowed them to talk through the issue or subject of the interview in a depth that they have not done before”* (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005: 55).

This may sound rather simple, but interviewing is in itself an art, and requires lots of practice to engage respectfully but fairly intimately with a relative stranger. In the process, you are required to engage them, to listen rather than to add your own thoughts to the conversation and to ask open questions which do not lead the interviewee to answer in a prescribed fashion. “So you found the experience of the MPH fulfilling?” would be a leading question, since it would be hard to say “no”. In this session, we will explore different kinds of interviews, the rationale for choosing interviews for data collection, technical aspects and the preparation of interview tools. Part of your assignment is to conduct an interview, so look back at these requirements now so that you study with this outcome in mind.

Although it is quite common for researchers to use a combination of more than one data collection technique - interviewing, focus group discussions and observation reports -the most popular amongst them is interviewing. You are probably familiar with interviews of various sorts, on the radio or television, for a job, or as part of performance appraisal. However, in qualitative research, an interview is a purposeful discussion between two or more people, a researcher asking questions and getting answers from research participants (Robson, 2011; Kahn and Cannell, 1957 cited in Marshall and Rossman, 1995). The goal of the interview is to allow us to get an understanding of the other person’s world and to deeply explore the respondent’s point of view, feelings and perspectives (Patton, 2002; Guion, 2006).

Contents

1 Learning outcomes of this session

2 Readings

3 Why use interviews to collect data?

4 Interview types

5 The interview process

6 Session summary

7 References and further readings

Timing of this Session

This session has three readings and five tasks. It should take you about two hours to complete if you work with focus. In total, this should take you up to four hours.

1 Learning outcomes of this session

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| --- |
| **By the end of this session, you should be able to:** |
| * Define interviews.
* Identify different types of interviews.
* Discuss the rationale for using interviews in qualitative research.
* Design interview guides.
* Identify pitfalls of interviews.
 |

2 Readings

You will be directed to the readings below in the course of the session.

|  |
| --- |
| Legard, R., Keegan, J. and Ward, K. (2003). In-depth Interviews. In J. Ritchie and J. Lewis (Eds). *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers.* London: Sage Publications: 138-165.Robson, C. (2011). Ch 11 – Interviews and Focus Groups. *Real World Research.* Chichester: Wiley: 278-285.  |

3 Why use interviews to collect data?

Before we go into any depth about qualitative interviewing, bring your own study back to mind. Since the sampling exercise, you hopefully have a sense of the population and sample for your study; bring your study to mind and let us focus on when and why you might choose interviews as your data collection technique.

**Task 1 – Why would interviewing suit your data collection needs?**

Skim read the recommended readings on interviews in order to answer the following questions:

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| --- |
| READINGSLegard, R., Keegan, J. and Ward, K. (2003). In-depth Interviews. In J. Ritchie and J. Lewis (Eds). *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers.* London: Sage Publications: 138-165.Robson, C. (2011). Ch 11 – Interviews and Focus Groups. *Real World Research.* Chichester: Wiley: 278-285.  |

1. How would you justify using interviews for your study?
2. What are some of the common challenges that interviewers are likely to experience?
3. Identify the different modes of interviewing, e.g. telephone, and how data can be captured/recorded.
4. What are some of the common challenges that you are likely to experience when conducting interviews?

**Feedback**

The input that follows provides the feedback on Task 1.

### 3.1 Rationale for using interviews in qualitative research

Interviews are very useful when trying to gain a thorough understanding of a phenomenon because it allows complex questions to be asked. The interviews are therefore used to get an understanding of why people do things the way they do, for example utilisation of health services. The researcher might want to know why they are using or not using health services, how do they use them, to describe their experiences, or how do they perceive the services, what knowledge they have of a condition, etc. The general aim of an interview is to reveal existing knowledge through a dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee (respondent). The interviewee’s position is made more explicit through that dialogue, and it can be further developed (Nemarundwe 2010). If the interviewer needs clarification based on the respondent’s answer, he or she can ask questions in the interview. On the other hand, the interview method also allows the participant to feel comfortable in asking questions about the purpose of the research or to ask questions about the research study. Other data collection methods often involve extracting information and do not often provide respondents with opportunities to stimulate self-exploration and discovery, which the Interview method often does (Farrelly, 2013).

One can use qualitative interviews to augment findings from a structured cross sectional survey, e.g. in-depth interviews can be used to explore responses given in a questionnaire survey. Further to this, qualitative interviews are well suited to collecting data on sensitive topics such as sexual and reproductive health of young people, which participants may not want to talk about in a group setting. An unstructured interview can be used guided by a series of topics for each type of respondent. Qualitative research therefore allows for exploration of sensitive issues from multiple perspectives. Given the sensitivities and complexities involved in sexual and reproductive health, and the perceptions and viewpoints of various levels of health workers involved in it, research into questions of improving young people’s access to sexual health care is imperative.

### 3.2 Modes of interviewing

There are different techniques for doing interviews. The commonly used interview styles are face to face and telephone interviews, but because of the growth of new forms of communication such as internet and chat rooms, there have been of a number of other modes of interviews that have been introduced (Gibson and Brown, 2009). These include skype interviews, email interviews, instant text messages and others.

Face to face interviewing is one of the most popular modes of interviewing that can provide a rich form of data as the respondent is visible to the interviewer and can pick up on non- verbal cues. However, face to face interviewing may require the researcher to travel which can be costly and researchers may not always have the time. Interviewees are not given a long time to reflect on their answers which has its own advantages and disadvantages. Telephone interviewing is a quick and easy method when conducting several interviews. The limitation of telephonic interviewing are that non-verbal cues cannot be seen (Gibson and Brown, 2009).

### 3.3 Challenges

*Some of the challenges that you are likely to face when doing interviews include the following.*

* Interviewers rely on the interviewee’s willingness to give accurate and complete answers, but at times interviewees may refuse to participate and may give wrong information; they might feel inadequate that they do not know much on the topic, and they may feel embarrassed (Farrelly, 2013).
* Interviews can easily become intrusive for respondents, especially when asking about their personal life, and participants might not be comfortable to discuss personal experiences.
* Depending on what form of interviewing takes place, interviewing can be very time consuming and expensive compared to other data collection forms.
* Interviewing can be susceptible to bias which may present itself in the form of the participants’ desire to please the researcher, saying what they feel the researcher may want to hear; this is also affected by the tendency to say something rather than nothing, and the researchers’ views can influence the interviewees’ responses by conveying surprise or disapproval (Doody and Noonan, 2013).

### 3.4 Methods of data recording

*So how do you as an interviewer decide what method is appropriate?*

Choosing the most useful recording method for interviews is determined by the wants and needs of the person using the information. The ways in which data will be analysed is also determined by how the data has been recorded; thus methods of recording information should be well thought through (Polgar and Thomas, 1995).

**Task 2 – Reflect on ways of recording interviews**

What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of the different ways of recording interviews? Fill them in the table below.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Method of Recording Interviews** | **Advantages** | **Disadvantages** |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

#### Feedback

*The following are some of the key issues you should take note of.*

**Figure 1 – Data Recording**

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###  (Polgar and Thomas, 1995: 142)

***Video recording***

Video recordings provide lots of information about the interview. It allows the interviewer to go back and observe the non- verbal communication and create more detailed audio transcripts, hence providing very rich information that can be independently analysed. Video recording can be seen by participants as threatening which may result in less disclosure. Interviewees may feel uncomfortable and may refuse to participate because they fear that the interviewer may disclose things they say to others. This technique is especially challenging when topics include the disclosure of personal information or discussion around controversial issues (Polgar and Thomas, 1995).

***Audio Taping***

The advantage of the video recording method discussed earlier and the audio taping method is that both have an advantage over other interview recording methods. Audio recordings allow interviewers to prepare transcripts for analysis, provides maximum validity and allow the interviewer to gather rich data. The interviewer can go back to the recording multiple times, to catch things he or she might have missed. One of the disadvantages of audio taping is that there is still a high risk of interview refusal due to recording, i.e. participants might refuse to participants because of the fear of being recorded (Polgar and Thomas, 1995).

***Response Sheets/ Answer agendas***

A response sheet is useful when the interviewer wants to record information on a predesigned response sheet checklist. The checklist usually provides areas for writing answers to particular questions. The problem with a response sheet is that unless it is well-designed, there may be a problem in adapting, if the interview takes an unexpected turn. If the answers are not related in any way to the assumptions for which the response sheet checklist was designed, it becomes problematic. The researcher may not have a space to fit some unexpected data.

In general, recording data on the response sheet can be done at two different times: one is through immediate recording; this is likely to be more accurate; the other is later, after the interview; with the latter, the interviewer may not remember everything discussed (Polgar and Thomas, 1995). Furthermore, the use of response sheets place a strong reliance on the trustworthiness, recording skills and judgment of the interviewer. When using this method, there is also the possibility of bias arising from the interviewer’s “adapting” the information provided, to fit their own expectations. Re-analysis is not possible in using response sheets.

