

# The Most Commonly Used Qualitative Research Methods and Their Using Technique

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## Abstract

Qualitative methods such as direct observation, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions are effective for gathering reliable information. Focus group discussions aim to elicit factual information and insights from participants, complementing sample surveys in questionnaire development and interpreting survey results. Combining focus group discussions with surveys can provide a more comprehensive assessment of topics. It is crucial to include diverse perspectives and prevent biases in discussions. Key informant interviews involve in-depth interviews with individuals with specialized knowledge or expertise on a particular topic of interest. Participant observation is a qualitative research method where the researcher immerses themselves in a social setting or group, observing and participating in the behaviors, interactions, and practices of the participants. Participant observation is a valuable qualitative research method that enables researchers to gain profound, contextual insights into social groups and phenomena by actively participating in and observing their activities over an extended period.

**Keywords:** qualitative methods, focus group discussion, key informant interview, participatory observation

## Background

Qualitative and quantitative research methods are fundamental approaches used to gather and analyze data in various fields, including social sciences, health, education, and market research (Ahmad et al., 2019; Lawrence Neuman, 2014). Each

method has distinct characteristics, purposes, and techniques for data collection and analysis (Bergin, 2018). Qualitative research focuses on understanding human behavior, experiences, and the meanings individuals attach to them. It aims to explore concepts in depth rather than quantify them (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002; Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2020). This method is often used when researchers seek insights into complex phenomena that are not easily measurable. Qualitative research, on the other hand, focuses on understanding the underlying reasons, motivations, and opinions of individuals. It involves collecting non-numerical data such as words, images, or observations to gain insights into a particular phenomenon.

Both quantitative and qualitative research methods have their strengths and weaknesses, and the choice between them depends on the research question and objectives. Quantitative research is more structured and objective, while qualitative research is more exploratory and subjective (Ahmad et al., 2019; Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024; Gelo, Braakmann, & Benetka, 2008).

Design decisions made at the outset and throughout a qualitative research study play a critical role in shaping the narrative. Employing qualitative research methods is essential for obtaining reliable information (Flick, 2004). Effective methods for identifying people's concerns include direct observation, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions (Brief, 2012). For collecting information in qualitative interviews the three primary types of questioning in qualitative methods are structured, semi-structured, and in-depth interviews (Britten, 1995). The main interview techniques used in qualitative methods are Focus Group Discussion, Key Informant Interview, and Participatory Observation.

While focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and participatory observation are crucial in qualitative research, there is a lack of resources available to students in this field. This article aims to provide information on all three methods and offer guidance to early career researchers on selecting the most suitable method for their study.

### **Focus Group Discussion**

Focus Group Discussion is a crucial method in qualitative research for exploring key insights. It involves gathering the perspectives of a small group of participants in a conversational format. The primary aim is to convene a group of 8 to 12 individuals to collectively discuss a specific topic (Bender & Ewbank, 1994). This method is valuable for understanding shared viewpoints. A focus group discussion is a form of group interview that aims to gather data through participant interaction (Kitzinger, 1995). It aims to elicit factual information, insights, or ideas from each participant and delve into their knowledge and experiences in depth. Initially used to study the impact of television and film on the general public, focus group discussions have since become influential in market research and social studies. They have evolved as a valuable methodology for exploring health issues

and family planning (Bellinger, Bernhardt, & Goldstucker, 1976). The goal of a focus group discussion is to provide a forum for individuals to discuss their challenges and experiences in a group setting, fostering an environment where participants can freely express their thoughts and opinions. However, it is essential to discern whether an opinion is influenced by others or reflects an individual's genuine perspective. Focus group discussions are considered reliable for qualitative research, while sample surveys are a quantitative research method.

The focus group method can complement sample surveys, especially in questionnaire development for survey research. Prior qualitative studies are essential to identify potential optional survey questions, reducing non-response and sampling bias by excluding questions that respondents may avoid (Wolff, Knodel, & Sittitrai, 1993). Additionally, conducting a focus group study after the survey can aid in interpreting the results. By combining survey research and focus group studies through triangulation, the overall findings can be (Denzin, 1970; Mattheu B Miles & Huberman, 1984; Matthew B Miles & Huberman, 1994). Individuals, families, and community members may tend to overestimate or underestimate certain topics when surveyed individually, leading to potential inaccuracies in the data collected through questionnaires. In contrast, focus group discussions offer a more realistic portrayal of the community's situation and promote collective responsibility in reporting the actual circumstances. It is crucial to include the perspectives of minority, marginalized, and vulnerable communities that have been disproportionately impacted.

