

Conducting Qualitative Interviews and Focus Groups

Key Takeaways:

- Qualitative interviews and focus groups can elicit rich data about personal and group experiences, feelings, ideas, and opinions. Such data can have substantial interpretive value for understanding connections between events, phenomena, and beliefs, including participants' accounting of implementation processes and outcomes.
- Purposive sampling for qualitative interviews and focus groups is the most common form of sampling in implementation science. Research objectives, resources, and time typically guide specific sampling parameters. Examples of purposive sampling include criterion sampling, maximum variation sampling, extreme or deviant case sampling, homogenous sampling, and critical case sampling.
- It is important to consider potential power dynamics in recruitment, sampling, and data collection. This concern is particularly relevant in implementation science, where participants are likely to know one another and have a direct influence over professional roles (e.g., supervisors and supervisees).
- Follow a “funnel structure” when developing interview and focus group guides. Guides should flow from introductions to warm-up questions through the main body of the interview, followed by a cool-off period and closure. Starting with more general and “easier” questions helps build rapport, facilitate the “flow” of the discussion, and improve the chances of quality responses when moving to more specific or sensitive questions later during an interview or focus group.
- Questions should be open-ended, centered on one topic at a time, neutral (so as not to imply a right or wrong answer), and clear and easily understandable.
- While conducting interviews or focus groups, prioritize active listening that conveys your interest in what participants have to share and involves probing for more information, paraphrasing to ensure comprehension, and asking for clarification when needed.
- Focus groups have several advantages, including efficiently collecting a lot of data in a short time. However, they require an effective facilitator and planning to manage the engagement of multiple participants at once. Focus groups are generally not appropriate for assessing controversial or highly personal issues. Unlike one-on-one interviews, the level of analysis is the group and group-constructed meaning.
- When conducting online interviews or focus groups, be sure to orient participants to the web platform, advise them to be in a space where minimal disruptions are likely to occur, allow yourself time to build rapport, maintain eye contact as you would if meeting in person, and demonstrate your presence by leaning into your active listening skills.



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Useful Resource Texts

- Bernard, H. R. (2018). *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hennink, M. M. (2013). *Focus Group Discussions*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
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- Lavee, E., & Itzchakov, G. (2021). Good listening: A key element in establishing quality in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 14687941211039402. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/14687941211039402>
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- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña J. (2020). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, 4th Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Morgan, D. L. (2018). *Basic and Advanced Focus Groups*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
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- Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2011). *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Schensul, S. L., Schensul, J. J., & LeCompte, M. D. (1999). *Essential Ethnographic Methods: Observations, Interviews, and Questionnaires (Vol. 2)*. Lanham, MD: Rowman Altamira.
- Spradley, J. P. (2016). *The Ethnographic Interview*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
- Weiss, R. S. (1995). *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.