***Unstructured notes***

This is the most common way of recording information which most of us use at work and in our personal life. It is cheap and simple but may not give you such rich data as other recording methods. In an interview, it is advisable to have an assistant researcher who takes these sorts of notes, but it is not easy to capture everything during an interview; more difficult still is referencing the notes to a recording. With interviews, it is therefore important to see written notes as supplementary to the recorded data.

4 Interview types

The degree of structure of an interview is part of a continuum and varies according to how far you wish to pre-plan, control or guide the trajectory of the interview. It will of course vary according to your study purpose, or the “‘depth’ of response sought” (Robson, 2011: 278). The less structure the more flexibility the interviewee has (Robson, 2011). Take for instance a study focusing on women’s experiences of gender-based violence; perhaps you are conducting an exploratory study, and want the participants to have free rein: in this case, you will err on the side of openness.

Different types of interview could be used across the lifespan of a research study: you may want to start with an unstructured interview format to see where the respondents go with the topic, and then once you feel comfortable with where the research is going, you can pursue more structured interviewing. Once the researcher has a good idea of what information needs to be extracted, or has clear questions to ask, the interviews may become more structured. As the researcher’s understanding grows or changes, so does his or her familiarity with the setting; as new questions and issues are identified, the researcher’s need to use more or less structured questions, changes (Gibson and Brown, 2009). However, where a researcher has a general area of interest and concern, and does not know much about it, an unstructured interview will be more appropriate (Patton, 2002; Robson, 2011). We will now explore these different interview types.

Authors have categorised interviews in a variety of ways: whereas Robson (2011) suggests three types of interview, Patton (2002) differentiates informal conversational interviews, interviews based on interview guides and standardized open-ended interviews. Oppenheim (1992: 65) on the other hand bases his typology on purpose, and distinguishes exploratory, depth and free-style interviews\* from standardised interviews such as are used in public opinion polls, market research and government surveys.

\*Free-style interviews are a form of unstructured interview.

Robson’s (2011) typology is includes structured interviews, semi structured and informal interviews, and we will deal with all of these in turn.

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| --- |
| READINGRobson, C. (2011). Ch 11 – Interviews and Focus Groups. *Real World Research.* Chichester: Wiley: 278-280.  |

**Task 3 – Compare different types of interview**

Read the Introduction and the section on “Types and styles of interviews”. As you read, compare the three different types of interviews, focusing on the differences.

**Feedback**

We will present the feedback primarily in terms of the purpose to which the different interview types may be put. Robson’s typology follows.

**4.1 Structured interviews**

In general, structured interviews are a good choice when the interviewer has some basic knowledge about the topic being studied and can therefore frame appropriate questions to find out more. On the other hand, the unstructured interview is the best choice when the interviewer “does not know what he or she doesn’t know” and must therefore rely on the respondent to inform him or her (Westbrook, 1994). Polgar and Thomas (1994) use terms like “formal” and “informal” or “guided and “open ended” to differentiate between structured and unstructured interviews.

However, a common error in qualitative data collection is to regard an interview as simply a face to face survey, where a tightly designed set of discreet and separate questions are asked, each yielding relatively short, non-continuous answers. Robson (2011) discusses this sort of interview-based survey under fixed design data collection on pages 262-263. In the fixed design interview, a schedule of pre-planned questions with pre-determined rather than open-ended answers is administered in a pre-set sequence. The interviewee’s role is to provide concise answers which the interviewer records. Closed response questions involve a choice of answers provided by the interviewer. In a structured interview, the interviewer explicitly guides or directs the conversation (Polgar and Thomas, 1994).

On the other hand, structured interviews do have a place in qualitative research, and may be very effective in, conducting research with, for example, health professionals who are familiar with similar processes, e.g. nurses often used structured questionnaires in assessments and admission of patients (Doody and Noonan, 2013).

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| **Example 1 – Sample of a Flexible Design Structured Questionnaire****Research question: Why do TB patients default on their medications? What could help them not to do so?**1. How many times have you forgotten to take your medication since your last visit?
2. For how many days did you forget on the last occasion?
3. When you remember to take it, what helps you to do so?
4. When you forget, is there anything in your environment that causes you to forget?
5. How do you feel when you do not take them?
6. Do you think forgetting has any negative effect on your health?
7. What can you tell me about the negative consequences?
8. Have the DOTS team ever assisted you to remember?
9. Would there be any advantage to having a DOTS supporter visit you?
10. In what ways is your family supportive towards you since you have been ill?In what ways are they less supportive than you would like?
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**The advantages structured interviews are that** they can often take less time, and that the same information is collected for all respondents. The reliability and validity of structured interviews is consistently reported in the literature as higher than unstructured interviews. Another advantage of structured interviews is that it limits researcher subjectivity and bias. The researcher also has increased control over the topic and format of the interview, which makes it easier to code, compare and analyse data.

One of the limitations of structured interviews is that responses are mostly not recorded in the interviewee’s words, thereby reducing the naturalism of the findings; in other words, it reduces proximity to the natural situation of talking to people in their usual contexts, and understanding their perspectives.

Naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) is conducted in the places in which people naturally interact, as opposed to specially designed laboratories or clinical/experimental settings. It seeks to achieve truth-value and authenticity in the data.

Critics have often said that structured interviews leave no room for detail, limiting the information you get. They also do not allow new issues to be raised nor to allow the data to grow easily. Doody and Noonan (2013) suggest that researchers should only use structured interviews when gathering socio-demographic data or in fixed designs (quantitative research).

**4.2 Semi-structured interviews**

*Semi-structured interviews are conducted on the basis of a loose structure consisting of open ended questions that define the area to be explored, at least initially, and from which the interviewer or interviewee may diverge in order to pursue an idea in more detail. Continuing with the same example, interviewees might initially be asked a series of questions such as: “What do you think good health is?”, “How do you consider your own health?”* (Patton, 2002: 350).

Semi-structured interviews are one of the most commonly used interview types in qualitative research. They can be conducted one-on-one, or in groups (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). They are generally organised around a set of predetermined open-ended questions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), contained in a predesigned interview guide. Guides are usually made up of a relatively short list of questions with prompts or probes. The interview guide helps to direct the interview in a fluid, conversational manner, though it has some direction (Fossey *et* *al.*, 2002).

***Example of double barrelled question***

***Example:*** *How satisfied are you with your housing and health conditions?*

***Application:*** *This is an example of a double-barrelled question because it is asking for one response to two separate issues, housing and health conditions. This may lead to inaccurate responses because the respondent may answer with "Satisfied" while, in reality, the respondent is "Very Satisfied" with the health conditions but "Unsatisfied" with* *housing.*

Polgar and Thomas (1994)

Semi-structured interviews are well suited to a concentrated investigation of a specific topic, for example, a study of perceptions and opinions regarding intricate and sometimes complex issues. For example, they would be appropriate for a study of the perceptions and experiences of school-going girls regarding adolescent reproductive health services. This type of interview allows probing for more information, and clarification of answers (Barriball *et al*., 1994), and gives participants the freedom to explain a situation in their own words. The interviewer can also ask for examples and stories, or cases, to gain more insight. The rich data collected from this process is what makes qualitative research unique (Morse and Field, 1995). In addition, further questions can emerge from the interaction between interviewer and interviewee.

A semi-structured interview schedule provides opportunities to change the wording but not the meaning of questions. A semi-structured interview schedule acknowledges that not every word has the same meaning to every respondent, and not every respondent uses the same terminology (Barriball *et al*., 1994). Double- barrelled questions should be avoided, meaning that each question that the interviewer asks must only tackle one aspect of a topic: asking more than one question at a time can confuse the interviewee.

**4.3 Unstructured and in-depth interviews**

The third type of interview is the unstructured and in-depth interview. These are the least structured interview type,

*“… and may cover only one or two issues, but in much greater detail. Such an interview might begin with the interviewer saying, ‘This research study is about how people think about their own health. Can you tell me about your own health experiences and what you think of your health?’ Further questions from the interviewer would be based on what the interviewee said and would consist mostly of clarification and probing for details”.* (Patton 2002: 354)

One should also note that rigour, validity and reliability in a semi-structured interview does not depend on using the same words in each question, but on making sure that the meaning of questions is consistent, which helps to standardize the semi-structured interview and enable comparability.

The advantage of a semi-structured interview is that it gives the interviewer not only flexibility in the wording of questions but also allows one to use probes. Probing in qualitative research is done when the respondent has answered a question and the interviewer wants to learn more about the respondent’s answer. The interviewer asks for further elaboration, definition, a comparison or a context. Probing can be a very vital tool for ensuring the credibility or truth value of the data as it allows for the clarification of interesting and relevant issues raised by the respondent. It also provides opportunities to discuss sensitive issues and can assist in gaining important and complete information. Furthermore, it helps the interviewer to explore and clarify inconsistencies within the interviewee’s responses. Probing can help respondents remember important information, and also allows for interactive opportunities between the respondent and interviewer, which helps to create a sense of rapport and decrease the risk of socially desirable responses (Barriball et al*.*, 1994).