By combining focus group discussions with sample surveys, a more comprehensive assessment of specific topics can be achieved. Involving respondents who are knowledgeable about the subject matter in focus group discussions can help overcome hesitancy in sharing information and foster a more open dialogue (Barbour & Kitinger, 1998). However, it is essential to prevent individuals from privileged backgrounds from dominating the discussions to ensure unbiased results.

#### **Role of the Facilitator in focus group discussion**

- In a focus group discussion, clearly state the purpose of the discussion and what participants can expect from the study. Participants should decide how to facilitate the discussion, whether through active participation, interaction, or following certain norms. Inform participants about the duration of the event and how it will conclude, including provisions for tea, water, or allowances.
- The success of a focus group discussion relies on the facilitator's ability to elicit relevant topics from participants and facilitate analysis among them. The facilitator should refrain from giving their own opinion on a predetermined topic and instead focus on listening and learning from the participants. Their role is to raise topics, prompt participants to express ideas, and facilitate interaction among participants. Introduce the next topic only after sufficient interaction has taken place among participants.

- Encourage active participation from all participants, especially those who may be shy or hesitant to speak. Discourage participants who dominate the discussion or only want to speak on their own and instead encourage others to contribute. If a participant provides irrelevant ideas or goes off-topic, redirect their attention or change the context to bring the discussion back on track.
- Aim for a spontaneous and informal discussion, allowing open interaction among participants. Treat participants with respect, and contextualize potentially embarrassing questions appropriately.
- Consider the context and content of participants when deciding to change the topic. Respect ethnic, gender, regional, and linguistic diversity among participants. Pay attention to body language and show interest in proverbs and sayings.

#### **Role of Recorder in focus group discussion**

- Before starting the focus group discussion, ensure that the recording device is working properly by testing its functions, such as pausing, turning on, and turning off.
- Record each discussion separately and label each file clearly.
- Ensure that the recording device can capture the voices of both the facilitator and participants, regardless of their speaking speed.
- The recorder is responsible for saving each recording and verifying its accuracy.
- Stay attentive during the recording to capture all relevant discussions.

#### **Role of note-taker in focus group discussion**

- The note-taker plays a crucial role in capturing key ideas and interactions during discussions, aiding the translator and analyst in understanding the significance of the recorded material. These notes serve as a valuable reference for future work on the topic. There are several reasons why taking notes is essential alongside recording. Firstly, technical issues with recording devices may lead to missing data. Moreover, non-verbal cues like body language and tone of voice, which are vital for communication, cannot be captured in recordings, emphasizing the importance of including such details in notes.
- When taking notes, clarity and conciseness are paramount. The focus should be on conveying the message rather than verbatim transcription. Introducing participants in the notes and enclosing important words in inverted commas are good practices.
- If multiple participants' express similar ideas, it is unnecessary to repeat them; instead, reference the initial speaker. Additionally, capturing the emotional context of participants' statements, such as anger or sadness, is crucial.
- In case of discrepancies or incomplete information in the notes, the note-taker can seek clarification by asking follow-up questions, typically facilitated by the

discussion leader. Summarizing each group discussion and maintaining proper margins in the notes are essential. Any additional information that arises later should be added for completeness.

Consistency and adaptability in note-taking are key. Thorough and accurate notes are vital for preserving important ideas, interpreting non-verbal cues, and laying the groundwork for future analysis and action.

#### Note taking format in focus group discussion

Date	.....			
Location	..... .....	Caste	Sex	Age
participants	1 2 3 ...			
Type of group				
Name of <b>facilitator</b>				
Name of recorder				
Note taker name				

Participants' views regarding the question

Question:

Answer:

Summary	Codes
participants: 1. .... participants: 2..... participants: 3.....	

Adapted from: [www.drugs.indiana.edu/spf/training\\_080124/Note-taking.doc](http://www.drugs.indiana.edu/spf/training_080124/Note-taking.doc);  
Neuman W L (2000:364) *Social research methods – qualitative and quantitative approaches*(Neuman, Wiegand, & Winterdyk, 2000)

#### Key informant interviews

Key informant interviews are conducted by incident investigation teams to gather accurate information about an incident and understand why it occurred (Gilchrist, 1992). These interviews involve one interviewer speaking with 1-2 individuals and asking open-ended and informal questions. The goal is to find someone who can effectively represent the thoughts and feelings of the entire community (Lokot, 2021). When selecting interviewees, it is important to consider their specialized knowledge,—social, economic, political, or cultural status, communication skills, and willingness to share information. Before the interview

(Lokot, 2021), the interviewer should communicate the questions they will ask to ensure effective communication. It is recommended to prepare five questions in advance. Direct observation involves the researcher personally collecting information, statistics or data about a phenomenon. This method is used to gather direct information about the condition of those affected by an accident. For example, observing broken toilets in a village after an earthquake and how they are only accessible to physically fit individuals. It is important to note that one case should not be considered representative of the entire situation (Gilchrist, 1992). The key aspect of direct observation is listening, observing, and learning from the affected area, rather than the researcher imposing their ideas or teachings.