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| **Example 2 - Sample of Semi-Structured Interview Guide****Research question: What contributes to TB patients defaulting on their medications?**1. Could you tell me a little about your experience of treatment to date, since we last saw each other?

Prompts: How has it been going with taking medication?What helps you to remember to take them?What makes remembering to take medication difficult? What could help you to improve your record on taking your medication?1. Tell me a little about how you feel at this point.

Prompts: Family and friends supportive?Physical symptoms?Impact on daily life – work, daily necessities, helping at home? Union assistance? Employer reaction?1. Tell me what you think will happen if you do not take your medications for three days or more.

Prompt: Can I tell you what might happen? |

**4.4 Unstructured interviews/In-depth Interviews**

An unstructured or in-depth interview is a conversation or dialogue between an interviewer and interviewee, in which meanings are negotiated and reformulated. The interviewer assumes an active role by encouraging the respondent to talk and converse about the issue being researched (Patton, 2002). This means that the interviewer is a co-participant in the dialogue and greatly contributes to the negotiation of meaning.

\*\*Solicited diaries are personal diaries requested of participants by the researcher; they are written knowing that the researcher will read and interpret their contents.

“Solicited diaries are often used as a reflective intervention in clinical situations to help patients reflect on their experience”

Jacelon, C. S. & Imperio, K. (2005). Participant Diaries as a Source of Data with Older Adults. Qualitative Health Research. [Online], http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/?term=Jacelon%2C+C.+S.+%26+Imperio%2C+K.+(2005). [Downloaded: 03 11 14].

In-depth interviews using open ended questions will thus encourage spontaneous discussions and identification of new ideas: these can be further pursued through \*\*solicited diaries as a form of pilot when trying to find out what might be of interest in a specific setting. They allow for exploration of sensitive issues that the participants may be reluctant to disclose in a group setting or through quantitative surveys. These types of interviews provide rich descriptions of the understandings of study participants, and this can provide a relatively comprehensive picture of the phenomenon.

Broad open questions are used in unstructured interviews, and probes are used to follow up to the interviewee’s responses. An interview guide is used, which either has several open-ended questions or themes on the topic being studied (Doody and Noonan, 2013). At times the researcher does not prepare questions because he or she may not know where to start, or because the researcher may still be learning about the topic. For example: a good starting question might rather be “tell me about ...”. The objective of this opening question is to let the respondent start from wherever he or she desires. Behind this style of interviewing is the belief that the interviewee often knows (better than the researcher) exactly what is and what is not relevant to the topic (Morse and Field, 1995). It is misleading to think that an interviewer conducting an unstructured interview has no particular interest in the research setting: interviewers always have some motivated interests. There would be no point in carrying out an interview if the researcher had no particular interest that they wished to explore within it (Gibson and Brown, 2009).

The following are some of the key points to note when conducting an unstructured interview.

* Your responsibility is to listen intently and follow the participants’ narrative. You must make sure not to interrupt unless you need clarity on something.
* A good interviewer keeps track of the story; this skill is very important for new researchers to learn. Since unstructured stories often come in the form of narratives, interviewees will relive their experiences.
* It is important for the researcher to be prepared for emotional responses by interviewees in the form of sadness or anger.
* A researcher conducting an unstructured interview may often prompt the respondent to reflect on their own current interests and concerns (Polgar and Thomas, 1994).

An unstructured interview is generally non-directive, flexible, responsive and thoughtful for the participant, compared to formal structured interviews. It seems more like a conversation and creates a more relaxed and natural environment . Highly detailed and rich or even “thick” data is created from this style of interviewing, which might take longer to analyse compared to structured interviews. The key feature in unstructured interviews is that it may evolve according to the interviewee’s responses to the questions.

The questions are not standardized: this increases the likelihood of each interview being different, which many Positivist researchers argue affects the validity and reliability of the research. This form of interviewing should, however, be done by an experienced researcher, and requires the researcher to have a good rapport with the interviewee (Farrelly, 2013).

Amongst the advantages of using unstructured interviews is that they are useful when little is known about a topic (Polgar and Thomas, 1994). In addition, they place fewer restrictions on the interviewees’ responses. Furthermore, since the respondents play a more active role, they may feel that they have some power in the interview (Polgar and Thomas, 1994). Doody and Noonan (2013) also note the importance of using open ended questions when researching sensitive or taboo topics.

Unstructured interviews, however, also have some limitations: analysing their data is very time consuming because it involves the researcher in creating links between the participants’ statements (Doody and Noonan, 2013). Their openness can also allow researcher bias in the form of inappropriate or irrelevant questions being asked. The same openness may allow interviewees “to get carried away” and to discuss irrelevant information; this may also make it difficult to code and analyse the data (Patton, 2002; Doody and Noonan, 2013).

|  |
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| **Example 3 – Sample of an Unstructured Interview Guide****Research question: What is affecting adherence to treatment?**Could you please tell me about experience of TB treatment so far?  |

Now read Legard *et al’s* (2003) discussion on in-depth interviewing.

|  |
| --- |
| **READING**Legard, R., Keegan, J. and Ward, K. (2003). In-depth Interviews. In J. Ritchie and J. Lewis (Eds). *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers.* London: Sage Publications: 138-165. |

**Task 4 – Consider what type of interviews would suit your study**

Identify the advantages and disadvantages of using each of the three different types of interviews for your study: fill them in the table below.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Type of an Interview** | **Advantages** | **Disadvantages** |
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|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

5 The interview process

In preparation for an interview, there are a number of processes to address, and this diagram by the author summarizes some of the key points:



**A couple of additions might be worth a mention:**

Check your equipment and have extra batteries available.

Arrive early and check the venue for noise.

Even though you will be anxious about time, stop the interview after the introductions and check the recording.

As a qualitative researcher, there are specific techniques and skills you need to learn, to be able to conduct a good quality interview. In their paper titled “A Review of the In-Depth Interview Technique: To Understand the Factors Influencing Adoption of Stabilised Earth Construction to Address Low Cost Urban Housing Crisis in Zimbabwe”, Mohammad Sharif Zami and Angela Lee (2009) outline key points you should take note of when conducting an interview. Box 1 below contains an extract from their paper focusing on questioning technique.

***Box 1 - Questioning technique2.1 Attributes of the interviewer and questioning techniques***

*Probably no other skill is as important to the survey research worker as the ability to conduct good interviews (Oppenheim, 1992, p65). A skilled qualitative interviewer should be someone who is (Guion, 2006) a good and active listener, patient enough to allow interviewees to speak, able to notice and react to nonverbal clues, flexible, open minded, and willing to release power and control. …, individuals vary in their ability to articulate their thoughts and ideas. With good questioning techniques, researchers will be more able to facilitate the subject’s accounts and to obtain quality and rich data from them. Berry (1999) summarised the following ten points from the current literature:*

***Ask clear questions:***

*Cicourel (1964) reflects that ‘many of the meanings which are clear to one will be relatively opaque to the other, even when the intention is genuine communication.’ Accordingly, it is important to use words that make sense to the interviewees, words that are sensitive to the respondent’s context and world view. To enhance their comprehensibility to the interviewees, questions should be easy to understand, short, and devoid of jargon (Kvale 1996, p130).*

***Ask single questions:***

 *Patton (1987, p124) points out that interviewer often puts several questions together and asks them all as one. He suggests that researchers should ask one thing at a time. This will eliminate any unnecessary burden of interpretation on the interviewees.*

***Ask truly open-ended questions:***

*According to Patton (1987, p122-3), truly open-ended questions do not pre-determine the answers and allow room for the informants to respond in their own terms (Mack et al, 2005; Boyce and Neale, 2006).*

***Ask experience/behaviour questions before opinion/feeling questions:***

*According to Patton (1987, p115; Mack et al, 2005; Boyce and Neale, 2006), it is useful to ask questions about experience or behaviour before asking questions about opinions or feelings, as this helps establish a context for the informants to express the latter.*

***Sequence the questions:***

*Cohen and Manion (1994, p277) refer to using a special kind of questioning technique called ‘Funnelling’, which means asking from general to specific, from broad to narrow. Cohen and Manion quote an example from the study by Sears, Maccoby and Levin: ‘All babies cry, of course. Some mothers feel that if you pick up a baby every time it cries, you will spoil it. Others think you should never let a baby cry for very long. How do you feel about this? What did you do about it? How about the middle of the night?’ (Sears, Maccoby and Levin, 1957, cited in Cohen & Manion 1994, p277).*

***Probe and follow-up questions****:*

*Mack et al (2005), Boyce and Neale (2006) and Patton (1987, p125-126) stated that the purpose of probing is to deepen the response to a question, to increase the richness of the data being obtained, and to give clues to the interviewee about the level of response that is desired. This can be done through direct questioning of what has just been said, for example, ‘Could you say something more about that? Can you give a more detailed description of what happened? Do you have further examples of this?’ Alternatively, a mere nod, or ‘mm’, or just a pause can indicate to the subject to go on with the description. Repeating significant words of an answer can lead to further elaboration (Kvale 1996, p133).*

***Interpret questions:***

*According to Kvale (1996, p149; Mack et al 2005; Boyce and Neale, 2006), throughout the interview, the researchers should clarify and extend the meanings of the interviewee’s statements to avoid misinterpretations on their part. Kvale (1996, p135) suggests that researchers may use questions such as: - ‘Is it correct that you feel that… Does the expression ... cover what you have just expressed?’ to allow the interviewees to confirm or disconfirm what has been interpreted by the researchers.*

***Avoid sensitive questions:***

*It is advisable to avoid deep questions which may irritate the informants, possibly resulting in an interruption of the interview (Mack et al, 2005; Boyce and Neale, 2006). Cicourel (1964) agrees that “the respondent may well feel uneasy and adopt avoidance tactics if the questioning is too deep”.*

***Encourage a free rein but maintain control:***

*The researchers should be prepared to let the interviewees ‘travel’ wherever they like, but a rough checklist of ideas or areas the former want to explore is useful. Palmer (1928, p171) suggests that proficient interviewers should be always in control of a conversation which they guide and bend to the service of their research interest.*

***Establish rapport****:*

*`This can be achieved by, for example, respecting the informants’ opinions, supporting their feelings, or recognising their responses. This can also be shown by the researcher’s tone of voice, expressions or even gestures (Mack et al, 2006; Boyce and Neale, 2006). In addition, Kvale (1996, p128) suggests that ‘a good contact is established by attentive listening, with the interviewer showing interest, understanding, and respect for what the subjects say’. He continues (1996, p148), ‘(a good interview) allows subjects to finish what they are saying, lets them proceed at their own rate of thinking and speaking’. (Sharif Zami and Lee, 2009: 29-30)*

##### Task 5 – Compile guidelines for interviewing

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| ANd9GcREEHPTKP1wnxe_GKOgxNyQLereoEf-qkWmYfAJdPQ1g8-vU7C1 | **USB FLASH DRIVE AND IKAMVA RESOURCE**Take a look at the two simulated interviews on your USB flash drive and iKamva: they are not in any way perfect, and you should view them critically. This may give you some ideas for this Task. |

1. Compile your own guidelines for interviews using the reading and others in this session.
2. What are common mistakes that interviewers make during the interviews?

c. How can they avoid them?

|  |
| --- |
| **READING**Legard, R., Keegan, J. and Ward, K. (2003). In-depth Interviews. In J. Ritchie and J. Lewis (Eds). *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers.* London: Sage Publications: 161-165. |

**Feedback**

The following common pitfalls are to be avoided:

* Interruptions – telephone, visitors
* Competing distractions (children, meeting, etc)
* Stage fright for interviewer or interviewee
* Asking interviewee embarrassing or awkward questions
* Jumping from one subject to another
* Teaching (for example, giving interviewee medical advice)
* Counselling (for example, summarising responses too early)
* Presenting one's own perspective, thus potentially biasing the interview
* Superficial interviews
* Receiving secret information (for example, abuse of funds)Poor translators (for example, inaccuracy) (Doody & Noonan, 2013).

The reading should also broaden your perception of the potential problems and difficulties that may arise during interviewing.

6 Session summary

Not all interviews will go according to plan. You can get extreme cases - from the uncooperative respondents who will not say much, to very talkative participants who will want to talk forever; you may also encounter over sensitive or overprotective participants, and at times angry and aggressive, or timid participants (Patton 2002).

Responding to such situations is always a venture into the unknown; it is difficult to plan or prepare yourself for this. Unexpected situations may arise during the interview and you will have to handle them with caution, e.g. a sensitive issue like a terminally ill patient or someone who has experienced a recent bereavement may result in a participant breaking down. As a researcher, you will have to plan ahead to arrange for help if you need it, or to assist a participant with a referral.

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Lewis, A. & Oppenheim, A. (1992). *Questionnaire Design, Interviewing and Attitude Measurement*. London: Pinter.

Liamputtong, P.R. and Ezzy, D. (2005). Ch 3: In-depth Interviews. *Qualitative Research Methods*. Sydney: Oxford Universuty Press: 54- 74.

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Morse, M. J. & Field, A. P. (1995). *Qualitative Research Methods for Health Professionals.* 2nd edition. United States: SAGE.

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Session 2 – Focus group discussions

Unit 3

Introduction

In this session we will discuss the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) data collection method, to get an understanding of what they are, when can they be used and the rationale for using them. In the second part of the session we will present an outline of how focus group discussions are done, what you should look out for when using them, and the advantages and disadvantages of using them as a data collection technique.

Contents

1 Learning outcomes of this session

2 Readings

3 About focus group discussions

4 Conducting focus groups

5 Session summary

6 References and further readings

Timing

In this session, you have four readings and four tasks. Two tasks are intended to be done with more experienced peers, so you should allow up to five hours to cover all the requirements.

1 Learning outcomes of this session

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| --- |
| **By the end of this session, you should be able to:** |
| * Define focus group discussions.
* Present a rationale for using focus group discussions in qualitative research.
* Identify the steps in the planning and implementing a focus group discussion.
* Identify advantages and disadvantages of FGDs.
* Select guidelines for conducting focus group discussions.
 |

2 Readings

The readings below can be found in your Reader or prescribed book. You will be directed to them in the course of the session.

|  |
| --- |
| Kitzinger, J. (1995). Qualitative Research: Introducing Focus Groups. *British Medical Journal*, 311: 299-302.Mathole, T., Lindmark, G., Majoko, F. & Ahlberg, B. M. (2004). A Qualitative Study of Women’s Perspectives of Antenatal Care in a Rural Area of Zimbabwe. *Midwifery,* 20: 122–132.Mkandawire-Valhmu, L. and Stevens, E. S. (2010). The Critical Value Of Focus Group Discussions in Research With Women Living With HIV in Malawi. *Qualitative Health Research*, 20 (5): 684-696.Robson, C. (2011). *Real World Research: A Resource for Users of Social Research Method in Applied Settings*. 3rd Edition. West Sussex. UK. 11:293 -300 |

3 About focus group discussions

**3.1 Towards a definition**

Focus group discussions (FGDs) have become a popular method of data collection in health sciences research (Sims, 1998; Webb & Kevern, 2001) and are now considered an important qualitative research technique (Madriz, 2000). They were originally used for marketing research and for communication studies, to explore the effects of film and television programmes (Kitzinger, 1995).

A focus group discussion (FGD) is a group discussion amongst a group of about six to ten people with similar social and cultural backgrounds (as regards age, sex, ethnicity, religion) or similar experiences (such as childbirth, contraception, HIV/AIDS, diabetes). They usually focus on a specific issue (Patton, 2002; Robson, 2011). Like interviews, they are used to collect data on the experiences, perceptions, reasoning, interpretations and beliefs of research participants or a selected population, to gain understanding of a particular phenomenon from the perspective of the research participants (Patton, 2002; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). They can be used to assess what people think, how they think about a phenomenon and why they think that way.

The criteria for selection of FGD participants may be similarity in backgrounds or shared experiences and concerns; so groups may be homogenous or heterogeneous, depending on the aim of the study (Patton, 2002). Data collection is conducted with the help of a moderator (usually yourself) in a setting that enables the participants to feel comfortable enough to participate in the discussion for about one or two hours (Kitzinger, 1995). The role of the moderator is to keep the discussion focused and interactive, stimulate participants to actively engage in discussion. Just like in interviews where the interviewer is a co-participant and has a potentially contaminating influence on the information provided by the interviewee, in the focus group discussion, the moderator influences the type of data collected (Edwards, 1999; Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005).



Patton, 2002

**3.2 How are FGDs different from group interviews?**

Focus groups discussions are often confused or used interchangeably with group interviews. Focus groups are a form of group interview that capitalises on group interaction and communication between research participants, in order to generate data. Although group interviews are often used simply as a quick and convenient way to collect data from several people simultaneously, focus groups explicitly use group interaction as part of the method. This means that instead of the researcher asking each person to respond to a question in turn, people are encouraged to talk to one another: in the process, they ask questions, confirm or dispute what others say and comment on each others' experiences and points of view (Nemarundwe 2011). The aim will be to get good quality of data in a social context where people can reflect on their views in the context of what others say (Patton, 2002). The method is particularly useful for exploring people's knowledge and experiences and can be used to examine not only what people think, but how they think, and why they think that way.