#### **Key points of Key informant interviews**

- Key informant interviews are a valuable method for obtaining detailed insights from individuals with firsthand knowledge of a topic, such as community leaders, industry experts, or individuals with unique experiences. These interviews are semi-structured, allowing for a natural exchange of ideas and information rather than following a strict set of questions. Key informants are chosen for their relevant expertise and diverse perspectives, rather than representing a sample of the population.
- Key informant interviews are particularly useful for gaining a deep understanding of issues, identifying problems, and generating recommendations, rather than collecting quantitative data. They offer advantages such as affordability, access to informed perspectives, and the potential to uncover unexpected insights. However, limitations include the possibility of interviewer bias and challenges in establishing data validity.
- Best practices for conducting key informant interviews include using a focused interview guide, selecting a diverse group of informants, building rapport, and accurately documenting the interviews.
- In conclusion, key informant interviews provide valuable qualitative data from knowledgeable sources to help researchers and evaluators gain a comprehensive understanding of complex topics and issues.

#### **Why use key informant interviews**

- Gathering detailed and rich data: key informant interviews allow researchers to collect in-depth, qualitative information in a cost-effective and straightforward manner.
- Establishing rapport and clarifying questions: key informant interviews help the interviewer build rapport with the respondent and clarify any questions that may arise during the interview.
- Strengthening relationships with stakeholders: Conducting key informant interviews can help researchers establish or enhance relationships with key community informants and stakeholders.

- Raising awareness and enthusiasm: key informant interviews can generate awareness, interest, and enthusiasm around the research topic.
- Interpreting quantitative data: key informant interviews can be used to interpret quantitative findings by interviewing key informants to understand the reasons behind the quantitative results.
- Framing relevant issues: key informant interviews assist in framing relevant issues before designing a quantitative study.
- Gaining first-hand knowledge: key informant interviews aim to gather first-hand knowledge and perspectives from knowledgeable individuals in a community.

### **Participatory Observation**

Participant observation allows researchers to gain a deep understanding of the social context and dynamics of a group or community. By being actively involved in the setting, researchers can uncover subtle nuances and unspoken rules that may not be apparent through other research methods. This method is particularly useful in studying complex social phenomena, such as group dynamics, cultural practices, and social interactions. (Aktinson & Hammersley, 1998; Musante & DeWalt, 2010). However, participant observation also comes with ethical considerations, such as ensuring the confidentiality and privacy of participants and obtaining informed consent. Researchers must also be mindful of their own biases and the potential impact of their presence on the group being studied. Overall, participant observation is a valuable research method for gaining rich, detailed insights into social phenomena, but it requires careful planning, ethical considerations, and reflexivity on the part of the researcher.

### **Key Characteristics of Participant Observation**

- Involves long-term interaction between the researcher and participants
- Examines various relationship dynamics, such as differences in status, power, and education
- Takes place in diverse settings, ranging from intimate interactions to public events
- Requires the researcher to navigate unfamiliar cultural environments and ethical codes
- Utilizes technology like photography, video, and audio recording to document observations
- Allows the researcher's role and relationships with the group to evolve over time

### **Reasons for Using Participant Observation**

Participant observation is valuable for studying social interactions, practices, beliefs, and values that may be challenging to capture through other methods. It

offers an insider's perspective to complement the outsider's view. This method is commonly employed in anthropology, sociology, communication studies, and organizational behavior.

### Examples of Participant Observation

- Studying the daily life and rituals of a religious community
- Observing and participating in the activities of a gaming club to understand consumer behavior
- Immersing oneself in a hospital setting to comprehend the experiences of nurses and patients

### Conclusion

Focus group discussions involve group discussions to gather insights from a diverse range of participants, while KIIs involve in-depth interviews with key informants to gain expert knowledge. Participatory observation allows researchers to immerse themselves in the research setting and observe interactions firsthand. By combining these methods, researchers can obtain rich and nuanced data that can inform their analysis and interpretation.

**Strengths and Limitations:** This article has some limitations. It is based on only three more powerful methods of qualitative study, so the results may not be applicable to all research.

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