**3.3 When are focus groups used?**

The other important thing to know is when it will be appropriate for you to use an FGD. As we earlier mentioned already, FGDs are used for generating information on collective views, and the meanings that lie behind those views. They are also useful in generating a rich understanding of participants’ experiences and beliefs.

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| The following are some of the examples of when focus group discussion can be used:* As a stand-alone method for research, relating to group norms, meanings and processes.
* In multi-method qualitative research, to improve rigour and quality of the data.
* In a mixed method design for an explorative study, to get a general understanding of a phenomenon, and to get data that will be used to develop questionnaires for quantitative data
* To clarify, extend, qualify or challenge data collected through other methods.
* To feedback results to research participants.
 |

**3.4 A rationale for using focus groups**

The use of FGDs is now widespread but as in all research matters, no decision should be made without a sound reason for it. So why do researchers choose FGDs for data collection?

**Task 1 – Why do researchers choose to use focus groups?**

We have two examples of authors that used FGDs in their studies - Mathole *et al* (2006) and Mkandawire-Valhmu and Stevens (2010) whose actual study is an investigation into the effects of focus groups in building mutual support amongst HIV positive women in Malawi.

1. Read the two papers and list the researchers’ key reasons for using focus group discussions in their studies.

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| **READINGS**Mathole, T., Lindmark, G., Majoko, F. & Ahlberg, B. M. (2004). A Qualitative Study of Women’s Perspectives of Antenatal Care in a Rural Area of Zimbabwe. *Midwifery,* 20: 122–132.Mkandawire-Valhmu, L. and Stevens, E. S. (2010). The Critical Value Of Focus Group Discussions in Research With Women Living With HIV in Malawi. *Qualitative Health Research*, 20 (5): 684-696. |

**Feedback**

The following are some of the key points other authors have made as part of the rationale for the use of focus group discussions. Compare the points you listed with the ones below.

* The suitability of focus group discussion is informed by the aim and objectives of the study. Focus group discussions have been found useful when the researchers do not have much knowledge about the participants, and therefore find it necessary to explore people’s knowledge and experiences (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005).
* FGDs can be used as a follow up to a quantitative study, to explore the reasons behind the available quantitative information, to understand the quantitative data better. The purpose of the follow up study is to ask the “why” and “how” questions and get an understanding of a phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants (Robson, 2002; Pettersson, Christensson, De Freitas and Johansson, 2004).
* FGDs can be used to discuss topics with which participants are more familiar or can be a forum to discuss shared experiences. Because the topics allow all participants to identify with them, they are comfortable to talk about, for example, women’s experiences of using antenatal care services (Mathole, 2004).
* FGDs can also be used in a diverse group to get data from participants from different backgrounds, conditions, circumstances, age, education, and other demographic elements (Pettersson *et al.*, 2004).
* FGDs can also be used to empower disadvantaged groups who are given an opportunity to share their experiences and views, or those who are not comfortable participating in individual interviews. FGDs can give them a *“… safe environment where they can share ideas, attitudes and beliefs in the company of people from the same socioeconomic, ethnic and gender background’* (Patton 2002: 389).
* FGDs allow researchers to obtain information about interactions between participants, and how social knowledge is produced.

**3.5 More about focus groups**

The idea behind the focus group method is that group processes can help people to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less easily accessible in a one to one interview. Group discussion is particularly appropriate when the interviewer has a series of open ended questions and the researcher wishes to encourage research participants to explore an issue of importance to them, in their own vocabulary, generating their own questions and pursuing their own priorities (Kitzinger, 1995).

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| ANd9GcREEHPTKP1wnxe_GKOgxNyQLereoEf-qkWmYfAJdPQ1g8-vU7C1 | **USB FLASH DRIVE AND IKAMVA RESOURCE**Take a look at the focus group interview on your USB flash drive and iKamva: it is not in any way perfect, and you should view it critically. This may give you some ideas for this Task. It is a focus group held at SOPH called SOPH-UWC. (2012) Focus Group Discussion. It is facilitated by Nikki Schaay with a group of Canadian public health professionals. The question was: *Why do health professionals choose to study Public Health?* SOPH, UWC. |

**Task 2 – Develop your understanding of focus groups**

You have already explored one of these papers, but read the other two prescribed readings for this session and answer the following questions in order to consider the value of FGDs to your own study.

|  |
| --- |
| **READINGS**Robson, C. (2011). *Real World Research: A Resource for Users of Social Research Method in Applied Settings*. 3rd Edition. West Sussex. UK. 11:293 -300Kitzinger, J. (1995). Qualitative Research: Introducing Focus Groups. *British Medical Journal*, 311: 299-302.Mkandawire-Valhmu, L. and Stevens, E. S. (2010). The Critical Value Of Focus Group Discussions in Research With Women Living With HIV in Malawi. *Qualitative Health Research*, 20 (5): 684-696. |

1. How are FGDs different from interviews?
2. b. What are the benefits of group interactions for data collection? Are there other benefits?
3. What are the potential advantages of using FGDs as a data collection technique for your study?
4. What are the limitations or challenges of FGDs for data collection?

**Feedback**

As you have read, one of the features of focus group discussions that distinguish them from interviews is that they make use of group interactions to provide information, by involving group participants in active interaction with each other and the moderator (Morgan, 1996; Edwards, 1999; Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). Even though group interactions have also been described as a significant source of data, it is often underreported and underused in qualitative research (Wilkinson, 1998).

Literature has shown that group interactions are valuable in understanding different forms of communication in which people engage in day to day interactions, including jokes, anecdotes, teasing, and arguing (Nemarundwe, 2011; Mavuya, 2012; Hughes and Dumont, 1999). Gaining access to such variety of communication is useful because people's knowledge and attitudes are not entirely embroiled in reasoned responses to direct questions (Patton 2002). Everyday forms of communication may tell you more, about what people know or experience. In this sense FGDs “reach the parts that other methods cannot reach” (Pope and Mays, 1995), revealing dimensions of understanding that often remain untapped by more conventional data collection techniques. Tapping into such interpersonal communication is also important because this can highlight (sub)cultural values or group norms (Hughes and Dumont, 1999).

**3.6 The significance of group interaction**

According to Robson and others (2011), group interaction between participants can therefore be used:

* To encourage research participants to generate and explore their own questions and develop their own analysis of common experiences;
* To encourage a variety of communication from participants - tapping into a wide range and form of understanding;
* To help identify group norms and cultural values;
* To provide insight into the operation of group social processes in the articulation of knowledge (for example, through the examination of what information is censored or muted within the group);
* To encourage open conversation about embarrassing subjects and to permit the expression of criticism;
* Generally to facilitate the expression of ideas and experiences that might be left underdeveloped in an interview, and to illuminate the research participants' perspectives through debate within the group.

FGDs bring together people with similar experiences and/or social and cultural backgrounds (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). This means that when the study participants talk about issues that they all identify with, they are more likely to provide rich and detailed information. Furthermore, focus groups are more natural settings, more like real life than interviews, and therefore potentially produce more credible data.

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| **Examples of research where FGDs were used.** * Utilisation of maternal health services
* Assessing health education messages
* Condom promotion campaigns
* Public understandings of illness and behavior
* Use of insecticide-treated bed nets
* Experience of disease and health services
* PLWHA experience of health services
* Exploring attitudes and needs of health staff
 |

**3.7 Advantages and disadvantages of focus group discussions**



4 Conducting focus groups

Now that you know about FGDs, what they are, when are they used, it is time for a demonstration followed by some practical learning. Take a look at the video recording called “SOPH-UWC 2012 FGD”.

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| ANd9GcREEHPTKP1wnxe_GKOgxNyQLereoEf-qkWmYfAJdPQ1g8-vU7C1 | **USB FLASH DRIVE AND IKAMVA RESOURCE:** SOPH-UWC 2012 FGDSOPH- UWC. (2012) Focus Group Discussion. Facilitated by Nikki Schaay with a group of Canadian public health professionals. Question: *Why do health professionals choose to study Public Health?* SOPH, UWC. |

We filmed a group of staff and interns, all in this case from Canada, except for the moderator (Nikki Schaay) and the assistant researcher, staff member, Dr Busi Nkosi, of the SOPH. Remain alert to a number of questions:

**Task 3 – Critically appraise the moderation of a FGD**

As you watch the video, make notes, watching out for the following:

1. How does the moderator introduce the event, and how does she get the discussion going?
2. To what extent does the moderator manage and guide the group? How does she ensure turn-taking?
3. How well does the FGD achieve group interaction?
4. Do you notice any cultural exchanges in the interactions through language, eye contact, body movement, etc.

**Task 4 – Find out about an FGD**

1. We want you to look for at least two people who have run FGDs before, either colleagues, or any other researcher you know. Make an appointment to talk to them (preferably face to face, or through skype or a telephone call). Ask them to share their experiences of preparing for and running a FGD.

They should describe the whole process from their research topic, aim and objectives, justification for the use of FGDs, preparation, their experience of conducting a FGD, the challenges they had, and the lessons they learnt. You are also welcome to talk to a SOPH staff member if you have access to skype. Ask them to share their FGD guide and outputs of that research. Record the key points for future reference.

The researchers you talk to will, among other things, share their experience of how they prepared for the FGDs, how they sampled and recruited their participants, the composition of their groups and how they conducted the FGDs. The notes below provide some additional information to what you learnt from your discussions with the researchers.

1. Having gone through the sampling and composition of FGDs, we want you to reflect on your discussions with the researchers you spoke to earlier in Task 5, i.e. on their experiences of conducting a FGD. Write down the key points you learnt on how to conduct a FGD.

**4.1 Sampling and FGD composition**

Participants are usually selected through purposive sampling, by deliberately choosing the people we think will give us the best information on the study topic, or “information-rich cases” (Mavuya, 2012).

The participants do not have to be the homogenous demographically: the key is shared experience. Some authors recommend an homogeneous group (in age, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual preference, socio-economic background, education) (Patton, 2002; Nemarundwe, 2011; Mavuya, 2009), arguing that participants will feel similar to, and comfortable with each other; and this may result in a more free flowing conversation. According to the same authors, being different restricts openness and sincerity (for example when you discuss sexuality issues, and combine old and young, or gay and straight participants in the same group).

A heterogenous group can also work in your favour depending on the aim of the study; for instance, if you want to explore and get the perspectives of different groups of people - then having a diversity of experiences or participants in the group would be suitable.

There is also dispute in the literature about whether people should know each other or not, but it is not always possible to bring specific groups of people together, for example, “hard to reach” groups like drug users, or people living with HIV, because of disclosure issues.

Either way, the key is shared experience, or having something in common (such as those who have been through an immunisation campaign or shared a health problem).

**4.2 Group composition**

The composition and the number of focus group discussions you can do in any study will be determined by the purpose, aims and objectives of your study.

Focus group studies can consist of anything between four to over fifty groups, depending on the aims of the project and the resources available (Nemarundwe, 2011). For a minithesis, you will need just a few groups, and can combine this method with other data collection techniques. A focus group discussion can also be done when developing a questionnaire, e.g. for testing the phrasing of questions; it is also useful in explaining or exploring survey results (O'Brien, 1995).

Most researchers recommend aiming for homogeneity within each group in order to capitalise on people's shared experiences. However, it can also be advantageous to bring together a diverse group to maximise exploration of different perspectives within a group setting. However, it is important to be aware of how hierarchy within the group may negatively affect the data, e.g. putting together a mother in law in the same group with a daughter in law in a culture sensitive study, or a junior employee with his/her manager in a hierarchical organisation.

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|  **4.3 Advantages of FGDs**There are some potential sampling advantages you should know of with focus groups, for example:* FGDs do not discriminate against people who cannot read or write.
* They can encourage participation from those who are reluctant to be interviewed on their own (such as those intimidated by the formality and isolation of a one to one interview).
* FGDs can encourage contributions from people who are shy, feel they have nothing to say or who are deemed "unresponsive patients", (but engage in the discussion generated by other group members (Kitzinger, 1995.)
 |

**4.4 Key issues in running a focus group discussion**

I am sure the researchers you spoke to told you that there is some preparatory work that has to be done before you do a FGD; these tasks include recruiting participants, making appointments, booking a venue, making travelling arrangements and other logistics. You are also supposed to inform the participants about the study and give assurance about ethical principles, such as anonymity and confidentiality. This gives respondents some idea of what to expect from the FGD, and it is an important ethical requirement (Hughes & Dumont, 1993). Finally, the list below highlights some of the key issues you should note or do before and during the interview:

* You should recruit participants and make appointments in advance; you should organise the venue.
* The time for the FGD as well as the choice of venue should be done in consultation with the participants and you should get venues that are free from distractions, e.g. a community hall or a room in a facility.
* You should establish rapport with participants before the focus group discussion.
* You have to develop an interview guide and familiarise yourself with the guide or questions that will be asked before the FGD; this will help you to be ready for the FGD.
* Sessions should be relaxed: a comfortable setting, refreshments, and sitting round in a circle will help to establish the right atmosphere.
* The ideal group size is between four and eight people. Sessions may last one to two hours (or extend into a series of meetings).
* The moderator/facilitator should explain that the aim of the focus group is to encourage people to talk to each other rather than to address themselves to the researcher/moderator. The moderator should encourage people to engage with one another, listen attentively to what the other participants say, formulate their ideas, and draw out the cognitive structures which previously have not been articulated.
* FGDs should be tape recorded and transcribed verbatim afterwards, and detailed field notes must be taken either during the FGD or immediately after. These are supposed to be supplemented by notes of what you observed, personal reflections, thoughts and ideas about the things that are discussed in the FGD.

**Your experienced moderator may have told you about the following:**

|  |  |
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| 1) Arrange and recruit participants: explain study and process the Informed Consent form, explain where, when – negotiate a convenient time. Decide on refreshments; avoid disturbances; plan travel costs, equipment, seating arrangements.(2) Introductions: Introduce self (moderator), observer/ recorder.Introduce ground rules – confidentiality; switch off mobile phones, etc.Deal with objections to recording, process of analysis and efforts to ensure confidentiality.Explain why you have been brought together (purpose).Confirm: There are no right or wrong answers and differences are welcomedConfirm: I would like everyone to participate in the discussion and people can just ‘step in’ but not talk ‘over’ one another. Ask: Any points of clarification? | (3) Warm up and make introductions - introduce yourselves please (perhaps through a non-threatening ‘ice-breaker’ type question. (4) Discussion / topic - from the general to the specific, to obtain an understanding of the issues related to the topic - not trying to reach consensus but exploring differences and inconsistencies.(5) Closure - summarising, re-capping and identifying themes, asking for further/new points, giving them time to ask questions and thanking participants.(6) Feedback - possibility of short input or opportunity to speak to participants individually about some of the issues that needed clarification and were raised(7) Debriefing - name of the group and date marked on the tape; moderator, recorder and observer meet to discuss impressions and review guide;(8) Respondents should also be debriefed. |

**4.5 Role of the moderator**

Moderating in a FGD is not easy, you need to be well skilled to run a FGD; if you have never done in before you can observe an experienced researcher doing it, watch the video again, or use the notes in box 4 above to prepare yourself. You could also try to join a fellow researcher as research assistant at one of their FGD sessions.

Gill and others (2008), provide a list of some of things to take note of as a moderator. This includes some of them.

* Participants have valuable views and the moderator should have the ability to respond actively, positively and respectfully. Such an approach is not simply a courtesy, but will encourage fruitful discussions.
* Moderating without participating: a moderator must guide discussion rather than join in with it. Expressing one’s own views tends to give participants cues as to what to say (introducing bias), rather than the confidence to be open and honest about their own views.
* Be prepared for views that may be unpalatably critical of a topic which may be important to you.
* It is important to recognise that a researcher’s individual characteristics mean that not every person will always be suitable to moderate any kind of group. Sometimes the characteristics that suit a moderator for one group will inhibit discussion in another.
* Be yourself. If the moderator is comfortable and natural, participants will feel relaxed.
* The moderator should facilitate group discussion, keeping it focussed without leading it.
* They should also be able to prevent the discussion being dominated by one member (for example, by emphasising at the outset the importance of hearing a range of views), ensure that all participants have ample opportunity to contribute, allow differences of opinions to be discussed fairly.

Finally, the other practical things you have to do when conducting a FGD are: show a neutral face throughout the FGD; show interest in the responses by nodding, smiling and saying “yes/yaa/mm, etc” and encouraging participants to talk. You should keep quiet enough to give them enough time to respond. You should be able to probe where necessary, e.g. to seek clarity where you need to. You should also remember that disagreements within groups can be used to encourage participants to elucidate their point of view, and to clarify why they think as they do (Morgan, 1993).

The moderator/facilitator may also use a range of group exercises, e.g. presenting the group with a series of statements on large cards. The group members are asked to collectively sort these cards into different piles depending on, for example, their degree of agreement or disagreement with that point of view or the importance they assign to that particular aspect of service. For example, placing a series of statements about midwives' roles along an agree-disagree continuum (Kitzinger, 1990).

Such exercises encourage participants to concentrate on one another (rather than on the group facilitator) and force them to explain their different perspectives. Researchers may also use such exercises as a way of checking their own assessment of what has emerged from the group. In this case it is best to take along a series of blank cards and fill them out only towards the end of the session, using statements generated during the course of the discussion.

5 Session summary

In this session, we have explored focus groups in some detail; you have talked to more experienced peers, read articles about them, watched a video and critiqued the facilitation of the focus group; you have also reviewed guidelines for conducting them. You have also, hopefully been able to play the role of an assistant researcher in a focus group. The only thing you have not done is to run a focus group practice session. If the opportunity arises to role play the process, it would be very helpful in preparation for data collection. On completion, you could ask a peer that attends to give you feedback on your moderation, and you could critically review the data you collect. In addition, you should reflect critically on the process, and on your own performance. This is one of the ways that you can really become more proficient, as a practitioner.

The next session introduces another data collection technique, this time observation, which is of special significance in Ethnographic research, but is also usefully combined with other data collection techniques.

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Session 3 – Observation

Unit 3

Introduction

You are now familiar with two data collection techniques - interviews and focus group discussions. Although these are the most common, we would want you to learn a little about the third data collection method – observation. You will also do some practical exercises to help you understand how it is done. We all observe different things around us all the time, we see, we smell, we hear, and at times we comment, or share with others what we saw later, but we don’t usually record it and use it as information. In this session we will learn about observation as a data collection technique in qualitative research.

Observation is mostly used in Ethnographic research. The collection of Ethnographic data requires detailed observations of participants and their interaction with their natural world (Kawulich 2005). The data collected is very descriptive and allows a researcher to note things which the participants do consciously and unconsciously. Within Ethnography, the researcher could be a passive observer or be actively involved with the participants under observation (Kawulich 2005). In either case, the researcher has to build and maintain rapport so as to ultimately participate and experience the research context as an insider (Patton 2002).

You should note that using observation to understand a phenomenon would yield important descriptive information about the nature of the phenomenon: for example, you would try to capture detail about the setting and about contextual issues such as what and how things happen, who interacts with whom, under what circumstances and where these interactions take place (Robson 2002). These descriptions would include both conscious and unconscious behaviours, verbal and non-verbal communication. Observation would also provide additional analytical information on similarities and differences of experiences and interactions (Kawulich 2005).

Contents

1 Learning outcomes of this session,

2 Readings,

3 Introducing observation as a data collection technique

4 How to do a qualitative observation

5 What is the role of an observer?

6 Session summary

7 References and further readings

**Timing of this Session**

This session has three readings and five tasks. It should take you about three hours plus the hour and a half you spend doing an observation for your assignment.

1 Learning outcomes of this session

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| **By the end of this session, you should be able to:** |
| * Describe and explain observation as a data collection technique.
* Describe the different types of observation method.
* Outline the steps you should follow when conducting an observation.
* Complete some practical exercises in observation.
* Develop a rationale for using this data collection technique.
 |

2 Readings

The readings below can be found in your Reader or prescribed book. You will be directed to them in the course of the session.

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| --- |
| Cole, R. E. (1991). Participant Observer Research . *In Action Research.*(ed.) Whyte, Newbury Park: Sage: 159-166.Kawulich, B. B. (2005). Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method. *Forum:* *Qualitative Social Research*, 6 (2): 22-24; 43.Robson, C. (2002). Ch 2 –Approaches to Social Research. *Real World Research.* Melbourne: Chichester: Wiley: 13-43. |

3 Introducing observation as a data collection technique

In this session we will start by taking a look at a scene described by Katzer, Cook and Crouch (1978) who are quoted in Patton (2002: 260).

*“Once at a scientific meeting, a man suddenly rushed into the midst of one of the sessions. Another man with a revolver was chasing him. They scuffled in plain view of the assembled researchers, a shot was fired and they rushed out. About 20 seconds had elapsed. The chairperson of the session immediately asked all present to write down an account of what they had seen. The observers did not know that the ruckus had been planned, rehearsed and photographed. Of the forty reports turned in, only one was less than 20 percent mistaken about the principal facts, and most were more than 40 percent mistaken ... Some readers chuckled because the observers were researchers, but similar experiments have been reported numerous times. They are alike for most people”(*Katzer *et al,* 1978: 21-22 in Patton 2002: 260).

The above incident serves to highlight that an observer should be trained in observation for research, and that one needs to be well prepared to report accurately, reliably and authentically. One challenge is that people may think that they already know how to observe and therefore do not need training, but according to Patton (2002), proper training will develop the researcher’s competence, which entails:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **The art of observation**Scientifically observing what is going onPaying attentionWriting descriptivelyAccurately recording field notesSeparating trivia from detailand describing from interpretationValidating and triangulating observationsAppreciating one’s own strengths and weaknesses | **Systematic seeing … not just****… ordinary looking** |

The training will therefore help the observer to conduct a systematic seeing rather than ordinary looking.

**Task 1 – Compare your observation skills with those of a colleague**

Do a short exercise with a colleague at work. Think about your own work, the type of work you do, the work setting and the activities you do.

1. What types of things will you better understand through observation?
2. Do an observation exercise with your colleague, and write notes of what you observe.
3. Compare your observation notes with your colleague’s notes.

As in the description of the shooting incident at the conference from Katzer (1978), you probably recorded different things, or recorded similar things differently.

1. What do you think are the reasons for these differences?

**Feedback**

**We all have multiple and diverse perspectives which might be influenced by ...**

**The following are some of the reasons that you are likely to write or record different things**

* **Background, training, discipline/profession, e.g. doctor, nutritionist, social worker, etc**
* **Cultural values**
* **Personal experiences**
* **Perceptions and attitudes**

It is therefore important as Patton (2002) noted earlier, that you are properly trained in how to collect data using observation; you also need to be aware that such data is collected for a purpose, with rigour, and that you must be guided by the aim and objectives of your study.

**3.1 Types of observation methods**

There are two main types of observation methods: structured or unstructured.

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| --- |
| **Structured** |
| **participant (direct) observation** | **non-participant (indirect) observation** |
| **unstructured** |

Each type of observation method can be direct or participant (you are a participant in the action) or indirect or non-participant (you are an observer).

Ethnography relies heavily on up-close, personal experience and possible participation, not just observation: these methods can give shape to new constructs or paradigms, and new variables for further empirical testing - in the field or through traditional, quantitative social science methods (Gezuk, nd). The diagram below shows the two different types of observation (direct/participant or indirect/non participant) and how observation can be done (e.g. structured observation).



Wilson, T. (2002). Information science and research methods. In *Library and Information Science,* published by the Department of Library and Information Science, Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovak Republic. Updated 26th March 2002. [Online], Available: <http://www.informationr.net/tdw/publ/papers/slovak02.html> [Accessed on 10 January 2014].

We now discuss further the two types of participant observation.

**3.1.1 Participant observation**

Participant-observation is commonly linked with anthropological fieldwork which in the past was mostly done by colonial researchers on indigenous people of other countries (Nemarundwe, 2011). In participant observation, the researcher stays with the people, so as to learn the language and behaviours of the people. Participant observation is a matter of degree and varies from case to case, according to, for example, time limitations or work commitments and the nature of the research being conducted (Cole, 1991). At times the researcher can be part of the community already, and still carry out the observation.

Participant observation would also enable the researcher to experience the environment, in which the interaction occurs as an insider (Robson, 2002). This would facilitate gathering of a comprehensive data set including notes about the environment, context and culture within, interactions which occur of which the participants may not even be aware. The researcher is able to determine the level of engagement as either a passive or an active observer of social interactions (Cole, 1991).

**Task 2 – What are the advantages of participant observation?**

Read this section of Robson (2011) and answer the question, *What are the advantages and disadvantages of participant observation as opposed to non-participant observation?*

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| --- |
| **READING**Robson, C. (2002). Ch 2 –Approaches to Social Research. *Real World Research.* Melbourne: Chichester: Wiley: 13-43. |
| **Advantages**Allows the researcher to gain an insider’s view and a deeper understanding of the context, their day to day experiences and how they and others perceive them. Researcher can review and reflect on the data as it is gathered and probe for a deeper and richer understanding of issues as they emerge. What people say they do are not always the same as what they do so participant observation can then be used with other data sources like diaries, and in-depth interviews, to identify and probe any inconsistencies between each of the data sources. The researcher can also have informal discussions with individuals that the research participants come into contact with on a regular basis, such as community members. | **Disadvantages**It takes time, and the observer has to stay with participates for long periods. It may require the observer to live or work in that area.It assumes that the observer will become an accepted member of the group or community.Obsevation can influence the behaviour of particpants even if they agree to your presence. |

**3.1.2 Non participant observation**

This method involves watching the events which are then recorded. If applied in its strictest sense there is no interaction between the observer and the observed. In some cases, a hidden camera or a two way mirror can be used to capture the events. The observer is like an eavesdropper, someone who observes people without any interaction with them, and without their knowing that they are being observed. It is mostly routinely used by psychologists studying children and animals. This topic is dealt with in more detail by Kawulich (2005), so extend your understanding of the significance of these differences now.

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| **READING**Kawulich, B. B. (2005). Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method. *Forum:* *Qualitative Social Research*, 6 (2): 43. |

4 How to do a qualitative observation

This time we really want you to get your feet wet, and try out observation in earnest, in a place that is not your work place, a place where you know no one. Past students have chosen to go to a park, a restaurant, a marketplace, a tavern, etc.

**Task 3 – Practising observation**

1. Describe what you did before the observation, i.e. your preparatory work.
2. Write an outline of how you went about it, and what you observed. Then compare your process with the steps described by Kawulich (2005) who describes the different stages or steps one should follow when doing an observation.
3. Record what you observe by writing fieldnotes. Refer to Patton’s guidelines below (section 4.1) before you undertake the observation.

Kawulich (2005) suggests that these are the stages one should follow:

* Deciding on a research site/selecting a research setting
* Compliance with ethical responsility
* Gaining entry/access
* Presenting oneself
* Conducting observation/collecting information
* Analyzing data and identifying key themes

Another challenge you are likely to have is that of recording data, i.e. writing field notes when you do an observation. You have already done two observation exercises. So, how did you write your notes for those tasks? How did you decide on what to write and what to leave out? It is your research question or the aim and objectives of your study which will give guidance on what to write in your field notes. You will have chosen your sources of data on the basis of these objectives, so they should guide your data collection.

**4.1 Taking field notes**

For an observation to work well the following needs to be properly described or undertaken. Observers can, if they wish, use a structured schedule for making the observation notes. Patton (2002) provides a good outline of what needs to be adequately described in field notes.

**Program setting or physical environment**

This must be sufficiently detailed to enable the reader to visualise the setting and should avoid vague and interpretive adjectives. The setting can be accompanied by photographs. The site must be appropriate, accessible and permit clear observation. The observer must be detached enough to be objective.

**Social environment,**

In this scenario the observer checks how people organise themselves, for example into groups or sub groups. How they interact and communicate and the direction of that communication, also how the decisions by staff are communicated.

**Historical perspective**

The history of the program, organisation or the community is important as it may give insight into certain behaviours. How the staff have interacted with the participants over time can be useful in the research.

**Program activities and structured interactions,**

This looks at basic descriptive questions such as *Who does what? Who is involved? What is being done and said? How do they go about their activities? Where do the activities take place?*

**Informal interactions and unplanned activities**

There could be occasions where there is a formal and informal time for gatherings or meetings. It is during these informal times, such as tea time that additional information can be obtained.

**Recording participants’ program language**

This has to do with “native” language of communication used by the participants or community. This helps to record the participants in their own understanding of their experiences.

**Observing non-verbal communication**

Although this sounds straightforward at times some gestures could be misinterpreted cross-culturally so it is important to get an understanding of what these mean when used in a particular setting.

**Watching for unobtrusive indicators**

In most cases if people are aware that they are being observed, they could alter their behaviour. The unobtrusive measures are those that done without the people being aware.

**Analysing documents, files, records and artefacts,**

Also called the “material culture” in anthropology this refers to all the written documents, records relating to a particular item or issue.

**Commenting on what does not happen (non-occurrences)**

Reporting what took place is important but also reporting what did not take place but was supposed to take place is also important. The researcher can use his or her experience for example to point out that in the absence of certain things the expected outcome is likely to be a certain outcome, and if that outcome did not take place then the researcher can find out the reasons why.

**Observing oneself,**

This is also referred to as *reflexivity* and it reminds the observer to be conscious of their own cultural, political and social circumstances.

**Documenting individualised and common outcomes**

(Patton, 2002: 301-309)

Take a look at Kawulich (2005: 22-24) for further guidance on taking field notes.

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| **READINGS**Kawulich, B. B. (2005). Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method. Forum: *Qualitative Social Research*, 6 (2): 22-24. |

5 What is the role of an observer?

There are different observation roles that you can choose to play according to the needs of your study. Polgar and Thomas (1995) provide a good summary of these roles, and of the different methods of observation. Please note that the levels of participation of the observer differ: at one extreme side is the participant observer who becomes completely absorbed in the group under observation and on the other side is the non-participant observer who tries to remain aloof from it.

For more information on the role of an observer, read this extract from Polgar and Thomas (1995) below.

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| **OBSERVER ROLES***“Whether or not instrumentation is used, observation involves a person perceiving and recording an event. There are various positions observers may take in relation to observing human behaviour in health care settings. The fundamental issue is the extent to which the observer becomes involved or a participant in the events being observed.* *There are four main roles: complete participation, participant as observer, observer as participant and complete observer.**The complete participant assumes the role of participant in the setting under investigation and does not normally disclose his or her intent to the other participants. Thus, the researcher actively participates in the setting without the knowledge or consent of the other participants. The purpose behind this approach is to minimise any changes in behaviour of the other participants as a result their being observed. It can however, border on the edge of unethical practice, and is a technique that must be used with caution.**An example of the use of the complete participant method is provided by the Rosenhan’s (1975) study of “pseudo-patients” in psychiatric hospitals. Here the observers posed as, (and were admitted as), psychiatric patients in order to study the experiences of psychiatric patients. The pseudo-patients were not recognised as imposters by the staff of the institution. In this way, they could make and record observations about the interpersonal interactions between the staff and patients. However, in order to be admitted, the observers deliberately misled the staff, who were in fact under study.**The participant as observer participates fully in the situation under study, but discloses his or her identity and purpose to the other participants. Example of this can be seen in anthropological studies, where the observer attempts to participate as an active member of a cultural group.* *The observer as participant makes no pretence of participation but interacts with the other participants. When using this method in a health setting, the observer obtains permission to record events and observe patients, while interacting with the staff and the patients. An example of this method is provided by a study recently by a PhD student with a nursing background, supervised by one of the authors. The student’s objective was to investigate how psychiatric nurses working in the community make decisions to act in a crisis situation with a disturbed person. He accompanied the nurses on their crisis visits. While travelling to the crisis scene, he interviewed the nurses about their expectations. He observed the crisis scene and its participants and immediately following its conclusion interviewed the nurses about it.**The complete observer does not interact with the other participants at all and as with complete participation does not disclose his identity or purpose. As an example, one might investigate therapist-patient interactions by observing from behind a one-way mirror.* *The level of participation chosen involves a tension between the requirements of objective and independent analysis, and the proximity from which the social and clinical phenomena can be studied. Clearly, the participation of the observer introduces changes in the phenomena under study. It is a question of whether these changes are so large as to negate the benefits obtained by closer observation afforded by actual participation. This is a vexed question and one that has occupied much discussion in the social and clinical sciences”.* Polgar and Thomas (1995) |

**Task 4 – The advantages of different roles**

What advantages does Cole claim for an “insider” participant-observation role, as opposed to the role of an “outside researcher”?

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| **READINGS**Cole, R. E. (1991). Participant Observer Research . *In Action Research.*(ed.) Whyte, Newbury Park: Sage: 159-166. |

**Feedback**

Cole notes the problem of reactivity as a disadvantage of being an outside researcher. The behaviour of people could change if they were or aware that they are being studied. This response could be reduced by a lengthy participant-observation. With the continued stay of the ethnographer, people would take less notice of the ethnographer’s comings and goings. Even with this, though, there is a risk in terms of familiarity and the roles between “friend” and “researcher” may be blurred especially when dealing with confidential data (Cole, 1991: 159-166).

Inherent in the role you take as observer are a number of questions regarding the ethics of being an observer.

**Task 5 – Consider the ethics of observation**

Cole refers to “ethical considerations” pertaining to participant-observation. He has reservations about the ethics of engaging in “a covert or semi-covert role”. As he sees it, participant-observers must be totally open as to their role and purposes.

1. What advantages would there be in engaging surreptitiously in participant-observation?
2. Do you consider covert forms of participant-observation to be unethical?
3. If so on what grounds? If not, on what grounds?
4. Consider also, whether in your judgement, the ethics of covert observation is absolute? Or do you feel that there are situations in which covert observation is acceptable? In what sorts of situation might it be unacceptable?

**Feedback**

Participant-observation is burdened by many ethical dilemmas such as “the problem of trust”, amongst others. Covert research runs counter to the principle of informed consent and is unethical, according to Cole (1991). At times, for social anthropologists the issue of consent is not easy since at times, so many people are encountered in a research setting that it may not be practical to get consent from all of them. Also in some cases, the concept of consent may not be fully understood. Most ethnographers however agree that to conceal information about the role and purpose of the research is unethical and that therefore being overt would be the preferred option (Cole, 1991).

To explore this further, read Cole (1991) pages 159-166.

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| **READINGS**Cole, R. E. (1991). Participant Observer Research . *In Action Research.*(ed.) Whyte, Newbury Park: Sage: 159-166. |

6 Session summary

You have completed the third session on different data collection techniques. There is a lot to take on, and it is probably best absorbed by trying our tasks and practising these techniques. You will be encouraged to take up this challenge by undertaking a couple of data collection processes for your assignment. The final session of this unit pertains to ethical considerations in conducting qualitative research. You were introduced to this topic in *Public Health Research*, but here you focus on aspects that are important in qualitative research.

7 References and further readings

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